

Community, Space and Support: Keys to Women-Friendly Gender Climates

Summary of Study

This analysis examined how students evaluated components of their academic department and whether existing programs created a woman-friendly environment for students. Women-friendliness was identified when departments were described by students as being effective in responding to women as underrepresented in the discipline. Students were asked to explain aspects of their program they wanted to change, to identify three aspects they wanted to retain, and to describe when they felt valued and supported by the department. Research findings were based on (1) coding of responses to questions in 150 face-to-face 60 minute interviews at 5 major Research I universities, (2) network analysis of the coded responses from students in Computer Science, Information Science, Informatics and other IT programs; and (3) analysis of programs designed to address women's needs and provide support as described on websites and other departmental and university materials.

Results

- The characteristic most valued was community, engendered by working together, decreased competition, and open access.
- Students noted the importance of physical space to work and feel safe 24/7, comfortable lounge areas, and natural lighting.
- Individual (name) recognition made women feel valued.
- Most students expressed no knowledge about programs for women
- Students involved in women's programs were likely to be strongly supportive of them and simultaneously more aware of "woman-unfriendly" characteristics
- Women in such programs believe them essential for increasing women's recruitment and retention
- CS departments seem to have more active women's organizations than applied programs.

Take Home Findings

Although women's programs are successful in ameliorating some challenges, they also raise awareness of the negative aspects in the community. This often leads to increased expressions of dissatisfaction while improving the overall climate.

There is some evidence that women shy away from involvement in women's programs because of negative feedback from other students. Programs that encourage men to be members may be more effective in dissolving those negative stereotypes.

Bettering the climate for women will also benefit men, whether in making buildings safer and aesthetic, encouraging faculty to provide positive feedback, and creating a community of shared interests.