

Cultivating Campus Climate: How Oberlin Meets the Challenges and Opportunities

*Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion
Campus Climate Report, Spring 2016*

Cultivating a campus climate that supports every student in the highest possible level of achievement is an important area of action for Oberlin College and Conservatory. This update from the [Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) is envisioned as the first in a series of regular reports that will allow members of the Oberlin community to access information about and track the progress of key initiatives designed to create an equitable and inclusive learning environment. It does not constitute a complete overview of the wide range of activities taken by faculty, staff, and students to assess and improve campus climate, but rather provides a snapshot of some key issues that have been the focus of campus concern in 2015–16. As such reports are issued in future semesters, the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion will seek opportunities to host more comprehensive summaries. To add items to this year's report, please contact the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at edi@oberlin.edu.

Why focus on campus climate?

Research on diversity and student success in higher education has identified campus climate as a critical framework for understanding why not all students thrive equally even with access to the same educational opportunities. In seeking ways to address disparities in achievement and experience related to race, class, gender, and other consequential differences, scholars have demonstrated that campus climate – which includes institutional history, policies, and structures, perceptions and attitudes of the campus community, and the external political-economic context – is one important site of intervention. (For more information on this research, the publications of scholars such as [Sylvia Hurtado](#) and [Mitchell Chang](#) provide a good starting point.)

For Oberlin, assessing and shaping campus climate directs our collective attention to the institutional practices and capacities that support students in realizing the highest possible level of achievement. While many of the challenges related to campus climate are connected to deeply rooted historical and contemporary injustices that extend beyond the boundaries of any given campus, this framework can empower institutions of higher education to shape their own structures and practices more intentionally to address the impact of these forces on learning. The focus on campus climate is part of a larger shift in the effort to build equitable colleges and universities away from a focus on the perceived problems with groups of students who may be struggling to the institutional practices that create barriers to student success.

Information from prior organizing

In conversations at Oberlin about equity, diversity, and inclusion in 2015–16, people in the campus community have asked for information about the impact of campus organizing over the past few years. As a first step in beginning to build such an archive, this report includes the following information about the ongoing conversations about best strategies to cultivate an inclusive campus climate since the [Day of Solidarity](#) on March 4, 2013. In Spring 2013, student organizers produced the [“Student Proposals for Institutional Change Around Diversity, Social Justice, and Inclusion at Oberlin College.”](#) Oberlin administrators reviewed the proposal and [responded with a report](#). These documents are provided here in part to address ongoing calls for greater access to information about institutional actions taken to address campus climate issues. Student, staff, and faculty collaborations have generated important outcomes over the past few years, such as the significantly enhanced student support funds to address economic needs that impact an Oberlin education. In acknowledging the significant work still ahead in order to achieve an equitable and inclusive learning environment, this report honors the important efforts to ensure meaningful steps have been taken in recent years.

Report from 2015–16

Planning and capacity building

In the 2015–16 academic year, a wide range of activities occurred across the institution to address campus climate. In particular, the [Oberlin College Strategic Plan 2016-2021](#), approved by the General Faculty on February 24, 2016 and by the Board of Trustees on March 4, 2016, developed a central focus on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion. The plan authorized the creation of an Equity and Inclusion Implementation Plan that is to be reported to the General Faculty at the beginning of the spring 2017:

Ensure an inclusive and equitable learning environment, including development of an Equity and Inclusion Implementation Plan that addresses the systemic barriers that keep us from reaching our compositional and interactional diversity aspirations and articulates clearly these aspirations. The plan will also identify appropriate strategies to measure and mechanisms to communicate progress, including concrete benchmarks that will be reported to the General Faculty by the beginning of the spring 2017 semester.

– Strategic Recommendation 1.3, p. 16

An Equity and Inclusion implementation group of faculty, staff and students, which will be chaired by Associate Dean of Arts and Sciences [Pablo Mitchell](#) and Special Assistant to the President for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion [Meredith Raimondo](#), is in the process of forming. For further information, please contact the implementation group co-chairs (pablo.mitchell@oberlin.edu and meredith.raimondo@oberlin.edu).

Administrative offices and faculty and staff across the College and Conservatory collaborated with student leaders and activists and provided support to students on a wide range of issues related to campus climate. This report draws attention to four major areas of particular focus in 2015–16, recognizing that every effort and issue addressed at any level is a part of the College’s comprehensive commitment to student success. The Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion offers its acknowledgement and appreciation to all of the faculty, staff, and students who work hard to ensure a successful and equitable community, often in private and unseen ways.

In 2015–16, Oberlin also engaged in two critical searches for positions that provide significant capacity in the area of campus climate – the Director of the Multicultural Resource Center and the Ombudsperson. Both searches were led by highly engaged committees of faculty, staff, and students, who reviewed campus needs in the process of identifying effective candidates. [Toni Myers](#) returned to campus to serve as the interim director of the MRC, while [Kimberly Jackson-Davidson](#) will move from the Dean of Students office to serve as Ombudsperson. Both Toni and Kim bring strong histories of achievement in relation to enhancing campus climate and supporting equitable pathways to student success.

Specific Campus Climate Concerns

In 2015–16, the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion collaborated on four major areas of campus climate assessment and response of concern to the entire campus community:

Campus climate around race and the impact of anti-Black and other racisms

In Fall 2016, attention to anti-Black police violence and the emergence of Black Lives Matter as a social movement newly animated students across the country to challenge

their campuses to examine their practices and do better in providing equitable educational environments. [At the University of Missouri and elsewhere](#), Black students and their allies challenged the educational status quo in higher education, especially in relation to compositional diversity, campus experience, and educational outcomes. At Oberlin, students issued [demands](#) addressed to the Board of Trustees, President Krislov, Dean of Students Eric Estes, and other governing bodies. President Krislov [stated in reply](#), “I will not respond directly to any document that explicitly rejects the notion of collaborative engagement” and invited the authors to work together with staff and faculty to address their concerns. Student leaders met with President Krislov, Dean of Student Eric Estes, and Special Assistant to the President for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Meredith Raimondo in early March and presented a focused list of priority items for next steps. They are presented below with a schedule for completion and the responsible administrative office.

Action Item	Responsible Office	Date to Be Completed
Enhancements to Afrikan Heritage House (library, lab spaces)	Dean of Students	Fall 2016
First Year Orientation event for Black students, including parents	Dean of Students	Fall 2016
A new landing page on the Oberlin website assembling student support resources in a more accessible way	Dean of Students, Office of Communications	Fall 2016
A data report on compositional diversity at the College	Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion	Fall 2016
An open meeting with President Krislov for Black students	Office of the President	April 2016 (complete)

These collaborative efforts will continue in Fall 2016, with an update on the completion of the action items described above and the identification of next steps.

In recognition of the importance of [Afrikan Heritage House](#) to the campus community, President Krislov authorized the creation of a new Presidential Fellow who will collaborate with the Faculty in Residence, the Dean of Students Office, and the Office of Admissions to enhance programming and interest in this vital program. This position will be filled by a recent Oberlin graduate.

In 2016, the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion announced the launch of [Think/Create/Engage](#), a new annual series exploring complex topical issues using the tools and resources made available by the synergy of a liberal arts college, a conservatory, and an art museum. A [committee](#) chaired by Professor of Comparative American Studies [Wendy Kozol](#) and Associate Professor of Music Theory [Jan Miyake](#) chose “the Framing of Race” as the theme for calendar year 2016, and issued a call for proposals related to courses, speakers, creative work, workshops, performances, and other events that address the complexities of race, racialization, and racism, as well as antiracism work and histories and strategies of empowerment. An updated list of events that occurred in Spring 2016 and scheduled for Fall 2016 will be posted to the website this summer.

Creating an inclusive climate in relation to race is a multidimensional effort and occurs in both classroom and co-curricular settings. Of the wide range of activities in this area in 2015–16, [Multicultural Resource Center](#) events about the experiences and needs of undocumented students provided an important opportunity for capacity building in light of the College’s [recent partnership with Golden Door Scholars](#). In April, [the 19th Biennial Midwestern Asian American Student Conference](#) highlighted a wide range of academic, artistic, and activist projects, demonstrating the continuing vitality of Oberlin’s long tradition of Asian American student organizing. These are only some of the projects that have and will continue to enable Oberlin to build a fully inclusive campus climate on the basis of race, ethnicity, and national origin.

Gender equity and sexual misconduct

Since 2012, Oberlin has dedicated significant additional resources and planning to address the impact of all forms of sex-based discrimination and harassment on the learning and working environment, which includes all forms of sexual misconduct (in accordance with [guidance from the U.S. Department of Education](#)). Since the implementation of the [Sexual Misconduct Policy](#) in July 2014, the College has dedicated additional staffing and programming resources to both preventing and responding to gender and sexual harassment, including all forms of sexual misconduct. Two notable developments in the last year include the creation of a Presidential Fellow focused on peer education (currently held by [Stevie Kelly ’15](#)) and the stabilization of [Preventing and Responding to Sexual Misconduct](#) (PRSM, or “prism”), a team of peer educators working to empower the entire student community to create a campus free of all forms of sexual misconduct through evidence-based public health strategies. Conservatory Assistant Dean [Chris Jenkins](#) has also joined the Title IX Team as a Deputy Title IX Coordinator. A new website designed to make information and resources even clearer and more accessible will be available by Fall 2016,

The Title IX Team has received and reviewed over 100 reports of potential sex-based discrimination and harassment thus far in 2015–16. Consistent with past semesters, the

most commonly reported concerns include sexual harassment, sexual assault, and/or intimate partner violence between students. Most parties making reports ask for various remedies but also request that the College take no disciplinary action against nor inform the responding party about the report, which the College honors to the extent that it is possible to maintain a safe and equitable learning and working environment. About 20 percent of all reports in 2015–16 were referred to full investigation, and if appropriate, formal investigation. The threshold to move to formal process was met in around half of investigations where the responding party was subject to a College process (some investigations relate to allegations made about individuals who have graduated, left employment with the College, or cannot be identified). When the threshold was met, findings of responsibility on all charges occurred in 70 percent of processes. In the remaining processes, the responding party was found responsible for some but not all of the conduct charges. Sanctions have ranged from deferred probation and education to dismissal, depending on the steps necessary to stop, address the effects of, and prevent the recurrence of sex-based discrimination and harassment in the education program. The Title IX Team continues to review appropriate strategies to share further outcome information while protecting individual privacy.

In Spring 2016, Oberlin worked with the Higher Education Dating Sharing consortium to conduct its first [sexual assault climate survey](#). Results from the anonymous survey, which will help the College gauge to what extent the reports of sexual harassment and assault reflect actual incidence, will be available this summer and will be reported to the campus community in Fall 2016.

While the Title IX Team sees the high volume of reports as a positive sign that members of the campus community are seeking resources when needed, significantly increased reporting has also created challenges in ensuring timely resolution of reports. Moving forward, the Title IX Team will continue to seek strategies to ensure prompt resolution of reports in a way that is both supportive to people who experience sexual misconduct and is fair and equitable to everyone involved in the resolution process. Additionally, the Title IX Team will be working with offices across the College to review and ensure compliance with recently released Department of Education guidance on [civil rights protections for transgender students](#). An update on this review will be available in Fall 2016.

While important steps have been taken since President Krislov appointed a [task force](#) to review College policies and practices in Fall 2012, continued efforts to prevent sexual misconduct and to provide robust support and equitable resolution options for people who experience sex-based harassment and discrimination will remain a significant institutional priority.

Campus climate for Jewish students, faculty, and staff

Oberlin staff have been in conversation with students for the past several years about the climate on campus for Jewish students. Until recently, the primary focus of this conversation was the challenge for students to claim and express any kind of religious and/or spiritual identity at a predominantly secular institution. In significant part due to capacity building in the [Office of Religious and Spiritual Life](#), including the development of a robust [multifaith model of engagement](#), the conversation about religion and spirituality generally and the concerns related to Jewish student community has shifted. In January 2016, a group of Oberlin alums organized a petition and a campus visit to explore concerns with anti-Semitism on campus. Facebook postings by an Oberlin professor further raised concerns with the experiences of Jewish students on campus in Spring 2016.

To address these concerns, Oberlin staff and faculty worked closely with partners including [Oberlin College Hillel](#) and [Chabad at Oberlin](#) to offer students a wide range of opportunities to receive individual and group support, [report discrimination and harassment](#), and/or receive education about anti-Semitism. Hillel, Chabad, the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life, the Departments of Religion and the Jewish Studies Program, and Residential Education sponsored gatherings and programming in Spring 2016, including meetings to discuss a range of issues including anti-Semitism, Zionism, and Jewish community concerns. The General Faculty and Divisional Faculties held meetings devoted to these issues, with particular attention to the educational impact of multiple forms of bias, the priority of creating inclusive educational environments, and the critical value of academic freedom. The Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion partnered to sponsor a [community conversation](#) on anti-Semitism that included the [Cleveland Anti-Defamation League](#) attended by an estimated 150 faculty, staff, and students.

A planning group is working with campus constituencies and [community partners](#) to ensure continuing engagement with a number of both linked and distinct issues identified by Oberlin students as key priorities for ongoing conversation, including Jewish identity and history, anti-Semitism, hate speech, academic freedom, the politics of the state of Israel, and allyship and coalitions. Members of the planning group have reached out to a wide range of Jewish students for information about their experiences on campus. To date, no student has reported a threat to physical safety or any experience of being barred from opportunity or inclusion on the basis of Jewish identity. The College has received no reports related to discrimination or harassment on the basis of religion, including anti-Semitism, in 2015–16. However, some Jewish students describe challenges in communicating with other students about contemporary anti-Semitism and have raised concerns that some members of the community are not fully aware of the characteristics and occurrence of contemporary anti-Semitism. This concern intersects in important

ways with the campus climate for discussion of Israel. Jewish students of diverse political perspectives have identified a politically challenging climate for discussion of Israel – a concern shared by both supporters and critics of current state policies and practices. Such challenges, which are occurring at colleges and universities across the United States, can have a differential impact on Jewish students, who describe experiences of feeling pressured to hide or disavow affiliations with or interest in Israel, or being pressured to adopt particular positions or be told they are not “Jewish enough.” Despite challenging interpersonal interactions, successful campus events offering a range of perspectives on Israel have occurred without disruption. An important national conversation about when and how critiques of Israel may become anti-Semitic or utilize anti-Semitic tropes has also been a concern of students, faculty, and staff at Oberlin. To address these issues, students across the political spectrum have asked for more opportunities to see speakers model, and themselves to participate in, educational conversations structured to provide respectful conversation across differences of opinion. Developing such opportunities will form one basis for designing programming in upcoming semesters.

Disability and access

There have been extraordinary transformations in access to higher education for students with disabilities in recent decades. At Oberlin, students have called for more than a reduction to formal barriers to education; instead, they envision a robustly inclusive campus environment that celebrates and supports a wide range of capacities that relate to academic and artistic achievement. The Office of Disability Services [Student Accessibility Advocates](#) provide effective peer mentoring to enable students to make use of the wide range of resources and supports at the College, and help ensure fellow students have the knowledge and support to seek full access. The growth of the program is only one of the many steps taken by the [Office of Disability Services](#) to ensure Oberlin students have equitable pathways to success. Campus discussions that moved from the framing of autism as a disability to an exploration of the importance of recognizing [neurodiversity](#) represented another important example of how the College can position itself as an educational leader in this important area, drawing on the expertise of students, parents, experts, and alumni (such as [Steve Silberman '79](#), author of *Neurotribes*, who visited campus in Spring 2016).

As part of Oberlin’s continuing commitment to proactive examination of equity issues, a Disability and Access Working Group convened this year to examine the broad campus climate and make recommendations about opportunities to enhance access. Comprised of faculty, staff, and students and chaired by Associate Professor [Elizabeth Hamilton](#), the working group has surveyed information on best practices on creating access, including strategies of universal design. They have received information from over 1,000 members of the Oberlin community through a survey and listening sessions and are developing a report and recommendations to be shared with the Oberlin community in Fall 2016.

Next steps

This report offers a preliminary glimpse into some of the areas and projects designed to enhance campus climate at Oberlin. Such work necessarily spans every part of the College and Conservatory and includes a wide range of issues and opportunities. By drawing attention to a few specific areas, this report seeks to begin a process of documentation of campus efforts that also responds to requests for greater transparency about both institutional action and challenges before us. It also hopes to help support collective conversation about how to ensure an equitable and inclusive education for all students. One of the founding commitments of campus climate work is the recognition that in addressing the specific issues for any individual or group, Oberlin both meets particular needs and discovers ways to make the campus better for all – a classic example of the ways a rising tide lifts all boats.

In addition to continuing work in the areas identified here, future efforts to address campus climate will likely engage core questions at the heart of scholarship on interactional diversity – how learning is enhanced by meaningful and inclusive opportunities to exchange ideas across diverse perspectives and experiences. At a time when the national climate hardly models generous listening, Oberlin can turn to its core educational mission as a framework for exploring a range of strategies to promote ways of learning together that maximize the value of a residential education, such as a structured dialogue program. Future campus climate work will also likely mean engaging even more fully and systematically with the impact of social media in our in-person and on-campus interactions. Cultivating an inclusive climate of active engagement is a significant challenge at this moment in history – for example, the echo-chamber effect of talking only with people who already agree with you is not just caused by Facebook and Twitter, but is also deeply embedded in histories of racial segregation and other structural challenges in American society. Working to create a space of engaged learning is fundamental to Oberlin’s success as an educational institution that supports, nurtures, and enables academic, artistic, and musical achievement.

For more information or to continue the conversation, please contact Meredith Raimondo, Special Assistant to the President for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at (440) 775-8555 or meredith.raimondo@oberlin.edu.