

CLIMATE CHANGE: Creating Space for Inter-Departmental Problem Solving at Skidmore College

THE CONTEXT

Historically, academic departments at Skidmore College operated with large degrees of autonomy from one another. Groups rarely collaborated, which made it difficult for faculty and administrators to address climate and leadership challenges across divisions. In the absence of a centralized group equipped with the tools and resources needed to address these issues, Skidmore partnered with the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) and conducted the Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey to identify ways to improve departmental climates.

BUILDING SOLUTIONS

“It’s helpful to have some sort of
common data that we can interrogate.”

—Crystal Moore, Interim Dean of the Faculty and
Vice President for Academic Affairs

In order to initiate conversations that could address climate challenges, leaders at Skidmore recruited a diverse team of full-time faculty members from every department and rank across campus to review and discuss Skidmore’s COACHE data together. Using Skidmore’s Faculty Job Satisfaction Survey results as a baseline for their first meeting, the team, which Skidmore leaders dubbed the ‘COACHE Collaborators’, worked together and identified three areas of departmental climate in need of attention: collegiality, diversity and inclusion, and work-life balance. The Collaborators then reported back to their respective departments on the progress the team had made and gathered feedback from their colleagues.

Over three meetings during the academic year, the COACHE Collaborators built trust and validated one another’s experiences through open dialogue and honest communication. Institutional leaders ensured that all meetings were run with humility by facilitators, and that the voices of all team members were heard through small and large group discussions. This approach developed group cohesion and resulted in group-led decision-making. With an open dialogue between and among faculty that would ordinarily not work together, the Collaborators discovered that departmental climates varied widely. While some departments fostered caring relationships among faculty and encouraged free and open discussions, others were found



to have less hospitable and more competitive environments. This realization spurred on the Collaborators to identify and create campus-wide policy solutions for tangible issues.

At this juncture, a tense, distressing email thread erupted across campus following a racially insensitive comment made by a faculty member during a meeting. The listserv's settings prohibited faculty from opting out of the difficult exchange. With no policy guiding the regulation of email exchanges like these, administrators decided that shutting down the thread would amount to suppressing freedom of expression. Whereas Skidmore had previously lacked a forum in which faculty could openly discuss such matters, the Collaborators now served as a venue for collective healing and problem-solving. The group found specific mechanisms associated with Skidmore's email practices as potentially problematic and urged campus leaders to develop a new college-wide email policy. The group also identified Skidmore's parental leave policy as an area in need of improvement and delegated one member to work directly with Human Resources to craft a more robust and equitable policy.

MOVING FORWARD

“What do we see as some of the most salient issues that we might tackle this academic year?”

The Collaborators kicked off the following academic year by building on their initial progress. With a new email policy and the proposed parental leave policy gaining traction, the group decided to focus next on inconsistent work-life balance practices across departments. In addition, the Collaborators plan to examine and learn from proposed departmental protocols aimed at promoting positive climates and a more equitable teacher observation policy developed by leaders at Skidmore. In effect, the Collaborators have become an inclusive, ongoing venue for addressing critically important campus-wide issues with data, and a fruitful conduit for interdepartmental and faculty communication.



Highlights:

- COACHE survey data provided a baseline for addressing critical campus and faculty issues at Skidmore.
- COACHE Collaborators developed a sense of trust and open communication with each other that facilitated honest discussions and allowed the team to discern unseen or unspoken behaviors and norms across departments.
- The Collaborators became a supplemental communication and sensemaking venue for data-based policy initiatives oriented towards improving targeted deficits in interdepartmental and campus-wide climate.
- The combination of COACHE data and an open venue for honest discussion of that data allowed nuanced problems to be identified and novel solutions to be realized.

Contact us to learn how your institution might benefit from a partnership with COACHE

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