

17 November 2014

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

Dear Presidents and Chancellors:

We are writing to you to ask urgently that each of you *not* commit to signing an \$85,000 contract on a sexual assault and campus climate survey with a consultant for the Association of American Universities by the December 1, 2014 deadline. As experts in the measurement of sexual violence, we have five objections to the AAU survey as currently planned.

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.¹ AAU universities are the premiere research institutions committed to peer-reviewed science. It is contrary to that ideal to keep this survey design secret.
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.”² 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.
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.³ 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.
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.”⁴ 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.

¹ Hunter Rawlings, “Update and Call to Action on AAU Sexual Assault Climate Survey,” November 14, 2014. A copy of this memo was sent to all presidents and chancellors.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Hunter Rawlings, memorandum “AAU President’s Report,” May 19, 2014, available at http://president.uoregon.edu/sites/president3.wc-sites.uoregon.edu/files/field/image/aau_presidents_report.pdf.

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.”⁵ 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.

The undersigned faculty scientists with careers devoted to research about sexual assault, sexual misconduct, and related matters respectfully ask you not to sign the letter of commitment being asked by the AAU by December 1, 2014.

Respectfully,

Antonia Abbey, Ph.D. Professor of Psychology, Wayne State University
William Flack, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Bucknell University
Rebecca Campbell, Ph.D. Professor of Psychology, Michigan State University
Kelly Cue Davis, Research Associate Professor, University of Washington
Jennifer J. Freyd, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, University of Oregon
Sherry Hamby, Ph.D., Research Professor, University of the South and Director, Appalachian Center for Resilience Research.
Mary P. Koss, Ph.D., Regents' Professor or Public Health, University of Arizona
Jennifer A. Livingston, Ph.D. Senior Research Scientist, Research Institute on Addictions, University at Buffalo
Jeanette Norris, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist, Alcohol and Drug Abuse Institute, University of Washington
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Jacquelyn W. White, PhD, 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
Heidi M. Zinzow, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology, Clemson University

⁵ Barry Toiv, “AAU Announces Sexual Assault Climate Survey,” Press Release, AAU, November 14, 2014, available at <https://www.aau.edu/news/article.aspx?id=15696>.