

## POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE: GOING BEYOND RECOMMENDATIONS IN A WOMEN'S CLIMATE STUDY

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### INTRODUCTION

The Chronicle of Higher Education (October 9, 1991) reports that contemporary studies of the climate for women at major universities draw the same conclusions as those conducted 20 years ago. Simply put, female professors, staff, administrators, and students in academe often face a hostile environment. How do we make certain that the environment for women does improve after a climate study presents its recommendations? Climate study recommendations can only produce change when followed by a concerted, coordinated effort to ensure that the recommendations are implemented. The energy to see this type of long-term project through is most likely to be found among those who benefit from the improvements, women. Also essential is the whole-hearted support from the central administration of the university. Following the recent publication of the "Study of the Climate for Women at Michigan Technological University" (October 1994), these postulates are being tested. This paper describes the climate survey, the results, the unique plans for implementation and summarizes the main components which appear to be leading to change.

### The Setting - Michigan Technological University

Michigan Technological University is an engineering, science and technological university which also includes related programs such as forestry, business, industrial archeology, and rhetoric and technical communications. In Winter quarter of 1992-93 when the Women's Climate Survey was conducted, the student population was 6,557 with 5,951 undergraduates and 606 graduates. A large proportion, 67% of the undergraduate student population, was in engineering programs. Michigan Tech is located in a small rural community, Houghton, in Michigan's upper peninsula. Cities such as Green Bay and Duluth are located at least four hours drive from Houghton.

Michigan Tech has long been a male-dominated university. As late as 1955, women applying for teaching positions were told "it is not the usual practice at Michigan Tech to employ women as members of the teaching faculty." Women comprised only 8% of the undergraduate population in 1967. Between 1967 and

1977, the percentage of women increased dramatically to 23%. Women made up 26% of the undergraduate student body and 20% of the engineering undergraduates at the time of the Women's Climate Survey. Likewise, women were underrepresented in the graduate and faculty ranks (Table 1).

Table 1. Women at Michigan Technological University - Dec. 1992.

Group	Total	% Women
Undergraduates	5951	26%
Engineering Undergrads	3976	20%
Graduates	550	M.S. 21%; PhD. 26%
Engineering Graduates	335	M.S. 12%; PhD. 15%
Staff	916	48%
Faculty	373	17%
Full Professors	100	6%
Engineering Faculty	121	4%

### THE WOMEN'S CLIMATE SURVEY

The Presidential Commission for Women was established by the President of the University in May 1992. The Commission is composed of elected representatives of undergraduate and graduate students, professional and unionized staff, faculty, and one person selected by the President. The charge of the Commission is to outline methods to create a positive environment for women faculty, staff and students at Michigan Tech. To help accomplish this charge, the Commission members believe that it is necessary to determine how women perceive the Michigan Tech environment as women. Thus, the Commission conducted a "climate" survey to identify the specific issues of concern and problems for women at Michigan Tech and, subsequently, compiled and analyzed the results in a report entitled "A Study of the Climate for Women at Michigan Technological University." The survey was the first of its kind at Michigan Tech.

The climate survey was designed to gather information about women's perceptions of how University procedures and policies and individual attitudes and interpersonal relationships affect them. The results of the climate study are based on individual perceptions, which are subjective, and therefore the results must be considered qualitative.



The survey population included representatives of the entire spectrum of women on campus. The survey was sent to all staff, graduate students, and faculty women and to 800 undergraduates and 805 alumnae. Each group was sent a different survey. In addition, half of the alumnae and undergraduate surveys were about academic life and half about out-of-classroom experiences. In all there were seven different surveys. The surveys contained both multiple choice and open-ended questions which were developed from issues presented in the national literature and climate studies from other universities.

The return rate was 61% for faculty, 39% for graduate students, 36% for staff and 29% to 35% for undergraduates and alumnae.

A few members of the University community criticized the methodology of the survey stating that the Commission should have had a more representative sample of the survey population. Another problem recognized by the Commission during analysis of the survey results, was that the surveys were too long and difficult to complete, analyze, and summarize, and that the meaning of some questions was not clear.

## RESULTS

Although many respondents were satisfied with their employment or educational experiences, many encountered problems related to being a woman at Michigan Tech which sometimes hindered their performance or decreased their satisfaction. The following were some of the major problems identified in the survey:

- ▶ devaluation of work and accomplishments
- ▶ non-physical forms of harassment
- ▶ a poor understanding of the reporting system for harassment and discrimination
- ▶ isolation
- ▶ family issues, specifically mentioned were the lack of on-campus day-care and inflexibility of student and staff scheduling (in some departments)

Certain problems were much more prevalent in some departments or divisions of the university than in others. For instance, in some parts of the university, women felt the "old boy's club" was alive and well, with higher standards and tougher rules for the "girls" than for the "boys." Students also expressed varying reactions to Michigan Tech. Most negative comments focused on the behavior of male students or of individual professors, however, in one or two departments, a large percentage of respondents commented on the overall negative environment for women students.

One student wrote about her positive experiences at Michigan Tech.

I feel my experience at MTU has been a positive one so far. I have not had problems with any of the male or female professors. I have had several professors encourage me to grow in my field and to go on to challenge my abilities. I don't think that I have been treated differently than any other student at this university.

Another respondent went so far as to state that there was no prejudice at Michigan Tech.

It has been my experience that women aren't treated that much differently than men. I found most of the questions in this survey to be absurd! Give me a break, this is 1993 and women are equal in every way!

In contrast, some students spoke very strongly of their negative experiences.

I am extremely unhappy as a graduate student - female in my department. I feel that being a woman has caused several faculty members to write me off if I get a poor grade, whereas they would seek out and help a male student. I think I am judged harder than others.

I am sick and tired of having professors look at me like they are undressing me with their eyes when I am in shorts or a skirt....

or another comment

MTU is in the backwoods as far as equality of male and female students go. So much offensive material is allowed all over campus that it is disgusting. Every week, I get completely outraged when I read the *Lode* [the student newspaper]. There are so many derogatory and sexually explicit articles and comments printed...

### RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION PLANS

Based on the results of the Women's Climate Survey, the Women's Commission formulated recommendations (see Table 2 for examples) to help alleviate some of the problems women face in the workplace and educational environment. After discussion with the President of the University, the Commission agreed to establish target dates for implementation, to assign the responsibility for implementation to particular departments within the University, and to coordinate the implementation.

The Commission made a concerted effort to educate the faculty, administrators, staff and students about the results of the Climate Study and the

recommendations. In order to disseminate the results, the Commission sent two (2) copies to every department or division within the University and a copy to the library, encouraged an article in the staff and faculty bulletin, and made presentations to numerous campus groups.

Table 2. Example of the Women's Climate Study recommendations including target dates and responsible departments.

To be implemented by 1996	
Responsible Groups	Recommendation
Facilities/Sexual Assault Taskforce	implement additional safety measures, for example, 1) increase lighting in dark areas, 2) increase number of emergency phones.
President/Provost/Human Resources	conduct a new study to assess pay equity within staff classification levels

### STATUS OF IMPLEMENTATION

As planned in the meetings with the University President, the Presidential Commission for Women is coordinating the implementation of the recommendations.

- ▶ The Commission sent departments, colleges divisions, etc. letters listing the recommendations for which they were responsible and asking them to establish goals and strategies to implement the recommendations. A letter from the President stating the importance of the study and the implementation of the recommendations was sent with these letters.
- ▶ The resulting goals and strategies are being dovetailed into the strategic plan of the departments and the University. The Provost and President will make budget decisions based on the University strategic plan.

### EVALUATION OF IMPLEMENTATION

Progress towards implementation of the recommendations will be informally evaluated continuously for the next two or three years. During the 1998-99 school year, the Presidential Commission for Women will conduct a formal assessment of progress. The Commission will collect information to answer these questions: 1) has the University implemented the recommendations, and, more specifically, 2) are the individual departments achieving their goals.

### SUMMARY: REASONS FOR OPTIMISM - POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

The Commission is optimistic about real systemic change at Michigan Tech brought about by implementation of the Climate Study recommendations. The following are key elements which appear to be contributing to this change.

- ▶ The implementation of the recommendations have the active backing of key administrators, including the President and Provost.
- ▶ Voices of all groups of campus women were heard.
- ▶ The written survey with both multiple choice and open-ended questions added credibility because the multiple choice questions gave a rough idea about the relative scope of the problem and the answers to the open-ended questions gave a graphic indication as to the impact of these problems on women. The personal statements were very powerful.
- ▶ The Commission refrained from alienating too many people in the University by using conservative or noninflammatory language in the Climate Study.
- ▶ Departments responsible for implementation are named in the Climate Study.
- ▶ Target dates are established.
- ▶ Departments establish their own goals and strategies to implement the recommendations. This gives them some "ownership" in the process.
- ▶ The Commission for Women is coordinating and monitoring implementation of the study recommendations,
- ▶ Administrators are weaving goals and strategies which implement the climate study recommendations into the Strategic Plan of the University.

The most important ingredient for change is the active backing of the President and Provost of the University. The President provides financial and "moral" support for the Presidential Commission for Women and the recommendations of the Climate Survey. He also provided input and suggested that the recommendations list those responsible for implementation and include target dates. More importantly, he insisted that the Commission coordinate and evaluate the implementation of the recommendations. Both the President and Provost remind committees about material in the Climate Study when the members raise the same issues. There are many reasons for completing a Women's Climate Study. However, if systemic change is to evolve from Climate Study recommendations, we conclude that support and involvement of the central administration is critical.