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Leslie E. Tower

West Virginia University, letower@mail.wvu.edu

Elaine Bowen

West Virginia Extension Service, epbowen@mail.wvu.edu

Mohamad G. Alkadry

Florida International University, malkadry@fiu.edu



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A Snapshot of Organizational Climate: Perceptions of Extension Faculty

Leslie E. Tower

Associate Professor
Division of Social Work
School of Applied Social Sciences
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia
Letower@mail.wvu.edu

Elaine Bowen

Associate Professor
West Virginia University Extension Service
Morgantown, West Virginia
EPBowen@mail.wvu.edu

Mohamad G. Alkadry

Associate Professor
Department of Public Administration
Florida International University
Miami, Florida
malkadry@fiu.edu

Abstract: This article provides a snapshot of the perceptions of workplace climate of Extension faculty at a land-grant, research-high activity university, compared with the perceptions of non-Extension faculty at the same university. An online survey was conducted with a validated instrument. The response rate for university faculty was 44% (968); the response rate for Extension was 77% (126). Perceptions of the workplace climate were in the high-to-moderate range. Extension faculty appeared to view campus climate more favorably than traditional faculty. This article calls attention to the benefits of assessing an organization's climate.

Introduction

The Extension system has unique characteristics distinct from other public and educational organizations. These characteristics are rooted in Extension's historical partnerships with the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and state and local governments. Every state and U.S. territory has an Extension Service to meet constituent needs through teaching, research, and service. Each state's Extension system may have its own organizational structure, qualities, and climate. However, in general, Extension systems are geographically dispersed office networks having self- and team-directed professional leadership. In addition, Extension has numerous funding sources with potentially divergent interests and demands. Extension

organizations exist within the context of higher education institutions. Each of these factors profoundly shapes the work environment or organizational climate for Extension employees at local, regional, and state Extension locations.

Despite Extension's long history, there is relatively little published on the topic of its organizational climate. Organizational climate of academic institutions, on the other hand, has been studied more extensively. The study reported here provides a snapshot of the perceptions of Extension faculty at a land-grant, research-high activity university, compared with non-Extension faculty at the same university. The purpose of the study was to identify strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement and also compare the results from Extension faculty with those from the rest of the university. The study's findings will inform administrators' strategies to enhance organizational climate. It also provides an opportunity to compare climate in two academic forms of organizations coexisting in the same institutional structure.

Campus Climate

"Campus climate is a measure—real or perceived—of the campus environment as it relates to interpersonal, academic, and professional interactions" (Study Group on University Diversity, 2008, p. 1). Climate affects productivity and effectiveness of employees, as well as their ability to provide an ideal learning environment for their students and to serve their community. It affects individuals' opportunities to grow professionally and personally.

Organizational climate literature points to several factors that can lead to increased employee satisfaction and commitment. Understanding these factors can guide organizational leaders in implementing strategies to improve work environment. One recent study of a select group of state Extension leaders identified and prioritized workplace issues most important to attract, motivate, and retain future employees. The two top-rated issues were competitive salaries and evolving from traditional to contemporary priorities (Kroth & Peutz, 2010). Strong and Harder's (2009) review of Extension literature revealed that maintenance factors (e.g., salary and work-life balance) were more often lacking than were motivational factors such as reward systems, mentoring, and satisfaction.

Numerous research studies have been conducted with Extension organizations on factors such as job satisfaction, retention, commitment, and turnover, yet few studies specifically examined Extension systems' organizational climate. Two studies explored the North Carolina Cooperative Extension (Fouts, 2004; Manzo-Ramos, 1997). Fouts described this system as a "consultative management system," concluding that various employee groups perceived the organizational climate differently. An Ohio study concluded that focusing on organizational climate improvements may positively influence employee commitment (Smith, McCracken, & Suandi, 1983). The Children, Youth and Families At Risk National Initiative's Organizational Change Survey included some items related to organizational climate, such as administrative and campus support (Betts, Marczak, Peterson, Sewell, & Lipinski, 1998).

Fair treatment is an important factor in employee satisfaction and commitment (Ingram, 2006). Studies of gender and employee satisfaction reveal that although women may look for different things than men pertaining to job satisfaction, gender does not seem to affect employee satisfaction (Sabharwal & Corley, 2009). Some research suggests that intrinsic motivation and the opportunity for flexible schedules are likely to increase satisfaction and organizational commitment for women (Sabharwal & Corley, 2009; Scandura & Lankau, 1997). A national survey of Extension employees by Vlosky and Aguilar (2009) revealed that job satisfaction of both males and females was positively affected by the same six variables: control/autonomy/influence, challenge, performance measures, feedback, instrumentality, and stability/security.

This article compares the climate perceptions among Extension faculty with those among non-Extension faculty at the same institution. Non-Extension faculty excludes Health Science faculty and faculty located at satellite campuses because these categories of faculty operate in organizational structures that may also have different characteristics from those of Extension faculty and their main-campus counterparts.

It is important to distinguish between Extension and non-Extension faculty because of the inherent differences in organizational structure and culture of these groups. The majority of Extension faculty work in small office units located in a community. Therefore, the day-to-day office functions are closely linked to community life and local needs. State-level Extension faculty are often located on university campuses. However, similar to the work of their counterparts in the county offices, state faculty work is focused on meeting the needs of citizens through teaching, research, and service. In contrast, traditional university faculty members work in larger departmental units on campus, and their primary work focus is meeting the needs of university students through teaching, research, and service.

Method

Sampling and Data Collection

The study was conducted at a public comprehensive land-grant institution. All full-time faculty were invited to participate. To alert faculty about the online survey, an announcement was sent to different university electronic mailing lists. These lists are open to the university community to post relevant university information. Faculty, staff, and students received these emails, although only faculty members were asked to respond to the survey.

Two email invitations were sent directly and exclusively to faculty through a Web-link in an email sent from the Provost's faculty listserv. Four follow-up reminders were sent to the email lists. In addition to email invitations, an announcement was made to the Faculty Senate to encourage senators to inform their constituents. Colorful flyers were posted around campus to educate and remind faculty to participate in the survey. Researchers encouraged others to actively promote survey participation within university units. Anticipating that the off-campus Extension faculty may not regard the climate survey as applicable to them, a notice to Extension faculty was emailed via an Extension listserv.

Each announcement increased the response rate. The overall response rate was 44% (968); the response rate for Extension was 77% (126). The survey was administered on Survey Monkey®.

Instrumentation

A literature review identified several Climate scales (e.g., Nesbit, Inglehart, Habil, & Sinkford, 2003; Riger, Stokes, Raja, & Sullivan, 1997; Wright et al., 2003). The scale used by Jacobs, Bergen, and Korn (2000) was selected because of its fit with the institutional stakeholders' concerns with campus climate as well as the instrument's psychometric properties (e.g., $\alpha = .94$). Selected dimensions of the other instruments were incorporated to strengthen the scale, including the design of a new subscale: Additional Discrimination. The researchers anticipated that some men might not respond if the survey focused entirely on women. Therefore, minor revisions were made to make the questions more gender-neutral.

Content validity was evaluated by four "experts" in the area of institutional climate, including the authors of the original instrument. The instrument was further revised based on the experts' comments. The Climate Survey was piloted with 10 faculty members. The revised scale had 41 items and six subscales: Positive Climate (10 items); Cohesion (6 items); Sexual Harassment (6 items); Gender Discrimination (6 items);

Gender Insensitivity (8 items); and Additional Discrimination (5 items).

The overall Climate scale Cronbach's alpha reliability score for Extension was .93. The alphas for each subscale were: Positive Climate = .84; Cohesion = .78; Sexual Harassment = .70; Gender Discrimination = .62; Gender Insensitivity = .85; and Additional Discrimination = .78). The overall Climate scale Cronbach's alpha for Non-Extension faculty was 0.94. The alphas for each subscale were: Positive Climate = 0.84; Cohesion = 0.89; Sexual Harassment = 0.71; Gender Discrimination = 0.76; Gender Insensitivity = .81; and Additional Discrimination = 0.72).

Data Analysis

Data from Survey Monkey® were imported into SPSS version 16.0. Univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted.

To conceptualize the results, a rubric was created. Items endorsed by 76% to 100% of Extension faculty participants, in the *positive direction*, were categorized as institutional strengths. Items endorsed by 51% to 75% of Extension faculty were characterized as having moderate importance to change. Items rated from 0% to 50% were identified as a critical need to address.

Because attitudes of Extension faculty are a starting point for the comparison, the above categories are used only for Extension faculty responses. In other words, if an Extension faculty response falls in the institutional strengths row, but the non-Extension faculty response to the same questions falls outside that row, means for both Extension and non-Extension faculty are located in adjacent columns in the strengths row to allow for comparison.

Results

Demographic Variables

Demographic data are presented in Table 1. Among the Extension respondents, 53.2% (67) identified themselves as "junior faculty" (e.g., Lecturer, Instructor, or Assistant Professor); 23.0% (29) identified themselves as "senior faculty" (e.g., Associate Professor, Professor); and 23.8% (30) identified themselves as "other." Only 12.0% (15) participants identified themselves as administrators. Thirty-one percent (39) of faculty were tenured, 33.0% (42) were tenure track (i.e., untenured), 10.3% (13) were clinical track, and 25.4% (32) were other.

Among the non-Extension respondents, 42.3% (197) identified themselves as "junior faculty" (e.g., Lecturer, Instructor, or Assistant Professor); 46.1% (215) identified themselves as "senior faculty" (e.g., Associate Professor, Professor); and 11.6% (54) identified themselves as "other." Almost 15.0% (69) participants identified themselves as administrators. Almost 45% (208) of faculty were tenured, 24.7% (115) were tenure track (i.e., untenured), 4.3% (20) were clinical track, and 26.4% (123) were other.

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics

Item	Extension Faculty		Non-Extension Faculty	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent

Sex				
Female	68	69.4%	188	46.2%
Male	30	30.6%	219	53.8%
Race				
Similar to the Majority	86	86.9%	332	80.8%
Minority	2	2.0%	27	6.6%
Prefer Not to Answer	11	11.1%	52	12.7%
Religion				
Similar to the Majority	70	70.7%	167	40.8%
Minority	9	9.1%	54	13.2%
None	16	16.2%	92	22.5%
Prefer Not to Answer	5	4.0%	96	23.5%
Sexual Orientation				
Similar to the Majority	89	89.9%	336	82.0%
Minority	2	2.0%	21	5.1%
Prefer Not to Answer	8	8.1%	53	12.9%
Age				
20-30	13	13.3%	36	8.9%
31-40	18	18.4%	110	27.1%
41-50	19	19.4%	112	27.6%
51-60	39	39.8%	98	24.1%
61 or older	9	9.1%	50	12.3%

Research Questions

1. *What is the perception of workplace climate of Extension faculty? How does this compare to the perception of non-Extension faculty?*

The overall perception of the workplace climate was in the high-to-moderate range. Individual items predominantly fell into the moderate and strengths categories. The Positive Climate Subscale (Table 2) had four items fall into the "strengths" category. For example, Extension faculty felt safe and respected at work. Five items fell into the "moderate importance to change" category. Only one fell into the "critical to address" category: Extension faculty did not feel that mentoring was beneficial to their careers. By comparison with non-Extension faculty, Extension faculty members were more positive about climate on all measures in this subscale. They agreed more that they have positive aspects in their workplace and agreed less that they have negative aspects in the workplace.

Table 2.
Positive Climate

		Extension Faculty Agree/Strongly Agree	Non-Extension Faculty Agree/Strongly Agree
Strengths	8. I feel safe in and around my workplace.	90.7% (98)	88.9% (377)
	24. I have the opportunity to collaborate with other faculty at WVU.	82.2% (88)	80.7% (342)
	1. My opinions are respected at work.	81.5% (88)	77.5% (330)
	34. Taking time off for family indicates to administration and colleagues a lack of commitment to my job.	20.8% (21)	25.7% (105)
Moderate Importance to Change	9. I am treated by administration and colleagues with courtesy and respect.	75.0% (81)	73.5% (314)
	3. I plan to make academia a lifelong career.	74.1% (80)	73.3% (313)
	37. My talents are recognized by administration or colleagues.	70.6% (72)	66.7% (276)
	29. My work schedule is sensitive to my social and family commitments.	52.9% (54)	50.1% (207)
	22. I am expected to work an unhealthy and unreasonable amount of hours to succeed.	34.6% (37)	40.2% (170)
Critical to Address	13. Mentoring at WVU has been beneficial to my career.	48.1% (52)	41.1% (177)

Table 3 displays the Cohesion Subscale items. These fell into the strengths category (i.e., 3 items) and moderate category (i.e., 3 items). Extension faculty respondents were more positive than non-Extension faculty about all the Cohesion Subscale items.

Table 3.
Cohesion

		Extension Faculty Agree/Strongly Agree	Non-Extension Faculty Agree/Strongly Agree
Strengths	30. I am proud to be a member of this faculty.	85.3% (87)	71.2% (296)
	14. WVU is a friendly workplace.	84.3% (91)	70.4% (299)
	7. There is little collegiality among people at WVU.	12.4% (13)	21.9% (93)
Moderate Importance to Change	10. There is a feeling of positive morale.	56.5% (61)	45.9% (196)
	2. There is a feeling of unity and cohesion in my workplace.	66.4% (71)	54.4% (233)
	19. Work is fairly distributed among colleagues in my workplace.	52.4% (55)	32.5% (138)

The Sexual Harassment Subscale responses showed that most Extension faculty did not feel that colleagues behaved inappropriately (e.g., comments on physical appearance). The items considered as critical needs related to the institution's response to sexual harassment complaints. Extension faculty did not believe that people who make complaints are protected or that complaints are investigated adequately.

Four out of five items in the Additional Discrimination Subscale were rated in the moderate category (e.g., not hearing denigrating remarks about race/ethnicity or sexual orientation). The fifth item identified as a strength was "not hearing denigrating remarks about minority religious groups."

Table 4 displays Gender Discrimination Subscale items. While 46% of the non-Extension respondents were female, 69% of Extension respondents were female. So the non-Extension results may be less representative of the female perspective. However, Extension faculty seemed to have fewer problems with gender discrimination than non-Extension faculty. Only 4% of Extension respondents agreed or strongly agreed with

the statement that they "experienced discrimination in the promotion process because of my gender," but 8% of non-Extension respondents did so. As Table 4 shows, Extension faculty tended to agree more with items that indicated lower gender discrimination and tended to agree less with items that indicated higher gender discrimination.

Table 4.
Gender Discrimination

		Extension Faculty Agree/Strongly Agree	Non-Extension Faculty Agree/Strongly Agree
Strengths	12. I have been asked intrusive questions about my personal life at work.	7.4% (8)	10.5% (45)
	15. I have experienced discrimination in the promotion process because of my gender.	3.8% (4)	8.1% (34)
	26. I believe qualified men are given more career opportunities than qualified women.	18.0% (18)	24.6% (102)
Moderate Importance to Change	44. I have equal access to departmental resources (e.g., space & laboratory support staff) as my peers.	66.3% (67)	68.1% (282)
	40. Women's views are represented fairly on major committees.	53.5% (53)	52.8% (215)
Critical	32. There is gender-equity in salaries.	35.4% (35)	23.1% (943)

Table 5 displays Gender Insensitivity Subscale items. Again, Extension respondents (69% female) tended to agree more with items indicating gender sensitivity in the workplace and less with items indicating gender insensitivity than non-Extension faculty respondents.

Table 5.
Gender Insensitivity

		Extension Faculty Agree/Strongly Agree	Non-Extension Faculty
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		Agree	Agree/Strongly Agree
Strength	16. I'd recommend WVU to a prospective faculty member of my gender.	83.0% (88)	69.0% (291)
	43. I have the same opportunities for informal networking as colleagues of the opposite gender.	79.2% (80)	69.2% (285)
	33. Faculty are accepted and respected by their peers regardless of gender.	77.5% (79)	72.5% (301)
	41. Women are interrupted at meetings more often than men.	17.8% (18)	17.0% (69)
Moderate Importance to Change	42. Contributions made by male and female faculty are equally valued.	68.3% (69)	66.2% (274)
	6. At WVU, people use inclusive language (e.g., he/she, chairperson).	63.0% (68)	60.7% (256)
	27. Women are adequately represented among the WVU faculty.	56.0% (56)	39.2% (162)
	28. When I speak out on issues of concern to me, I am labeled a troublemaker.	30.7% (31)	26.5% (109)

2. Are there any differences in workplace climate perceptions based on demographic variables?

Few significant differences were found. The institution studied has a very homogenous workforce. In Extension, only 2% (2) of individuals identified themselves as a racial minority, 2% (2) as a sexual orientation minority, and 9% (9) as a religious minority.

On the Climate scale and subscales, no significant differences were found on sex, age, presence of extended family in the area, or whether the individual lived with a partner. There was a significant difference found between junior- and senior-level faculty, with junior-level faculty perceiving there to be more gender discrimination ($F=4.084$, $p=.046$) and gender insensitivity ($F=4.366$, $p=.039$) than their senior counterparts.

3. How do the perceptions of Extension faculty compare to the perceptions of campus faculty as a whole?

To compare colleges, the scale and subscale means were divided by the total possible scale points. The range for all colleges was from 65% to 80%. The median and mode rating was 72%. Extension faculty rated the overall campus climate in the 73% range, which falls in the upper moderate range. Ratings on the subscales were: 71% (Less) Sex Harassment, 72% Cohesion, 73% (Less) Gender Discrimination, 74% Positive Climate and (Less) Gender Discrimination, and 75% (Less) Additional Discrimination.

Discussion

Results of the study reported here should be interpreted in light of its limitations. The survey was conducted at one university. It may not be possible to generalize these results to other universities. However, it allows us to control variations from state to state and institution to institution. There was an overrepresentation of women among the Extension respondents, but less than half of non-Extension respondents were women. Because results show that Extension faculty members were more positive about climate, this gender bias is likely to have tempered the difference between the two populations. The alpha for the Gender Discrimination Subscale was slightly lower than the acceptable .70 level.

When testing Research Question 1, we found that Extension faculty viewed climate in the high-to-moderate range. Extension faculty viewed their work climate more positively than non-Extension faculty at our institution. In Research Question 3, when comparing faculty by college, Extension faculty remained more positive about climate than those in other colleges. These results may be due to Extension faculty's ability to create their own workplace climate. In other words, climate may be tied to one's physical setting, and Extension faculty's physical settings are geographically dispersed. Non-Extension faculty members tend to operate within a larger centralized organizational structure.

Because of the homogeneous demographic makeup of the overall institution and Extension faculty, it was difficult to test most variables in Research Question 2. Differences, however, were found between junior and senior Extension faculty, with the former perceiving more gender discrimination and gender insensitivity. Junior faculty may come from a younger generation, which may have greater awareness of these types of issues, and therefore may be more likely to report it on a climate survey.

It seems redundant to argue that a positive climate results in better job satisfaction, better retention rates, and better human resource management practices. Positive climate has been repeatedly proven to have these effects on job satisfaction and employee retention (August & Waltman, 2004; Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009).

Implications

Considering current state budget shortfalls, it may be difficult to offer and maintain competitive salaries, which Extension faculty identified as important to them (Kroth & Peutz, 2010). Organizations, however, can improve climate by strengthening or implementing new organizational policy. How does an organization begin to address climate issues? Conducting a climate survey may be the most important first step. Collecting empirical evidence is important because it offers an objective way to look at organizational issues, including work climate. Empirical support allows organizations to make informed decisions about where to direct limited resources.

Organizations may wish to analyze their survey results by identifying areas of concern and areas of strength.

This article offers a rubric to interpret climate scales. The categories we created may be useful in prioritizing issues. In addition, the rubric allows organizations to celebrate and communicate their strengths.

In the process of conducting the survey and analyzing the results, transparency has to be valued. It is important to ensure that individuals conducting the survey have credibility among faculty. It is also important to communicate the results and an action plan that celebrates the strengths and addresses the issues. Issues may be addressed by collecting additional data to better understand an issue, making changes or additions to institutional policy, and increasing communication.

Work-life balance policies affect climate, which, as Strong and Harder (2009) report, is often overlooked. Some work-life balance policies may be implemented with minimal organizational costs (e.g., flextime). Some policies that affect work climate may be federal or state law (e.g., sexual harassment policy).

As in any survey research, a survey measures faculty perceptions. It may not always reflect practices. Addressing areas of concern, therefore, may begin with collecting additional data to get a better sense of what is happening. For example, 35% of Extension faculty perceived gender equity in salaries. If an institutional pay equity study was conducted, with a sound and transparent methodology, and no disparity in compensation was found, it would be important to announce these results. On the other hand, there may be some perceptions that would be harmful to ignore, such as the perception of discrimination. If an institution conducts a climate survey, administration needs to trust the faculty.

Results of the study prompt further questions about what makes Extension organizations different from non-Extension organizations. These questions include: "When other conditions are held constant, do Extension organizations provide an alternative to traditional academic institutional organizations?" and "Should organizations with troubled climate attempt to make organizational changes that emulate Extension organizations, which in the study reported here had better climate on all measured climate scales and subscales?" In sum, the use of climate surveys is recommended to identify organizational strengths and identify or confirm organizational weaknesses. Climate survey results may be prioritized into a rubric, as in this article, to clearly illustrate issues that need to be addressed.

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