

# AAS Climate Site Visit Manual

This document provides information about AAS Climate Site Visits, to serve as a reference for the Site Visit Oversight Committee (SVOC; item 1 below) and Site Visit Team (SVT; item 2 below). Included here are instructions for institutions wishing to request a visit, as well as guidelines for selecting and training SVOC and SVT members, scheduling and conducting visits, and producing follow-up reports for sites visited.

## Introduction

In this document, an organization's *climate* refers to the cultural values, beliefs, and assumptions of the organization as well as the patterns of behavior, schemas, attitudes, and feelings that characterize life in the organization. An organization's climate impacts each individual's sense of belonging, respect, value, equity, fair treatment, access to opportunity, and overall ability to achieve success. *Marginalized* or *underrepresented* identities are those *historically* excluded from fair, safe, and equitable participation in astronomy.

Since many aspects of climate are intangible and may be invisible from within, departments and organizations can expect to benefit from the wisdom of external evaluators even when the climate is already favorable. The site visit team is charged with providing general recommendations and guidance, not with addressing specific incidents or individuals.

## 1. The Site Visit Oversight Committee

- a. History: In February of 2017, the AAS Board approved the formation of this committee to develop, implement, and oversee a Climate Site Visit Program for astronomy departments, institutes, and organizations where AAS members are employed. This document further develops the originally approved [site visit procedures](#), providing more detailed descriptions and adding key components.
- b. The SVOC will consist of one member nominated by the AAS President as well as one nominated by each of the AAS equity committees, which currently are the Committee on the Status of

Minorities in Astronomy (CSMA), the Working Group on Accessibility and Disability (WGAD), the Committee for Sexual Orientation and Gender Minorities in Astronomy (SGMA), and the Committee for the Status of Women in Astronomy (CSWA); hereafter, the AAS Inclusion Committees. In addition, two experts in human resources, survey administration, or relevant social science disciplines will be selected by the committee's AAS representatives and approved by the AAS Board of Trustees. Ideally, SVOC members represent a range of identities and of career stages from undergraduate students to senior faculty.

- c. SVOC members normally serve a three-year term, except for the initially appointed committee. Some members of the initial committee will serve shorter terms in order to enable staggered terms for continuity. Terms may be renewed once; no more than two terms may be served consecutively, and additional terms may be served non-consecutively.
- d. Selection of new SVOC members will be by nomination and appointment as above. Each nominating body will propose a new member as the term of its appointee expires.
- e. The SVOC will meet yearly with inclusion committee chairs for updates on new issues or concerns from each group.

## 2. The Site Visit Team: Charge, Selection, and Terms of Service

- a. The charge to the Site Visit Team (SVT) is to assess the department's climate, especially for marginalized groups, and to offer suggestions for improvement in the climate, based on the SRC survey, information provided to the SVT by the department, and meetings between the SVT and department members.
- b. For each visit, SVTs will consist of three people chosen by the SVOC from a larger pool of six members. To select members of the SVT pool, open calls will be made to the AAS membership and Inclusion Committees for nominations once per year. SVT pool members will normally serve a 2-year term, except for the initially selected team. Half of the initial SVT pool will serve a 1-year term in order to enable staggered terms for continuity.

- c. In keeping with the SVOC's fundamental charge of inclusion, SVT pool members should ideally be representative of a range of career stages and identities. They should also have experience recognizing the signatures and impact of the trauma that marginalized people face. Early-career SVT members may be considered if it can be demonstrated that retaliation will not occur and the time commitment will not be detrimental.
- d. The SVT pool members will be selected through an application process that includes a set of questions gauging candidates' interest and experience in inclusive practice. Endorsements/references may be requested. The SVOC will maintain a list of potential SVT candidates in addition to annually requesting nominees from the AAS membership and Inclusion Committees.

### 3. Training the Site Visit Team

- a. Once SVT pool members are selected, they will be trained by the SVOC in topics relevant to the site visits. To this end, one or more HR representative from the SVOC will conduct an interactive on-line training workshop.
- b. Training topics will include building awareness of bias, examples of harassment/exclusion that different identity groups face, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act ([FERPA](#)), best practices and guidelines pertaining to confidentiality, inclusion of marginalized perspectives, communication and interviewing techniques, and active listening.
- c. The SVT will also be trained to acknowledge and recognize power dynamics, especially with regard to the risks that more vulnerable junior members may take when being candid with the SVT.
- d. Team members will be trained to assume all the roles below; team members' responsibilities may rotate with each site visit, but the SVT coordinator should always be a senior astronomer.
  - i. Coordinator: this team member will coordinate the details of the visit with the site director/department chair in advance of the visit and will coordinate the activities of the SVT during and after the visit.

- ii. Documentation lead: this team member will document details of the interview, collate quotes or summaries from interviews, and keep track of pertinent site information.
- iii. Interview lead: this team member, ideally experienced in interviewing or conversing with marginalized groups, will strategize with the SVOC before the visit regarding how to conduct interviews with selected groups, will suggest the order of interviews and specific questions to ask of the interviewees, and will be the primary interviewer during the visit.

#### 4. Site Visit Requests: Submission and Processing

- a. AAS Climate Site Visits for astronomy departments will be initiated by invitation from a department chair/site director sent to the AAS President or any member of the SVOC. The request should demonstrate that endorsement of site administration (e.g., a Dean, Provost, or Director) has been obtained; this is necessary for ensuring accountability as well as potentially securing both funding and administrative support for the site visit team.
- b. The SVOC website will provide a [draft of a letter](#) that department members may customize and submit to department chairs/site supervisors encouraging them to invite a visit from a SVT.
- c. The SVOC will process site visit requests on a first-come, first-served basis unless circumstances meriting expedited response arise.
- d. All parties (the department chair/site director, the SVT, and the SVOC) will sign and commit to a customized agreement that details the procedures for their particular site visit before it can be initiated.

#### 5. Survey Protocol

- a. Before each visit, the [Statistical Research Center of the American Institute of Physics \(SRC\)](#) will administer a climate assessment survey to assist the SVT in focusing discussion with department members during the visit. Faculty, staff, postdocs, graduate students, post-baccalaureate researchers, and undergraduates will be surveyed

separately if the numbers in each group permit. For any group small in numbers, provisions will be made to mitigate power dynamics and ensure confidentiality.

- b. The survey process will begin at least ten weeks prior to the site visit. The survey should not be conducted near the beginning of the academic year because new students and hires would have little knowledge of or experience in the department early on.
- c. The site director/department chair will be responsible for sending three email messages (detailed below) about the forthcoming survey to participants. The SRC will provide text for these emails in advance; it is important to use wording from the SRC because research has demonstrated it will maximize response rates.
- d. Exact dates for sending the email messages will be determined when the site visit is scheduled. The SRC will prepare a Memorandum of Understanding outlining the dates and send it to the site director/department chair and SVT leader.
- e. The timeline for the survey process, including scheduling, administration, and data analysis will be as follows:
  - i. Ten weeks prior to the site visit: climate survey scheduled by the department with the AIP SRC.
  - ii. Eight weeks prior to the site visit: pre-notice sent to notify department/site members of the impending survey.
  - iii. Five days after the pre-notice: initial invitation sent to department/site members to participate in the survey.
  - iv. Ten days after the initial invitation: follow-up invitation sent to remind participants to complete the survey before the deadline.
  - v. Ten days after the follow-up invitation: Data collection for the survey will close. The AIP SRC will conduct the data analysis and prepare a report.
  - vi. Two weeks before the site visit: The AIP SRC will submit the report to the SVT. The SVT will not provide survey results to the department or any other entity or persons.

- f. In order to assist the SVT in identifying issues with respect to marginalized groups, the survey will attempt to collect basic demographic information with respect to gender/gender identity, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, disability status, and other relevant information. The survey will state, however, that responses are strictly voluntary, that all information will be kept strictly confidential by the SVT, and that responses from groups smaller than the limit set by the AIP SRC will not be reported in order to prevent individuals from being identified. Results from the survey will not be directly provided to the site. Knowledge of the results of the survey will assist the SVT in formulating questions to department members during the interviews, and the final report will provide an overview of the results.

## 6. Documents provided by department

- a. The department chair/site director will be asked to provide relevant information to the SVT, including a faculty and staff roster, recent hiring activity, tenure and promotion decisions over the past 10 years, recruiting brochures, faculty and student handbooks, codes of conduct, relevant policies such as anti-harassment, grievance procedures, academic dishonesty, scientific misconduct, and health insurance and family leave policies for department/site members.
- b. Application/enrollment statistics, such as standardized test scores, students' previous institutions, and GPA at the previous institution, will be requested for the graduate and undergraduate applicant pools and for admitted students (if normally provided to departments). When applicable, data on graduate degree programs, such as time to degree, degree completion rates, and time to pass required examinations, will also be requested. Data will be disaggregated by gender and other marginalized identity status to the extent known by the department and permitted by applicable policies.
- c. Information on terminal degree recipients for past five years, such as adviser, length of time in program, and job placement will be requested.
- d. Information on recruiting activities, such as staffing a booth at the winter AAS meeting and participating in [SACNAS](#), [NSBP](#), [CuWiP](#), and other meetings, will be requested.

- e. Institutional support resources (e.g., ombudsperson, Title IX office, institutional equity, accessibility, and diversity offices) and their contact information will be requested.

## 7. The visit

- a. Each visit will be conducted by a subgroup of three members of the SVT pool, depending on scheduling and availability. The visit team will include at least one person trained in astronomy and at least one expert trained in either Human Resources, interviewing members of marginalized populations, and/or making recommendations for improving climate. This expert will have the role of interview lead (see 3d, iii above).
- b. Site visits are not reviews of the academic or science programs of the department, except for aspects directly relevant to the climate.
- c. Visit length: the team will spend two days in the department, usually arriving the night before the first day.
- d. The SVT will make a walk-through tour/assessment of the department/site, paying attention to accessibility, overall atmosphere, and facility conditions.
- e. The department will provide a private meeting space for the SVT and arrange for lunch to be delivered for the team.
- f. Interviews will be conducted with groups of department members; interview groupings will be determined in discussion between the SVT and site administrator/department chair. Bearing in mind the importance of all, collectively, to a department's/site's climate, interviews may be scheduled with the department chair/site supervisor, faculty, postdocs, graduate students, postbacs, undergraduates, and staff. Individual interviews and interviews with smaller groups (e.g., female-identifying faculty) may also be scheduled.
- g. In advance of the visit, department/site members will be given the opportunity to request individual interviews to be held in a private

location. The participants and times of these interviews will be held strictly confidential, and the SVT will anonymize any resulting findings/reports from these meetings.

- h. On the second day of the visit, SVT members will begin to compose their final report, reflecting on the first day's meetings and seeking follow-up as needed. The SVOC will provide the SVT with a draft outline to help structure the report. The SVT will have a meeting to debrief with the site director/department chair to provide an early, high-level overview of their visit and findings.

## 8. Administrative/financial details

- a. Travel for the Site Visit Team: the visited department will provide lodging and reimburse team members for allowable travel expenses. Arrangements will be made in advance to the best of all parties' capability to reduce the out-of-pocket expense incurred by SVT members and to ensure reimbursement timelines are as short as possible.
- b. Setting for confidential interviews: the visited department will provide a suitable location, possibly off campus, for confidential interviews between the team and individuals or small groups.
- c. Pre-visit survey: the AIP's Statistical Research Center will develop, administer, and analyze the online surveys. They will invoice the AAS, which in turn will invoice the site/department for the AIP's charges, which typically are between \$2,000 and \$2,500.
- d. A \$500 honorarium per visit for each SVT member will be provided by AAS upon completion of the site visits and submission of reports.

## 9. Reports

- a. Within two weeks of the site visit, the SVT will submit their report to the department chair/site director for comment. The chair/director will return the report with comments or suggestions to the SVT within two weeks of receiving the report. The SVT will then have another two weeks to finalize the report for SVOC review.
- b. The SVOC will read the report and discuss with the SVT within two weeks of receipt. After any editing, the finalized report will be sent to



the department chair/site director, who will then have two weeks to share the report with department/site members.

- c. The SVOC will maintain a web presence, allowing departments/sites to opt-in and self-identify as a visited site on this website if they choose to. Additionally, if they wish to release post-survey feedback (e.g., quotes) regarding a site visit, identified or anonymized, this may serve to motivate additional departments/sites to participate in visits.

## 10. Post-Visit Follow Up

- a. Immediately following a visit, the SVT will solicit feedback on the site visit process as a formative assessment to improve future visits. The feedback will ask participants for their thoughts on the visit, including whether the SVT could have carried out any additional assessments/activities that would have been beneficial.
- b. Six months after the site's receipt of finalized reports, the SVOC will check in with site contacts (department chair/site director; Dean/Provost/Director) to determine whether/what actions have been taken in response to the SVT's recommendations.
- c. The SVTs will broadly encourage departments/sites to formalize and publicize codes of conduct and processes and procedures for conflict mediation and resolution if they have not previously done so; the SVOC will follow up post-visit to review these documents if the department/site wishes.
- d. One year post-visit, the AIP/SRC will re-administer the pre-visit climate assessment survey. The data gathered from this post-survey will be aggregated across institutions and compared to the baseline survey data to determine if site visits are associated with evidence of improved climate. Since these data will be used to assess the effectiveness of the site visits overall and will not inform individual departments, the AAS will fund the administration of the post-survey.

## 11. Confidentiality

No information specific to the institution, including survey results, will be made public by any AAS representatives. Due to the sensitivity of the

information obtained, the SVOC and SVT will follow detailed protocol for document control, including signing of Non-Disclosure Agreements. Copies of all reports will be curated by the AAS Secretary's Office and not shared with the AAS Board. However, a department may choose to distribute its report.

## **12. Accountability of the AAS site visit program**

Each year, the SVOC will provide the number of sites visited and an evaluation of the site visit program to the AAS Board without sharing reports. After sufficient data have been collected, the SVOC will share via a website the anonymized, aggregated results of post-visit surveys, including the post-visit response survey and pre-/post-visit AIP/SRC measures of change in site climate. These surveys will provide valuable information about the effectiveness of the program. Departments will be encouraged to share their experiences and feedback on the site visit with the SVOC and/or the AAS President.