

# Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions from UW-Extension Survey of Workplace Climate

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**Kerry Zaleski & Jeffrey Lewis**  
**Program Development & Evaluation**  
**UW Extension/Cooperative Extension**

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## **Purpose**

To improve the working environment at UW-Extension

## **Methodology**

Rankin and Associates, the consulting firm charged with conducting the survey, entered open-ended question responses from the “Survey of Workplace Climate” into an Excel spreadsheet by question and respondent ID number. Kerry Zaleski and Jeffrey Lewis from Program Development and Evaluation coded and categorized the data using NVivo 09 software as well as manually, in order to identify emerging themes and potentially useful information that would help provide recommendations for improving the working environment at UW Extension.

## **Limitations**

- Since we are unable to identify which specific respondents were from Co-op, we cannot know how pervasive any given issue is within Cooperative Extension.
- We have no ability to provide any analysis by district or county.
- The data are weighted on state staff that made up 19.3 percent of CE respondents.
- Despite representing a substantial proportion of the state population, the Quad Counties had a response rate of only 7 percent.
- Disability question does not provide option for HIV, which is protected under the ADA. Would be useful to explore and understand the extent to which stigma and discrimination affects people with HIV in the workplace and if staff are aware of the institution’s HIV workplace policy or whether or not these exist.

## Who participated in this survey?<sup>1</sup>

	# of respondents	Percent of total	Response rate
UW Extension	577	100%	35%
<b>Cooperative Extension</b>	<b>399</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>43%</b>

- The majority of completed surveys came from Academic Staff (41%)
- 91% of respondents identified as white (38.3% response rate)
- 7 % of total respondents identified as people of color (34% response rate)
- Response rate from African American / Black staff was only 25%
- Women accounted for 71% of survey respondents (41% response rate)
- Men accounted for 28 % of survey respondents with a 25.7% response rate.
- 92% of respondents reported being heterosexual, with 3.8% identifying themselves as lesbian, gay or bi-sexual.

## Findings

Overall, 85% (n=489) of **all** respondents took the time to respond to one or more of the open-ended questions.<sup>2</sup> All of these questions followed different multiple-choice questions and asked for any additional information the respondent wished to share. The question generating the most response were around

1. Reasons for considering leaving and/or reasons for staying with UWEX (Q8)
2. Job satisfaction and career progression (Q6)

### **Question 4: Comfort level with climate** (139 respondents)

Most of the comments expressed negative concerns, sometimes coupled with positive observations. A number of people expressed Indifference, stating that there were problems but that they were out of the employer's control, that things were fine for them but not for others, or that it varied week to week.

### **Elitism, hierarchical structure, classism**

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<sup>1</sup> Twelve people did not respond or were missing. Eleven people reported 'other', which included written responses suggesting this question is irrelevant. A few people seemed to take offense to the questions with responses such as: "normal", "human" and "none of your business."

<sup>2</sup> Although we cannot know how many of these responses come from Cooperative Extension staff, we do know that if all non-Co-op staff responded to open-ended questions (n=178), all of the remaining 311 respondents would be from Cooperative Extension or 64% of the total, which is close to the overall Co-op response percentage.

A number of responses talked about unfair treatment and condescension particularly toward classified staff.

*“Classified staff are like good servants—invisible”*

*“I usually feel no one really cares how I’m doing or even about finding out anything my work might be worth in someone’s life”*

There were numerous comments about classified staff being treated like “peons” and feeling like faculty are the only well-respected staff members. Many people expressed a “top-down” approach, with little credit or voice given to people who are not in senior positions.

*“People are afraid to speak up...”*

*“No one listens. It’s the same thing all the time. It’s like being in a dictatorship”*

There were a handful of responses related to **bullying and intimidation**:

*“I have seen an increase in bullying and arrogance by administrators in the division. People are in tears on a frequent basis.”*

A number of respondents reported on the general feeling of inclusion and quite a few mentioned the state budget/Walker agenda and loss of collective bargaining as a source of stress. Related to this, some respondents commented that liberal perspectives dominate CE and apparently feel excluded, marginalized, etc. within CE; others expressed feeling excluded for other identity-related reasons. An overall feeling of uncertainty seems to prevail:

*“A great deal of change is upon us which leads to uncertainty in Extension overall.”*

### **Question 6: Job satisfaction and career progression** (352 respondents)

A significant number of people took time to respond to questions about job satisfaction and career progression. The majority of responses were negative. Those who had positive things to say focused on the importance of their work and ability to make a difference in people’s lives. Others mentioned good working relationships with colleagues.

#### **Concerns**

Overwhelmingly on the negative side, respondents reported being dissatisfied with **career progression and growth**, reflecting inability to move up the ladder and **feeling “stuck”** in their position.

#### **Salary**

This was the second most discussed issue for dissatisfaction, with much of this falling on the state budget cuts, having to pay for benefits (health care and pension) and the salary freezes since 2009. Many people stated that salaries are not adequate to support a decent living, especially with the new benefit changes and wage freezes that have taken place. This seems to contribute to people not feeling valued for the work they do, even when demands are increasing.

## **Leadership**

A number of people expressed dissatisfaction with **leadership** within the organization. In particular, people mentioned not having their ideas supported and their voices ignored. Many mentioned they did not receive encouragement to seek out **professional development** by their leaders.

*"In every annual review, I ask for the same training and I am always denied"*

*"Department head discriminates and only provides training to "pet" favorite coworkers"*

**Leadership** was also mentioned a number of times regarding **not feeling appreciated**, not having efforts recognized, and not having ideas taken forward.

*"They (administrators) are too out of touch with the day to day work and clients."*

Some also mentioned the issue of promises being made but not kept, particularly in terms of advancement.

**Lack of state support to counties** was raised quite a few times as something that constrained the work of county educators in particular.

A number of people drew particular attention to **WNEP**. Nutrition educators tend to feel **limited** in their ability to apply learning and test out new ideas. They felt that the program has a lot of constraints that do not nurture creativity and innovation.

Discrimination based on **sexism** was raised a number of times with people feeling like it is easier for men to move up the ladder than women:

*"I was never groomed for a position as I have seen males be groomed. I feel I had to work harder and be better just to be equal"*

**Favoritism** came out as one of the key reasons people felt unequal, and unappreciated.

*"There seems to be different rules or procedures for people who are liked by administration"*

As in question 6, a common theme included the unequal treatment of **classified staff**:

*"There are many opportunities for unclassified and academic staff within Extension. Classified staff receive very little inclusion and often feel left out, inferior or different."*

*"There is no promotion available for people without higher degrees"*

Positive comments were mainly around the adequacy of the organization. Those who felt fulfilled did not seem to have any higher expectations than what they were doing or felt that they had achieved their goals. Many appear to love their work, even as they express concerns or frustration. Some responses expressed satisfaction towards achievements, particularly among people who felt somewhat balanced between the pros and cons.

*"Has gone according to plan."*

*"Overall UWEX is a great place to work. I am not fond of the political aspects of the position but one takes the positives with the negative."*

*"I'm doing what I came to do."*

*"The pay is low but the work is satisfying."*

Many respondents expressed satisfaction with their situations because they were doing **important work**, and able to make positive differences in people's lives:

*"I love the work I do and find meaning in the difference it makes for others"*

*"I love helping people..."*

*"I love Extension work. I find it very rewarding both personally and professionally."*

A few people commented they were new and still feeling things out.

**Question 8: Why did you consider leaving and/or why did you decide to stay? (347 respondents)**

Responses to this question appeared to strike a chord regarding key organizational culture issues, including elitism, classism and hierarchy; lack of communication, not feeling valued; poor leadership and lack of accountability.

Most people who have considered leaving have done so due to:

1. **The inability to progress in their career** and provide for themselves and families due to the budget cuts and **salary** freezes.
2. A number of people also felt stress from the increased workload and demands put on them due to other positions not being filled, and expectations being held too high.
3. **Stress** related to **workload** seems to be affecting **morale, work-life balance** and family responsibilities.

These remain the top reasons why people are currently considering finding work elsewhere.

The primary reasons people stay include:

1. Lack of jobs elsewhere,
2. Flexibility in work
3. Location and sense of security (for the most part, by people who are nearing retirement).

One person mentioned having better opportunities with Extension in other states as a reason to consider leaving.

As reasons to stay, many people mentioned not having other opportunities due to the economy, and a sense of feeling stuck. People did not want to risk giving up their benefits, particularly health insurance. A good number of people stated that they felt safer just to stick it out until retirement.

Of those that decided to stay, a few said it was because they were able to find another position in Extension. They highlighted this as the only way to move up in the organization, with particular emphasis on difficulties getting positions reclassified.

### ***Poor leadership***

This was mentioned quite a bit as reasons for considering leaving. Frustration with high turnover in administration was expressed a number of times:

*“New administrations that reinvent the wheel and then never address compensation issues or sticking around long enough to truly change the organization.”*

*“There is a systemic leadership problem that trickles down to academic staff.”*

*“Two very bad bosses drove me to apply for other jobs.”*

*“No shared leadership.”*

As in previous questions, we found a number of concerns about leaders not keeping promises with regards to career progression (trustworthiness & integrity):

*“If there was actually some movement toward a higher level position rather than just talk, then I might be willing to stay.”*

A number of people reported discrimination with no protection from HR. Many people expressed feeling push back or blame for the raising such issues. **Lack of accountability** was a common theme around issues related to **discrimination** or **bullying**. Examples included managers as well as HR not being responsive to complaints.

*“I refuse to be discriminated against by my department head. I contacted HR several times and they didn’t do anything except refer me to EAP and encouraged me to speak to my department head about ‘my issues’.”*

Overall comments about poor **working relationships** or the feeling that the university is a **hierarchal** organization that will never change was apparent in the majority of responses relating to reasons one has considered leaving. **Hierarchy, classism and lack of appreciation** were common themes:

*“The university system maintains a tradition of hierarchy and class system that no longer serves us...”*

**Question 15: Elaborating on the response: “I felt isolated or left out because of my identity” (64 responses)**

Although the total number of responses represents just 13 percent of the total number of respondents to open-ended questions, they reflect troubling issues within the organization for these respondents.

Of the 64 responses to this question, the majority talked about **poor leadership** in handling complaints, which they attributed to favoritism or minimizing the behavior by saying things such as: *“Don’t report this or it will make the county look bad.”* People also felt like they were blamed and turned against by management after reporting **bullying** behavior. A number of respondents reported feeling that the HR department was **not protective of their rights**. A number of responses described how HR managers did not stand behind them when complaints were made and deflected responsibility by advising they take the issue up with their supervisor. Many were told to *“just deal with it,”* resulting in employees avoiding certain colleagues, creating an uncomfortable work environment.

### ***Lack of trust***

Low trust in administrators was a common theme in almost every response in this section. A “nothing’s being done” attitude was expressed by those who have reported **bullying or discriminatory** behavior. People do not seem to feel like there are effective protocols in place for reporting and addressing this type of behavior. One person had experienced bullying in the past, but felt that too much time had passed to report it.

There was also mention of feeling like one has been **set up for failure** by management.

### **Questions 23-24: Sexual Misconduct** (4 respondents)

Four people reported being a victim of sexual assault while working for Extension. In each case, the perpetrator of the crime was different. They included: Co-worker, community partner, supervisor and volunteer. One person reported seeking support from administrator, supervisor or manager, another reported it and it was ignored, and another did nothing about it. It is concerning that, when asked why the sexual assault was not reported, the respondent stated it was because s/he **feared retaliation which happened anyway.** The person who *did* report the sexual assault to Extension (Q24) said that she was told that the behavior was due to the perpetrator having lost his wife, and **was advised not to “get in situation with person again alone.”** Details of the assaults were not reported. However, none of the purported victims reported the assault to law enforcement officials or sought medical treatment after the incident.

### **Question 50: Observations of exclusionary conduct directly towards a person or group of people at work (60 respondents)**

The majority of responses to this question were around **poor leadership** (20 respondents), particularly with regards to **accountability**. A number of people stated that they did not want to say anything out of fear of losing their job. Others talked about leaders (administrators, supervisors) siding with the 'abusers.'

A few reported not having a say in their departments or having their opinions dismissed. Others talked about witnessing derogatory or discriminatory comments being made. A few people had felt offended by remarks made about political view points.

### **Question 53: Discriminatory hiring practices (42 respondents)**

A few people commented on **affirmative action** practices and felt that unqualified people of color or women were getting hired solely due to their race or gender.

A number of people talked about **favoritism** and internal biases, politics and what they perceive to be a culture of "who you know" rather than "what you bring."

A few people reported feeling that the proper procedures for hiring were cleverly bi-passed in order to hire someone in particular that was well known or worked internally, without going through a thorough recruitment process. Many people expressed the observed ease of getting around the procedures by doing things such as advertising a position externally for only a half day in order to limit the number of applications in favor of the person they had in mind.

*"The current classified/unclassified system creates inherent bias in educational level"*

A number of people reported feeling a culture "*good ol' boys club*" where the highest held positions are intentionally white males. On the other hand, another respondent stated, "white males hardly have a chance of getting a position".

One person talked about experiences on a search and screen committee where comments about diversity efforts included "*we have women in the pool so we are good there.*" The response seemed to suggest that people don't understand the purpose of affirmative action processes.

There was one response related to search committees being biased by only including unclassified staff, suggesting classified staff should have opportunities to serve on hiring committees.

### **Question 56- Discriminatory disciplinary action** (26 respondents)

The majority of the respondents felt that people were disciplined unfairly if they did not **conform** to the ways of the leader. **Not feeling safe** was a common theme. Some even suggested that people were forced to lie and cover the backs of the leaders, for fear of losing their jobs if they refused. One response expressed this as a culture of “yes men” where the leaders of the institution only want people working for them if they tell them what they want to hear.

### **Question 59: Discrimination related to unfair promotion** (32 respondents)

A number of people talked about the unfairness in hiring practices that require degrees and not considering performance quality and number of years experience. People who brought this issue to the forefront talked about **agism**, hiring younger people with a degree over older people with experience but no degree as part of a strategy to build the future workforce.

As mentioned in previous questions, many people brought up **favoritism**, knowing the right person in management in order to get a promotion.

**Tradition** and **having to conform** were also listed as challenges for people with new ideas:

*“In Family Living, if you don't fit the mold you will have a hard time getting promoted. It is a very traditional program area and colleagues expect conformity.”*

### **Question 63: Observations of accessibility for People with Disabilities** (42 respondents)

A number of people responded that because they were not disabled themselves, they did not feel in the position to comment.

Other responses were mainly around not having **ADA compliant building accommodations** such as ramps to bathrooms and automatic doors to bathrooms. Others talked about IT

accommodations and needing more software that accommodated for people who are visually impaired.

Just a few respondents stated that UWEX bends over backwards or does an excellent job at accommodating people with disabilities.

### **Question 71: Recommendations to improve climate (79 respondents)**

The main recommendations centered around improving leadership, providing mentors for all employees (not just minorities) and increasing professional development on inclusion and diversity, with some suggesting this should be mandatory for all employees. One person also suggested that diversity and inclusion should be specifically written into job descriptions, interview questions and performance reviews.

There were a few people who pushed back and felt that issues of diversity and inclusion were being “shoved down their throats” and money was being wasted on these efforts.

### **Summary of recommendations made by respondents**

- Improve leadership (define)
- Provide mentors for all employees, not just minorities
- Increase professional development opportunities
- Increase professional development on inclusion and diversity
- Make diversity and inclusion training mandatory for all employees (Note of caution here: need to know what this means... definitions, intended outcomes, how would these be measured? Design, delivery would need serious consideration. Who’s charge would this be?)
- Explicitly mention inclusion and diversity in job descriptions, interview questions, performance objectives and performance evaluations

We think most important is to come to a common understanding of what these terms mean to people (leadership, inclusion, diversity), what they mean and look like within the organization and how we are going to get there.