

25 November 2014

Presidents and Chancellors
Association of American Universities,
Consortium on Financing Higher Education

Dear Presidents and Chancellors:

As a group of 45 researchers advocating for a rigorous scientific approach to assessment of sexual victimization and campus climate, we continue to recommend that decision makers defer participation in an AAU survey by the December 1 deadline to allow time for a thoughtful and transparent evaluation of the issues.

Information provided in the November 20 AAU FAQ (that we just today saw) raises new concerns that suggest unanticipated negative consequences.

1. The survey is unlikely to be as strong as other models because AAU is neither waiting to benefit from the psychometric studies being undertaken by the Bureau of Justice Statistics nor using a process that will allow adequate input from experts.
2. If implemented universally across AAU and Consortium institutions, the survey would likely remove the 80 top universities from a potential national data base being developed through the Presidential Executive Order because they would have recently measured campus climate with non-comparable questionnaire components.
3. The AAU time frame for survey design, IRB approval, administration and data analysis is unrealistic for a scientifically sound result. The FAQ says IRBs cannot change anything; how will AAU override the usual independent process with IRBs?
4. The AAU is proposing a one-size fits all model whereas there is a strong argument for a uniform core across institutions and then individualized components that reflect campus specific concerns. The AAU contract with Westat forbids individual campuses from adding questions of local interest such as reactions to prevention programs or perceptions of residence life initiatives.
5. It is unclear from the breakdown of costs just how much Westat is charging for this survey and how much per campus is profit. The \$85,000 appears to be a minimum assuming everyone joins in and it does not appear to include local staff costs. Many questions remain. What if the local IRB does not approve the survey without changes? Will participants have the right to use this proprietary survey in future years at no cost? Many campuses have institutional resources that could implement a yearly campus survey at potentially lower costs.
6. Finally, the AAU communication does not address the extremely poor public perception that will result from their selection of experts from UVA and other campuses that have had serious problems or have used surveys on their campuses that have measured sexual assault with questions that are considerably below the state-of-the-art. AAU highlights two experts. One is advising the AAU itself and is not directly a member of the design team. It could be expected that from a survey design team of 18 individuals more than one content expert would be put forward to bolster perceptions of scientific expertise.

If you value research that has integrity, you will reject the AAU plan because it does not make adequate use of either the knowledge base of science or the open and rigorous process of science. You will reject the AAU plan because it will not have legitimacy with the public and it will not provide information that truly supports addressing sexual violence on campus.

Sincerely,

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