

# Campus Sexual Assault Series

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Crime Victims' Institute

College of Criminal Justice | Sam Houston State University



## Writing Between The Lines: Examining Unprompted Handwritten Comments on a Campus Climate Survey

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Empirical work has found that 15 to 25% of females and approximately 1 in 17 males will experience some form of sexual victimization while attending college (AAU, 2015). As such, improving victimization responses and enhancing safety measures at institutions of higher education (IHEs) are important issues. The U.S. Government has encouraged IHEs to improve campus safety through evidence-based approaches by surveying students about their attitudes toward safety and their victimization experiences (White House Task Force, 2014). This report details findings from a study that examined unprompted, handwritten comments left by survey-takers on a paper-and-pencil, campus climate survey. Paper administration of the survey offered respondents the chance to leave comments in the survey margins. The survey did not formally ask respondents to provide commentary. Implications for Texas IHEs are discussed.

### Campus Safety and Campus Climate Surveys

Scholars have documented the difficulty in capturing data on sexual victimization. Limitations of legislation and associated reporting requirements mean that victims of sexual assault often disclose informally to friends/family (Fisher, Daigle, Cullen, & Turner, 2003). One way to better recognize the scope of sexual victimization at IHEs—compared to reliance on formal reporting—is with self-report data captured through campus climate surveys. These were developed, in part, to better measure student victimization but have expanded to include questions on attitudes toward safety, rape myth acceptance, and awareness/use of campus resources (Wood et al., 2016). Data from them can inform IHEs about how to best address victimization on their campuses and how to disseminate information about reporting methods and student services. These surveys have been offered primarily online by IHEs (Lindquist & Krebs, 2017).

### Online and Paper-and-Pencil Survey Methods

While paper-and-pencil surveys have their own set of limitations, they hold several advantages over online surveys. Researchers have had an easier time establishing rapport when offering in-person surveys because they can explain the survey content/goals directly to participants, rather than through an impersonal email solicitation (Wright, 2005). With online survey administration, respondents can fill out the survey wherever they please, which can be problematic because others can be present when online surveys are taken, potentially influencing responses. Surveys offered in-person (e.g., in a

classroom) can be better monitored.

When developing a sampling frame, it is easier for in-person surveys to achieve a random sample. The email databases used by researchers when disseminating online surveys have included multiple email addresses for one person, inactive email addresses, or have omitted individuals who have not included an email address on those lists. Potential survey-takers may irregularly check email or disregard survey solicitations (Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003). When researchers offer an in-person survey, they can alleviate concerns that are more difficult to control with online dissemination.

Lastly, paper-and-pencil surveys have offered respondents the chance to leave unprompted comments in the survey margins. This is not possible in web-based options. Thus, paper-and-pencil surveys have the potential to allow for a unique form of data.

### Unsolicited Comments Left on Surveys

Unprompted comments left in the margins of books by readers or authors—known as marginalia—have been analyzed for centuries. In social science research, comments have often been disregarded and considered irrelevant to the survey's central objective of gathering information (McClelland, 2016). This is problematic as these responses may have highlighted limitations with question wording or the survey more generally. This perspective has been useful for researchers because it treats respondents as having special knowledge/input on topics that scholars may have overlooked (Fox, 2015). Surveys have generally contained closed-response questions deemed important by the researcher during the survey design process, potentially overlooking what respondents have identified as valuable (Clayton, Rogers, & Stuifbergen, 1999). Individuals may leave written comments on paper-and-pencil surveys if respondents feel important information is unaddressed (Maliski & Litwin, 2007; McClelland & Holland, 2016). Similar conclusions were reached in the analyses of unsolicited comments on psychological and medical surveys: unsolicited comments have been a plentiful data source and have received limited empirical attention, have had the potential to inform better survey design, and have provided useful information related to response choices (Clayton et al., 1999; Maliski & Litwin, 2007;

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McClelland & Holland, 2016). McClelland and Holland (2016) analyzed comments from a paper-and-pencil survey of various psychological health-related self-report scales. The authors discovered three broad categories: clarifications, corrections, and instances where survey-takers indicated an item was not applicable. McClelland and Holland (2016) argued studying marginalia has provided insight into the relations between the researcher's intentions and participant responses to the questions.

### Methodology

**Data Source and Collection.** Data were drawn from a paper-and-pencil campus-wide climate survey administered at a four-year southeastern university to a random sample of undergraduate and graduate classes. Ten percent of courses offered at all university campuses during the spring 2017 semester (N=198) were randomly selected. Each instructor was contacted electronically to request permission to administer the survey during the first two weeks of class. The email highlighted that the survey was being administered in coordination with the Title IX office. Nearly half (48.24%) of instructors agreed to survey administration. At the discretion of the course instructor, some students were offered extra credit. Across all courses that participated, most students (89.65%) voluntarily took the survey. The 71-item survey used in this study was adapted from a survey designed and used by the University of Kentucky (2015).

**Analytic Strategy.** A total of 2,265 paper-and-pencil surveys were collected. To identify the subsample of respondents who left marginalia, surveys were examined for written, legible, marginalia. Non-word marks (e.g., faces, question marks) were included because they also convey information. After initial identification of surveys with unsolicited comments, relevant pages were scanned and printed. The final subsample included 248 respondents (10.95% of the sample) who provided 540 distinct comments on 466 pages. Comments were analyzed using the systematic methods of Glaser and Strauss' (1966) grounded theory approach to qualitative analysis. Importantly, researchers enter the data categorization process without presumptions. An inductive methodological approach is used, beginning with the collection of qualitative data, which are individually examined and subsequently compared to one another (often referred to as constant comparison), allowing for the development of categories/themes (Creswell, 2007). Each case should be initially categorized into as many groups as possible; this method is highly flexible, with emergent themes evolving during analysis (Glaser, 1965). For this study, data were systematically and thoroughly examined to assign codes to phenomena and to identify repeatedly-emerging themes. Each comment was read and line-by-line text analysis of the commentary was performed. As each comment was analyzed, adjectives and descriptions were identified. After the first review of the comments, similar adjectives/descriptions were grouped together and served as the foundation for developing themes and categories in which comments were sorted. To ensure that each comment was sorted into all applicable themes, and to best address this need for constant comparison, a second systematic review of each comment was conducted.

### Results

White (63.4%) and female (54.6%) respondents comprised most of the subsample. The average age (*Mean*=23.33) was slightly higher than that of the overall sample. Bivariate analyses revealed there were no significant differences between the subsample and the overall sample for both gender and age.

**Questions with no Unsolicited Comments.** Nearly 92% of the campus climate survey items (65 of 71) provided at least one unsolicited comment. Those without marginalia encompassed time spent with friends, physical disabilities, whether or not the respondent voted in the presidential election, and enrollment in

2016 summer school. The other two questions that did not provoke unsolicited comments revolved around unwanted sexual experiences.

**Top Five Most Commented-On Questions.** Marginalia were left most frequently on a set of rape myths taken from prior literature and measured with a Likert-type scale (McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999). Nearly 22 percent of the subsample left a comment in this section. These included opinions about the statements and creation of new response categories such as, "*rarely*" and "*sometimes*." Others were related to the accuracy of the myths: "*no shouldn't be a game*;" "*sometimes this is true*;" and, "*I know this happens often, but IDK how often*." In total, 24 comments were supportive of rape myths, eight denounced them, and five were unsure if they were true. The second most commented-on question related to the use and satisfaction of services. These comments primarily provided reasoning as to why the respondent did not answer the items. Some comments indicated the item was not applicable to them (e.g., "*nothing happened for me to contact anyone*;" "*not needed*;" and, "*lived in [another state]*").

The third most commented-on question asked who the survey-taker voted for in the 2016 presidential election. Respondents left positive and negative comments toward each candidate. One individual indicated they voted for Donald Trump and wrote, "*unfortunately*" next to their choice. Another wrote, "*didn't really like her either*" next to Hillary Clinton.

Comments on the item, "*How do you express your gender?*," which had male, female, and an option for other responses generally reinforced the gender binary. Survey-takers also questioned the presence of the "other" response choice, with comments such as "*soggy Ritz cracker*" and "*There is no other!*"

Lastly, 17 individuals wrote comments on items related to perceptions of safety on campus and unwanted sexual experiences. These comments primarily provided explanation as to why the respondent answered in a given way. A person marked "strongly disagree" with the statement, "I would go to the Student Health Center if I needed assistance because of an unwanted sexual experience" and wrote, "*I go to the cops*."

**Grounded Theory Analysis.** Twelve categories were identified falling under three general themes: additional information and clarification; altering the survey; and opinions about the survey. Since the categories were not mutually exclusive, total values exceed the number of total comments (N=540). Some overlap also existed between the broad categories.

#### Additional Information and Clarification (n=421).

**Clarification about the response chosen (n=171).** This theme is comprised of comments that provided some form of explanation or justification. One respondent selected "strongly disagree" in response to whether they would go to the student health center if they had experienced an unwanted sexual experience and wrote, "*real hospital*," providing a reason as to why they would not access the student health center. One respondent wrote, "*not to my knowledge*" and marked "never/0 times" for the question "[During the past 12 months], how often has someone done the following: followed or spied on you in ways that made you afraid?"

#### Clarification/commentary in lieu of answering (n=91).

This category included remarks left by respondents indicating why they did not provide an answer to a question. One respondent wrote, "*transfer student*" and did not answer a set of questions asking how many times in the past 12 months a student at the university had bullied them.

**Personal anecdote/opinion (n=71).** One person wrote, "*I*

wouldn't distract I intervene" next to the following statement: "Tried to distract someone who was trying to take a drunk person to another room or trying to get them to do something sexual." The same individual wrote, "I'm a cop so it's kind of my job" next to another question pertaining to intervention behavior.

**Unexpected commentary/write-in responses (n=57).** This category comprised responses not relevant to the survey question. Many of the comments came solely from the item asking respondents about gender expression. Some of these were written in the "other" gender response choice and included "grasshopper" and "attack helicopter." This category also included responses to a question that captured which year the respondent began attending the university. One individual wrote, "athletic shoes," while another responded with, "don't forget about your coursework." Additionally, commentary unrelated to the participant's response is included in this category. One person circled the word "adults," wrote, "IMPORTANT!" and drew a smiley face, regarding the instructions, "How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about sex between adults" (emphasis in the survey).

**Other information provided (n=31).** This category included comments that did not fall into the category of personal anecdote/opinion or explanation for their response. One person wrote, "Single Pringle" and drew a sad face next to their choice of "single" on the marital status question. For the question, "How often did you suspect or know that someone was being hit, shoved, or otherwise physically hurt by someone they were dating or a spouse/partner?" a survey-taker wrote, "told after it had happened" next to their response.

#### Altering the Survey (n=139).

**Adding a new response choice (n=79).** Comments in this category include instances where respondents either added a neutral/not sure/do not know option to the Likert-type response choices or created their own choice. For example, some survey-takers marked both "agree" and "disagree" and wrote, "both" or "50/50" next to their choices. Additionally, some respondents wrote, "I don't know" in place of a choice. Several respondents added a "none of the above" response choice to an item.

**Changed/added wording (n=12).** Comments classified in this theme focused around two conditions. In the first, the respondent crossed out part of a question and provided their own wording. For example, several individuals drew a line through the word "men" in the rape myth section and wrote in, "people," "someone," or "women."

#### Opinion about the Survey (n=120).

**Respondent deemed the question not applicable (n=48).** For these comments, the majority were "N/A," or "not applicable," written next to the item. Responses in this category also belong in the broad category altering the survey.

**Comment about the survey (n=27).** One individual wrote, "terrible survey question. Watch your wording," in the margin next to a set of items asking respondents about their perceived safety levels. Another wrote, "too long repetitive" (emphasis from respondent) at the end of the survey. There were also positive comments; several people wrote, "You're welcome" at the end of the survey next to the statement, "We really appreciate the time you put into this survey." Another individual wrote, "well worded" next to the item asking respondents how they express their gender. An example of a comment that was initially positive but eventually became critical was left at the end of the survey: "thought the survey was well done, except for the 'other' gender thing, don't encourage mental disorders w/ people."

**Commentary alleging gender bias (n=19).** For comments in this theme, the respondent indicated that the items—generally

the rape myths—were gender-biased. One individual wrote, "women do it too but thanks for the generalization." Respondents sometimes added to an item's wording. Multiple individuals added "women" to the rape myth items, and one person crossed out "men" and wrote, "people."

**Confusion about a question (n=16).** These comments included, "question is confusing," and, "same question?" Another individual wrote, "What? Ohhh..." next to the statement, "students would label the person making the unwanted sexual experience report a troublemaker."

**Adherence to the gender binary (n=10).** The comments in this section almost exclusively were written next to the item asking how the respondent expresses their gender. Some people wrote comments such as, "no such thing!" next to the response choice, "other." All comments left on these survey items, except for one respondent who wrote, "well worded," indicated distaste for treating gender as a non-binary construct.

#### Discussion and Implications for Texas IHEs

Marginalia left on this campus climate survey are indicative of how researchers can better capture information pertaining to safety, rape myth acceptance, willingness to intervene, victimization experiences, and knowledge/use of resources. They also highlight areas where future climate surveys can ask more context-driven questions. Previous limitations of campus climate surveys demonstrate a lack of university context. Incorporating a more diverse sample of college students to pilot test the survey may provide a deeper understanding of the different cultures and environments on specific campuses. The clarifications of choices, altering of questions, and negative opinions regarding the survey may diminish if more college students understand the survey and apply their university context/experience.

Further, the inclusion of open-ended items where survey-takers can provide information about their choices may be useful for researchers who want to probe the respondents' thought processes. IHEs in Texas can use this information to improve training on consent, intervention practices, and reporting methods for victimization. Context regarding campus safety perceptions, such as at night, could assist Texas universities in addressing fears of certain campus areas by adding security measures or addressing environmental characteristics. Texas IHEs should also work to make safety procedures/applications more accessible/well known, potentially increasing formal victimization reporting, while also promoting feelings of safety on campus. There is a push toward survey digitalization, with advocates arguing that this method makes dissemination easier, is less time-consuming, and uses fewer resources (Lewis et al., 2009). Research has also shown that almost a third of students complete climate surveys on their handheld devices (Lindquist & Krebs, 2017). Some online surveys allow respondents to share comments at the conclusion of the survey. Although this approach can be useful, it does not allow survey-takers to freely provide comments throughout the instrument. While the use of paper-and-pencil survey methods may wane, marginalia on online surveys can still be captured and analyzed. Online surveys can be designed to capture commentary from survey-takers throughout the process with the inclusion of open-ended items asking respondents to explain their response choices.

Unsolicited comments can provide context, improve future instrument iterations, and capture a more complete campus climate picture. These sections pertain most to the interests of Texas IHEs, which are constantly looking to improve campus safety, effectively address victimization experiences, and advocate for healthy, consensual sexual experiences and intimate relationships. Such information is vital for making students feel safer as they

pursue secondary education, for addressing rape culture, and helping victims feel more comfortable reporting their experiences—and confident the university will respond appropriately. In recent years, universities across Texas have implemented their own campus climate surveys and should continue to do so in light of the ever-present issue of sexual assault on college campuses.

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