

A Student Statement on the Climate in the Chemistry Department

October 30th, 2019

Many students from underrepresented communities and disenfranchised faculty/staff continue to struggle in the chemistry department. Our personal experiences have increasingly shown the lack of ability and or willingness of some professors to mentor students from our communities. The current state of the department imposes consequences on our health, academics, research performance, and places additional financial burdens on ourselves and family. We are negatively affected by this toxic climate. Many of us have considered switching – or have already switched – majors due to the lack of faculty understanding. We are frustrated and hurting. There must be a demand to appreciate that Western Washington University, as decided by the state, is a primarily undergraduate serving institution. Being undergraduates ourselves, we are stakeholders in the department's bureaucratic decisions and climate, thus giving this statement legitimacy.

Recent efforts made by some faculty and staff have demonstrated interest in improving the climate. However, we want to convey that there is still much that needs to be discussed and improved. We are worried that this fact may have been lost over the course of the quarter. This statement embodies the frustrations of fifty plus students from both underrepresented backgrounds and allies. This statement may bring feelings of discomfort. We do not aim to specifically target any one individual, but we hope any feelings of discomfort may lead to reflection. We are grateful for what has been done thus far. We are grateful for the faculty that can help us navigate the scientific community comfortably. We understand academia is a slow-changing institution, but we must not let that fact leave us inert. We all have agency over the culture we engage in. This statement is to provide a starting point for discussions that are necessary for advancing equity in the chemistry department. The following are a series of suggestions and reminders that we hope can be in the forefront of discussion.

- Lack of communication over the cancelation of the Wicholas Symposium has caused distrust between students and faculty.
- The departure of Marc Muñiz was in part due to the toxic working environment and lack of demonstrated support and respect from colleagues. His parting not only hurt the chemistry community, but the broader community of underrepresented minorities within the College Science and Engineering.
- The ambassador program members are not solely responsible for bettering the climate in our department.
- Faculty should be trained on how to mentor students from underrepresented identities.
- Faculty, staff, and students all have agency in the culture we promote and engage in.
- Lack of engagement for change by the established tenured faculty is negatively impacting the health, teaching, and research capacities of non-tenure track faculty and junior faculty. This was especially true for the departure of Mark Muñiz.
- In the process of selecting a new chair, student input should be considered. It's necessary that the successor is versed in these types of dialogues.
- The climate and equity issues in the department should be considered in promotion and hiring practices.
- All junior faculty, non-tenure track faculty, and staff should be considered in the department's bureaucratic decisions.
- Student involvement in the hiring process and ambassador program do not translate to a fixed climate.
- Historical pretext for academic traditions does not justify these practices are acceptable.
- Sexual harassment is common amongst research students. Methods of prevention should be made well known, and methods of protection should be readily available.
- Equity, inclusion, and diversity training should be mandatory in the undergraduate and masters research programs.
- The department should monitor hours that students spend doing research. Students should not have to sacrifice their health and academics for a research project.
- Regulation of the student research program is necessary. The current model, along with unattainable expectations from PIs, gatekeeps students from low income and underrepresented communities. A standardized hiring model is needed.
- At the beginning of each quarter there should be a mandatory meeting for research students and new chemistry/biochemistry majors to be reminded of agreed upon community guidelines and resources available to them. This includes methods of sexual harassment reporting and prevention, mental health resources, and the presentation of 'equity, inclusion, and diversity' issues. Non-research students and pre-majors should be encouraged to come.

Finally, the department needs to know that it's unfortunate that students must provide these perspectives. We are your students. Like many of you, we are the first in our family to go to college and we look towards all of you for guidance. The current state of our department has left members of our community feeling disregarded. We want the department to thrive, but we need you to ensure that we, and the students that succeed us, can thrive within it.
