Revision of SRTE: Inclusion of Campus Climate

(Forensic)

Rationale and Background
The Penn State Strategic Plan and Framework to Foster Diversity, both charge every university location with creating a welcoming campus climate. Institutionalizing the values of inclusion and respect requires the University to take formal and informal action in subtle and dramatic ways if it hopes to make the ideal real.

The classroom is arguably the most important “micro-climate” influencing the overall University environment, directly through faculty-student interaction and indirectly through the modeling and teaching of respect and inclusion. It is the only micro-climate over which faculty has ultimate authority and control.

The Student Rating of Teaching Effectiveness is the only instrument that extends across the University into most, although not all, classrooms. As such, it is the one of the most powerful tools currently available and regularly administered to assess climate.

Including a climate assessment item in the SRTE is a significant way to highlight the commitment of faculty to the strategic plan and framework goals. It communicates very clearly to students that the University faculty accepts accountability for their leadership in creating a climate where diversity, of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, political viewpoint and ideology, approaches to problem solving is not just tolerated, but nurtured and respected even in the inevitable instances of disagreement.

The SRTE has both admirers and harsh critics. Regardless of the ongoing debate, it has been demonstrated to be a stable measure (with respect to “quality of instructor” item) over a number of courses and sufficient number of students, specifically, at least five courses and 20 students. (Dooris, p. 7) Individual items selected by units tend to have a high correlation with this measure.

The question of how to address issues related to climate have not been addressed since the Framework to Foster Diversity was adopted. In the 1990s revisions to the SRTE to include diversity items were considered and at least temporarily adopted. On February 20, 1990, the Faculty Affairs committee of the University Faculty Senate approved adding two SRTE questions to the “B” pool. A March 9, 1990 memo from the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs to SRTE Area Representatives, Department and Division Heads, and the Council of Academic Deans advised them of the recommendation of the Faculty Affairs Committee and the process for their inclusion. The items were identified as:

- 178. Rate the degree to which the instructor showed appropriate sensitivity to students representing a different or culturally diverse background (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, or culture).
179. If applicable, rate the degree to which the instructor included course content representing a different or culturally diverse perspective (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion or culture).

In a September 13, 1990 memo from the Chair of Faculty Affairs to the Vice Provost noted recommended changes in these questions to fit them within the 130 character limitation of the SRTE form.
- Rate the instructor’s sensitivity to students of culturally diverse backgrounds (race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion).
- If applicable, rate the instructor on including culturally diverse perspectives (race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion).

An October 1, 1990, memo from the Vice Provost to the Commonwealth Caucus indicated that 38 departments intended to use one or both of the questions on an experimental basis in the Fall 1990 administration of the SRTE. (The Commonwealth Caucus in two memos to the Vice Provost had expressed concern over the speed with which the questions were added to the pool and questioned whether or not full consultation with the faculty had occurred. One of the main substantive concerns voiced in memos from the Caucus was whether or not the questions impinged on academic freedom).

In a May 19, 1995 memo from the Chair of Undergraduate Education to the Chair of the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity (CORED) indicated that Undergraduate Education had voted unanimously against inclusion in the SRTE pool of two questions brought to them by CORED. The questions and the reasons for their defeat were:

1. Demonstrates a respect for the value of individuals regardless of their background or culture.
   - Drew undue attention to minority background or culture
   - Wording change suggested: “demonstrates a respect for the value of all individuals”

2. Contributes to processes that support a diverse learning environment.
   - Did not clarify what diverse learning environment meant.

We maintain that the history of the struggle to include diversity related questions on the SRTE and the willingness of 38 departments to use one or more of them on an experimental basis warrants revisiting this important question.

We believe that focusing explicitly on the question of climate encompasses the diversity concerns expressed in earlier discussions and avoids the pitfalls. The difficulty of communicating the concept of climate, as distinct from matters of room temperature on the one hand or course content on the other, is recognized. The committee’s concern with climate is not to be confused with either of these matters. Climate items should focus attention on respect for and inclusion of all students in the full richness of the teaching and learning process.

Challenge One of Penn State’s Framework to Foster Diversity identifies positive perceptions of climate relating to “an environment characterized by equal access and respected participation for
all groups and individuals irrespective of cultural differences and, more importantly, where the multiplicity of characteristics possessed by persons are not simply tolerated but valued.”

Building from this concern with climate, the committee does not intend to reduce the concern of the committee to cultural differences; our concern with climate emphasizes “all groups and individuals.”

The phrases “creating a positive atmosphere for learning,” “openness to discussion of other viewpoints,” “presents divergent viewpoints,” are used by many units. Before a recommendation of items is brought to the Senate, EECE will conduct a small study of student perception of each item’s meaning. Procedures of consultation with units will also be followed.

Questions for Consideration
- Does the faculty want to include an SRTE question that deals with diversity/climate?
- Should the climate question be mandatory or optional?
- Should the climate question be selected from a group of questions categorized as “climate?”
- Should the climate question be scaled or open ended?

References:
Communications of the University Faculty Senate Faculty Affairs Committee. 1990 and 1995.