

Princeton Astrophysics Climate Survey 2021 – Public Summary

July 2021

The Department of Astrophysical Sciences conducted its second department-wide climate survey in February 2021, with a department-internal report produced in May. 91 out of 168 current and recent department members participated in the survey. The survey was run by the Princeton Office for Institutional Research and Office of Institutional Equity and Diversity, with resulting data and anonymized comments passed to the climate committee. The demographic breakdown of survey participants by role, gender, and race/ethnicity is shown in Fig. 1. Some of the survey responses are shown split by gender or by role, but not by race/ethnicity due to small group sizes. This is a brief summary of the main findings.

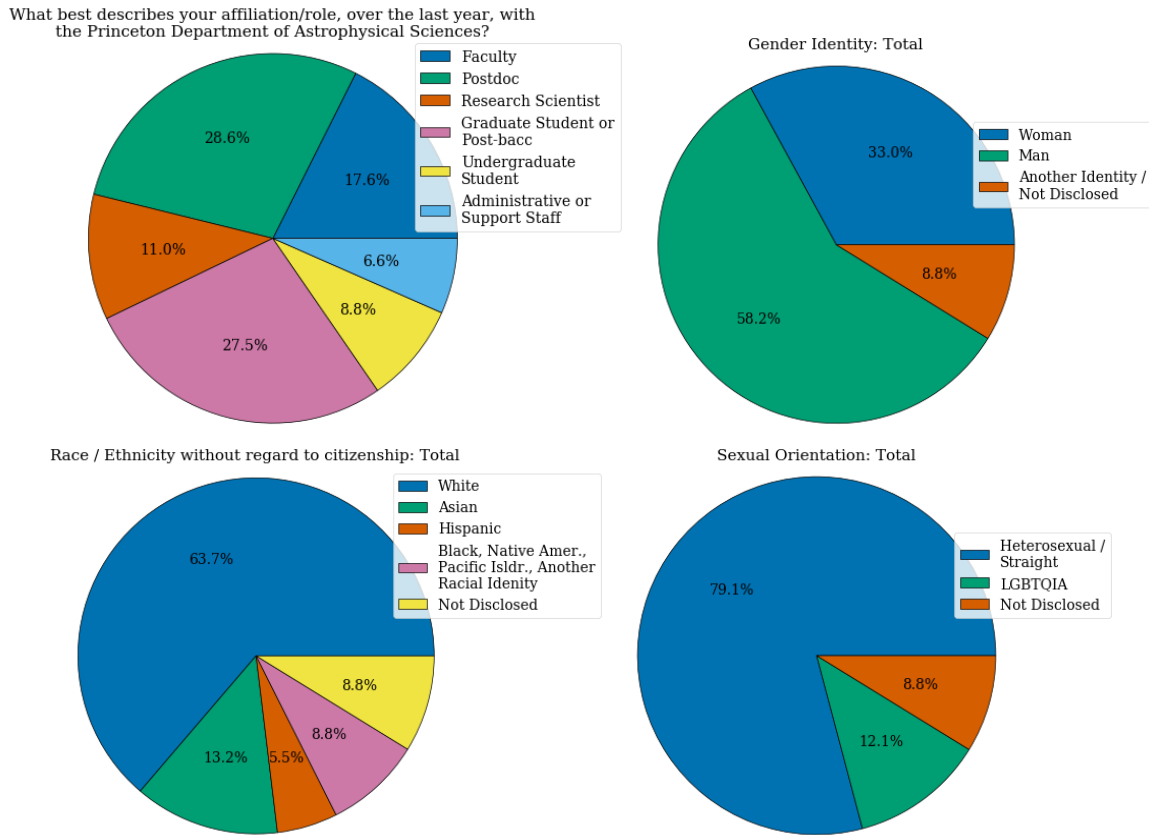


Figure 1: Demographic Breakdown of Survey Participants

Positive Aspects of the Climate

Most of the survey participants expressed positive views of the Department, indicating that they feel comfortable, respected, and well supported. As one respondent commented, ‘This is an excellent department, friendly, supportive, and welcoming.’ For summary purposes, we define a *positive response* as the choice of ‘Strongly Agree’ or ‘Agree’ to a question about positive experiences or a response of ‘Strongly Disagree’ or ‘Disagree’ to a question about negative experiences. Out of the 29 survey questions for which responses can be categorized as positive or negative in this manner, the majority of responses were positive for 27 questions.¹ For example, 91% of respondents responded

¹The two exceptions were ‘Are you comfortable discussing personal challenges with X?’ where X is the director of the respondent’s program or another faculty member besides a direct supervisor.

positively that they are comfortable with the climate in our Department. Likewise, 94% of respondents responded positively when asked if the Department cares about, and is taking steps toward, a positive climate. Another high fraction of positive responses, 93%, was obtained for the statement ‘Other members of the Department as a whole treat me with respect and dignity.’ Some of the written comments echoed these positive results, such as ‘This department (still) has an amazingly good climate.’ and ‘I feel encouraged by the seriousness with which the Department has organized around and takes action on climate matters. There will always be things to improve, but the willingness to do surveys, have town halls, address equity issues is broad and that is good.’

A few topics that were raised as concerns in the 2018–2019 survey did not, for the most part, come up as concerns in the 2021 survey, which we interpret to mean that they have been largely resolved following various department actions. A request for more resources and support for careers beyond academia inspired the new Outside Academia talk series. A wish for clearer expectations for graduate students led to the formation of a graduate student handbook. An interest in more departmental discussion of Equity & Inclusion topics has resulted in a regular talk series and journal club, alongside the creation of a faculty E&I coordinator. Comments and discussion about improving junior-member participation in Astro-coffee has led to a modified structure and rotating leads.

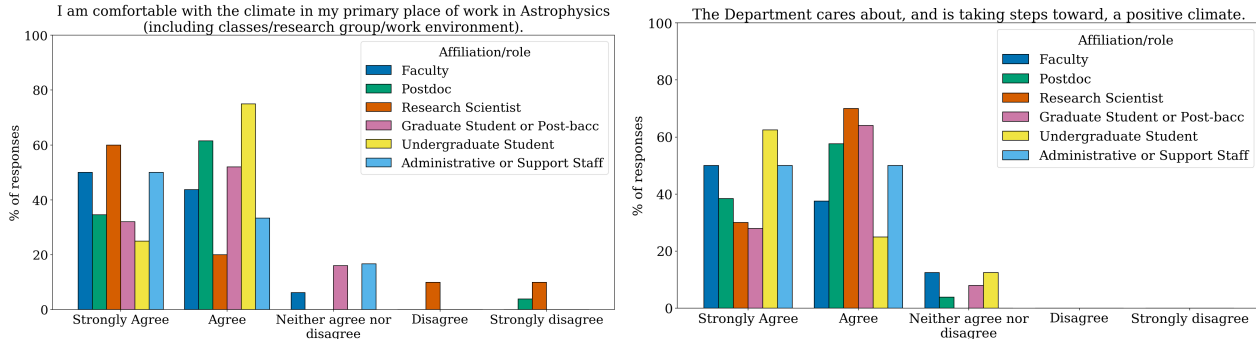


Figure 2: Agreement with positive statements about department climate broken down by role.

Areas for Improvement²

Mental health was a key concern reported, with thirty-five percent agreeing with the statement ‘I experience a level of work-related stress that makes me concerned for my own mental health’. Although the isolation due to COVID-19 was reported as a source of stress, comments indicated a broader set of contributing factors^[1]. Other comments also reflected the impact of COVID-19, including noting a feeling of disconnection from community, and concern that those with dependents were still not able to work the same hours as usual ^[9].

In terms of diversity, the demographics of our department continue to show a strong skew towards White and Asian participants, particularly at the more senior levels^[2]. Experiences of unwelcome or exclusionary verbal or written behavior were reported by 10% of respondents; this included 50% of undergraduate student respondents; ~40% of those who identified as a non-White or non-Asian race/ethnicity; and 20% who identified as LGBTQIA^[4]. While junior members felt more comfortable speaking at Astro-coffee compared to the last survey, women consistently reported lower rates of comfort asking questions at department events compared to men, and only 10–15% of graduate students reported comfort in asking questions at colloquium and Tuesday lunch^[3]. Roughly 40% of women respondents agreed with the statement, ‘I am burdened by service responsibilities to the Department more so than my colleagues.’, with comments also noting that unequal distribution of service responsibilities can lead to students and postdocs missing out on opportunities to de-

²The relevant summary point described in the next section is indicated with [number]

velop professional skills^[6]. Across the department, 10–20% of respondents disagreed that they were receiving the level of mentoring/advising needed to identify and achieve their professional goals^[5].

There were a variety of comments about discussion of climate issues in the department, with some expressing concerns that only a small fraction of members take part in climate-issue discussions, and others expressing a wish to focus more on science^[7]. Although the broad perception of the general climate in the department was positive, more than 25% of those who identified as LGBTQIA, or did not disclose demographic information, disagreed that ‘People in the department treat one another with respect and dignity, regardless of gender identity’^[8].

Actions Discussed

The following areas for action were discussed in cohort and department-wide townhalls in Summer 2021. They will help guide efforts for the 2021-22 academic year.

1. Provide support and resources for improving mental health. *For example: clear resources on the webpage and via supervisors and mentors; discussion and promotion of work-life balance.*
2. Continue to demonstrate a top-down commitment to supporting diversity when hiring, admitting graduate students, and inviting speakers. *For example, continue the department Equity & Inclusion plan; gather suggestions for speakers.*
3. Help junior members participate in department-wide events. *For example, try out different ways to improve comfort in asking questions at colloquium and Bahcall lunch.*
4. Take action to prevent and address unwelcome and exclusionary behavior. *For example, promote Ground Rules for Discussion, establish department values and/or code of conduct, continue inclusion training, work on strategies to respond to issues quickly.*
5. Create and improve mentoring structures for all department members. *For example, track the new mentoring program, assess the needs of all cohorts.*
6. Balance service responsibilities and offer service opportunities. *For example, track responsibilities, be aware of invisible work, advertise service opportunities for post-docs and research scientists.*
7. Be inclusive to department members of all sexual orientations and gender identities. *For example, continued inclusion training, checking of pronouns and name pronunciations on the webpage.*
8. Foster open and honest discussion of differing perspectives on climate issues in the department.
9. Respond to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. *For example, monitoring by advisors and program directors of how its impact continues to affect members’ work and lives differently.*