

3 December 2014

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

Dear Presidents and Chancellors,

We write to you as research scientists (1) to clarify our objections to the methods of the proposed AAU/Westat study; and (2) to describe an alternative survey that can be conducted in a more sound and consultative manner. Our concerns are with the process and the proposed methods of the AAU/Westat survey and not with those organizations themselves, which we respect.

In his original November 14, 2014, letter to AAU Chancellors and Presidents, Hunter Rawlings stated the purpose of the AAU/Westat study as follows:

- 1) *Collect information used to estimate the incidence and prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment experienced by university students (undergraduate, graduate and professional);*
- 2) *Collect information on students' attitudes towards sexual misconduct, including their perception of the adequacy of the university's response to sexual misconduct; and*
- 3) *Collect university-specific information on student experiences with programs and policies on their campuses.*

We strongly endorse these goals. We support the value of a large-scale comparable database that an organization such as the AAU could facilitate. Achieving these goals is contingent on state-of-the-art methods, both in data collection, for which Westat is eminently qualified, and survey content for measuring sexual misconduct and campus climate. However, good survey content requires that a range of experts with specialized academic expertise in assessing these sensitive issues be engaged. Accepted wisdom in survey methodology is to broaden the input from the research community, not tightly confine it.

A well-written survey that has been properly evaluated can be used for years to compare across campuses and to track the progress of institutional responses and sexual assault prevention initiatives. This will contribute to continuous quality assurance and assist institutions to support what is working and to redesign where improvements are needed.

Regrettably, the AAU proposal cannot achieve these shared goals for several reasons.

#### The time line is too short

Working as quickly as the AAU proposes, at the cost of ignoring best practices and wide expertise, is neither necessary nor wise. For example, any scientist who has studied sexual victimization can attest that it is unrealistic to allow just one month to secure institutional review board approval and to block any requested changes to the research protocol. The time line is also too compressed for external review or consultation with independent content experts. At this point it is unclear which survey has been adopted as the template, what measurement strategy for

sexual assault will be used, and the numerous other design decisions that must have already been made to meet the end of December timeline for a first draft. Given the huge scale of the proposed AAU endeavor, and no clearly articulated reason to rush, it would be prudent to follow established scientific process before fielding the survey.

#### The survey is duplicative of existing initiatives that are proceeding

AAU proposes to build on the sample survey included in the Not Alone report developed by the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault. (In his December 1 memo President Rawlings mistakenly identifies this survey as the New Hampshire survey). The White House task force report toolkit states:

The questions below are *examples* that represent the best available promising practices in climate surveys. Schools must work with faculty who have extensive research experience or other experts to customize a survey that works for their campus. *If conducted without sufficient planning, a survey can measure nothing, give false results, or even harm campus efforts to address sexual assault.* Some of the sample climate questions have not been validated, and this survey as a whole has not been validated.

#### The proposal lacks transparency

The terms and conditions of the AAU collaboration with institutions are constantly shifting. AAU President Rawlings has left unanswered the question of whether the institutions will have rights to use the survey they have purchased in future years. The data will be strictly confidential and available only to the individual institution, but on the other hand, it is claimed that will be available to researchers for comparative analyses – a rather clear contradiction. We do not support the development of a secret, proprietary, survey. It is crucial to create comparable, longitudinal, and publicly available data sets if universities are to understand which of their efforts will prove to be effective.

As a coalition of almost 60 concerned scientists, we want to offer our constructive thoughts about how the process could be improved and how the content of a survey can be constructed to accomplish the aims the White House, the AAU, and others who are developing campus climate surveys. However, the AAU is not listening. We continue to stand by, ready to contribute to reliable knowledge generation that will be seen as legitimate by the public, scientists, and policymakers at every level.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Allard, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, University of California, San Diego  
Joanne Belknap, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, University of Colorado-Boulder, Past-President  
of the American Society of Criminology  
Jennifer L. Berdahl, Ph.D., Montalbano Professor of Leadership Studies: Women and Diversity,  
Sauder School of Business, University of British Columbia

NiCole T. Buchanan, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Michigan State University  
Thema Bryant-Davis, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Pepperdine University  
Bethany Brand, Ph.D., Professor, Psychology Department, Towson University  
Jacquelyn Campbell, PhD, RN, Professor, Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing  
Rebecca Campbell, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Michigan State University  
Catherine C. Classen, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Toronto  
M. Lynne Cooper, Ph.D., Curators' Distinguished Professor, Department of Psychological Science, University of Missouri Columbia  
Lilia M. Cortina, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies, University of Michigan.  
Kelly Cue Davis, Ph.D., Research Associate Professor, University of Washington  
Amber N. Douglas, PhD. Associate Professor of Psychology, Mount Holyoke College  
Louise F. Fitzgerald, Ph.D., Professor Emerita, Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
William Flack, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Bucknell University  
Julian D. Ford, Ph.D., A.B.P.P., Professor of Psychiatry, University of Connecticut Health Center  
Lisa Frey, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Oklahoma  
Jennifer J. Freyd, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, University of Oregon  
William H. George, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, University of Washington  
Gordon N. Hall, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, University of Oregon  
Lise Gotell, Ph.D., Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, Vice-Dean of Arts, University of Alberta  
Sherry Hamby, Ph.D., Research Professor, University of the South and Director, Appalachian Center for Resilience Research  
Jocelyn Hollander, Ph.D., Professor and Department Head, Sociology, University of Oregon  
Janet Shibley Hyde, Ph.D., Evjue-Bascom Professor, Helen Thompson Woolley Professor of Psychology and Gender & Women's Studies, Director, Center for Research on Gender & Women, University of Wisconsin  
Angela J. Jacques-Tiura, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, Wayne State University  
Karestan C. Koenen, Ph.D., Professor, Director, Psychiatric-Neurological Epidemiology Cluster, Department of Epidemiology, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University  
Bridget Klest, PhD, Assistant Professor of Psychology, University of Regina  
Mary P. Koss, Ph.D., Regents' Professor of Public Health, University of Arizona  
Debra Kaysen, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Depression Therapy Research Endowed Professor, University of Washington  
Dean G. Kilpatrick, Ph.D., Distinguished University Professor of Clinical Psychology, Director, National Crime Victims Research & Treatment Center, Vice-Chair for Research & Research Administration, Co-Director, Charleston Consortium Clinical Psychology Internship Program, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Medical University of South Carolina  
Angela K. Lawson, Ph.D., Assistant Clinical Professor, Departments of Obstetrics & Gynecology and Psychiatry  
Northwestern University

Heather Littleton, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, East Carolina University

Jennifer A. Livingston, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist, Research Institute on Addictions, University at Buffalo

Amy D. Marshall, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, The Pennsylvania State University

Tatiana Masters, PhD, Research Scientist, School of Social Work, University of Washington

Laura McCloskey, Ph.D., Professor of Public Health, and Director, Center for Research on Health Disparities, Indiana University

Christine Murray, Ph.D., LPC, LMFT, Associate Professor, Department of Counseling and Educational Development, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Elana Newman, Ph.D., R. M. McFarlin Professor of Psychology, University of Tulsa

Jeanette Norris, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute, University of Washington

Loreen N. Olson, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Communication Studies, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Holly K. Orcutt, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Northern Illinois University

Michele R. Parkhill, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychology, Oakland University

Heidi Resnick, Ph.D., National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Medical University of South Carolina

Charlene Y. Senn, PhD, Professor, Department of Psychology and Women's Studies Program, University of Windsor

Stephanie A. Shields, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology & Women's Studies, Penn State University

Margaret L. Signorella, Ph.D., Director of Academic Affairs, Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies, Pennsylvania State University, Greater Allegheny Campus

Paige Hall Smith MSPH, PhD, Associate Professor, School of Health and Human Sciences, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Kevin Swartout, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Psychology, Georgia State University

Martie Thompson, Ph.D., Research Professor, Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life, Clemson University

Jeff Todahl, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Director, Center for the Prevention of Abuse and Neglect, University of Oregon

Sarah E. Ullman, Ph.D., Professor of Criminology, Law, and Justice & Director, Office of Social Science Research, University of Illinois at Chicago

Jacquelyn W. White, Ph.D., Emerita Professor of Psychology, Senior Research Scientist, Center for Women's Health & Wellness, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Nicole P. Yuan, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Public Health, University of Arizona

Tina Zawacki, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Texas at San Antonio

Heidi M. Zinzow, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Clemson University

Eileen L. Zurbriggen, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, University of California Santa Cruz