



AAU PRESIDENT MEMORANDUM

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TO: AAU Presidents and Chancellors

FROM: Hunter Rawlings

SUBJECT: Response to Researchers Critical of AAU Sexual Assault Climate Survey

The purpose of this memorandum is to expand upon the responses we have already provided to the concerns raised in two communications from some researchers about the Association of American Universities Sexual Assault & Campus Climate Survey. For the most part, these communications are based on misunderstandings about the survey or disagreement with what we are trying to achieve. I recognize that these communications have caused some to question not only the efficacy of the AAU survey but also our good faith in creating and implementing it. AAU undertook this survey at the request of many of our institutions. Given the critical significance of this effort to AAU, our universities, and especially to the safety and security of your student bodies, we want to be sure that you have the facts with which to make your decisions about participating and with which to respond to questions.

Following are the points made in the initial letter from researchers, followed by our response.

1. The AAU is asking for a commitment to buy a survey sight-unseen, which is proprietary and therefore not available for scientific examination. Its questions, methods, and infrastructure will apparently be available in advance only to the administrations in those universities that pay for it. AAU universities are the premiere research institutions committed to peer-reviewed science. It is contrary to that ideal to keep this survey design secret.

AAU's process for developing and implementing a valid and reliable survey has been transparent to its members. AAU informed its [presidents and chancellors](#) (and other constituents) in June – and [the public](#) in November – that the AAU survey will follow guidance provided by the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, and that the AAU survey will be based on an instrument developed by Victoria Banyard which was included in the Task Force Report. Moreover, all were informed that a modified version of the Banyard instrument was being piloted by scientists at Rutgers. In addition, both communications noted that institution-specific questions would be included. Finally, AAU announced to its constituencies and the public that it had hired a respected survey research firm, Westat, to work with AAU to develop and implement the survey.

Therefore, universities did have a great deal of information provided to them concerning the topics to be covered in the survey, the instrument (namely, the Banyard survey) on which the AAU survey would be based, and the company that would be working with AAU on the survey.

This process is typical of how survey research is funded. A general idea of the survey, as well as the project staff and their experience, are presented to the potential funder – in this case our universities. The funders decide whether they believe the survey is worth funding or not. The survey design is not “secret.” It is under development. Each participating university will see the AAU instrument in draft form when it goes to the survey institutional research board (IRB) and when it goes through each university’s own IRB processes.

Once the survey development is complete, the instrument will in fact be made public.

2. The results will also not be shared and available for comparative analysis. A memorandum sent to you by AAU President Rawlings specified that “university-specific information will be shared only with that university.” In other words, each of you will know something about what is happening at your university (assuming the questions are scientifically valid, which we cannot tell) but nothing about others, except on a nationally averaged basis. It is well-known that even among AAU institutions, there are subgroups of peers. Without comparative data among institutions, the practical value of a nationwide survey will be severely limited.

The goal of this survey is to provide the information that universities need to craft empirically informed policies and practices for protecting students from sexual assault and promoting campus safety. We also hope that collecting data from across our universities will inform public policy and all other efforts to better understand this important and complex issue. **Therefore, the overall results of this survey will indeed be shared with the public for comparative analysis, and AAU is working on a plan for sharing the data with researchers when it is completed.** The overall survey information will be extremely valuable to policymakers, the public, and researchers.

We will also encourage our universities to make their own data public, but that decision will be up to each institution.

3. The AAU agreement with universities is that the survey content cannot be modified for individual campuses. Five questions will be “tailored” to individual campuses only by including the names of specific offices on each campus. The survey will not allow universities to include more useful questions that they might consider important. Therefore, the survey may not meet the needs of campus student affairs officials.

Most of the questions in this survey will be consistent across campuses to allow for analysis across the breadth of our campuses. However, we also know that universities differ in the specific prevention interventions they provide, the names of their programs, and other matters, so **there will indeed be some questions that universities can tailor to ask about these specific initiatives.** (Indeed, this is one of the reasons the AAU survey design team has practitioners who actually run these programs on campus.) Thus, we are confident this survey will indeed meet the needs of campus officials.

In addition, AAU and Westat are exploring the possibility of schools adding a link at the end of the survey to a home-based survey to allow schools to add additional questions to meet specific compliance needs and allow for additional customization.

4. The pressure put on AAU member institutions to sign commitments quickly, totaling as much as \$5 million nationwide (if most AAU members were to sign on), is disturbing. In May of this year AAU President Hunter Rawlings stressed the need to “get ahead of this issue before a federally designed survey is

mandated for us.” We do not understand this fear. Furthermore, spending \$85,000 for a non-transparent survey may well relieve institutions of the incentive to perform valid surveys conducted by those with expertise in researching campus sexual assault.

This overall cost figure is considerably exaggerated. The \$85,000 cost is based on 40 institutions participating in the survey. If more participate, as we hope will be the case, the per-institution figure may well decline. Still, the truth is these surveys are expensive because of the complexity of the instruments and the large number of students whom AAU and our universities want to reach. We have provided our institutions with a breakdown of the costs.

As for the timing, this survey will be implemented in the spring of 2015. AAU is indeed deeply concerned about the potential for a single government-run survey that is used for every institution throughout the country, from community colleges to small liberal arts colleges to small public universities to large public and private research universities. The differences among these institutions are immense – some have tens of thousands of students, some fewer than 1,000; some are almost entirely residential, some are entirely commuter; some are entirely full-time, some are mostly part-time. The nature of the relevant issues varies so much that clearly the same survey for all of these institutions would not make sense. So yes, we believe it is important to develop a valid survey that is useful for our institutions and their students, as well as policymakers, the public, and other researchers.

5. Accuracy of data regarding sexual violence has been known for years to be very sensitive to the way it is measured. AAU President Hunter Rawlings has asserted that a survey supported by the White House could provide “potentially misleading data” and “would not reliably assess the campus culture on this issue.” We have the same concerns about the not-yet-designed AAU survey, which neither academic experts nor university presidents have seen. Sound collaborative scientific efforts involve advisory boards of highly qualified scientists. In the case of the AAU survey, only two members of the advisory committee appear to have any experience in survey assessment on sexual assault, although the committee does have several lawyers and administrators.

It is a truism that the accuracy of survey data is sensitive to how it is measured, and this is especially true of sexual violence survey data. **That is why the Westat-AAU team is made up of researchers, practitioners, and other professionals with deep and direct experience, whether academic or practical, in survey research, sexual assault, gender issues, student affairs, or other related matters.**

Our survey firm, Westat, has personnel who have deep expertise on research surveys in general, and on sexual assault surveys in particular. For example, **Dr. Bonnie Fisher**, a nationally recognized expert on sexual assault, has been hired by Westat to work closely with the AAU-Westat team to shape the content and analysis of the survey. Her participation is a primary reason AAU retained Westat. **Dr. Sandy Martin**, a senior researcher and research administrator at UNC Chapel Hill, is leading the AAU survey design team.

To be clear, this team is building on the extensive body of existing work by sexual violence researchers and survey researchers.

This memorandum is intended to use as you wish. I hope it is useful to you. AAU will also make this information publicly available this week. I am, of course, eager to answer any additional questions you may have.

CC: Council on Federal Relations
Public Affairs Network