

IDHE REPORT

Weber State University: An IDHE Campus Climate Report

Located at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life, the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) is an applied research center that examines and supports college student political learning and participation in democracy. IDHE's signature initiatives include the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement (NSLVE) and studies of campus climates for political learning and engagement. This report contains the findings from a qualitative case study of Weber State University's political climate. The research team consisted of Ishara Casellas Connors (formerly associate director at IDHE, currently at Texas A&M University), Jennifer Domagal-Goldman (formerly at the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, currently at Civic Nation), Steven Hunt (Illinois State University), Nancy Thomas (IDHE), and Kyle Upchurch (IDHE). Contact nancy.thomas@tufts.edu with questions.

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Introduction and Methods

As part of a joint initiative between AASCU's American Democracy Project (ADP) and the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) at Tufts University, a research team visited and collected data at Weber State University (WSU) in Ogden, Utah. The project, "Examining Campus Climates that Foster Student Political Learning and Engagement in Democracy," seeks to answer the following research question: *What structures, norms, human characteristics, and political forces promote campus climates for political learning and engagement in democracy?* WSU is one of twelve ADP campuses conducting political climate studies, ten through a process of self-assessment and two (including WSU) using the research team for data collection and analysis.

Researchers from IDHE and ADP visited Weber State University March 19-21, 2018. While there, they conducted six student focus groups, four faculty focus groups, one deans focus group, one staff focus group, one focus group with administrators in diverse positions, one focus group with a coalition focused on political learning (a mixture of faculty, staff, and students) and six interviews with administrators. The researchers recorded their notes and completed a rubric reflecting the perspectives of the participants. The data were coded pursuant to a codebook developed by IDHE based on two years of prior research on political campus climates. The research team analyzed, discussed, and organized the data to identify the themes reflected in this report.

Weber State University Background

Weber State University is a public university located in Ogden, Utah. Originally founded as a private college by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1889, the state of Utah acquired Weber and rebranded it as a state-supported junior college in 1933.¹ In 1991, Weber State officially achieved university status, and in 1997, opened a second campus about 15 miles away, WSU Davis, to serve Davis County. The University also supports multiple continuing education "centers" in the county.²

Ogden is Utah's seventh-largest city with more than 86,000 people.³ According to 2017 Census data, around 61% of the population is White (non-Hispanic) and about 32% is Latino, primarily Mexican.⁴ According to 2016 data, in Weber County, where Ogden is located, 55% are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; in Utah, 60.7% are members.⁵

In 2012, Weber and the town of Ogden created a College Town Coalition, deepening the partnership between the two and leading to the adoption of a College Town Charter in 2013 that codified collaborative efforts.⁶

¹ <https://www.weber.edu/AboutWSU/timeline.html>

² Ibid

³ <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html>

⁴ <https://factfinder.census.gov>

⁵ <http://archive.slttrib.com/article.php?id=7496034&itype=NGPSID>

⁶ <https://weber.edu/collegetowncoalition>

Weber serves 28,247 students; 55% of whom are female.⁷ In addition, 56% of Weber students are “25 or older, married, divorced, widowed or a parent.”⁸ Around 8000 students are younger than 18, and the university offers classes through a partnership with area high schools. Seventy-nine percent of students work, and 58% attend Weber part-time.⁹ The average age of the undergraduate student body is 26.¹⁰ Additionally, 92% of students are Utah residents.¹¹ Weber is an open-enrollment university committed to access.

The local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is located near the campus, and it has built a student center adjacent to university property. The campus is a dry campus – no alcohol is served.

As a public university, Weber is subject to regulation and funding by the state of Utah. A recent executive order signed by the governor prohibits employees of the executive branch, including college and university staff, from lobbying the legislature on matters of policy.¹² Weber’s president resigned in 2018, after the researchers visit. His resignation coincided with a “shuffle” in leadership at several Utah public institutions. The new president came from within the institution and previously held positions of Vice President for University Advancement and oversaw government relations.

With a Republican governor and GOP control of both the State Senate and House of Representatives, Republicans control Utah state government.¹³ At the federal level, Utah is represented entirely by Republicans.¹⁴ In 2016, Donald Trump earned 45.1% of the vote and conservative Independent Evan McMullin earned 21.3%.¹⁵ Utah is by any measure an overwhelmingly red state. Finally, IDHE rates Utah’s 1st Congressional District, in which Weber is located, as having a high share of college students as part of the voting population at 11.1%.¹⁶

Findings

In this section, we present the findings from the analysis of interview and focus group data collected at Weber State. We organize the findings into strengths of and challenges to the campus’ political climate. While we are not recommending specific courses of action to address the challenges – that will be the task of WSU in the next phase of the initiative – we provide an overview of the context, assets, and challenges as a foundation for campus-wide discussions. We conclude with a chart detailing the strengths and challenges identified in this section.

⁷ <https://www.weber.edu/IR/instprofile.html>

⁸ <https://www.weber.edu/AboutWSU/studentbody.html>

⁹ <https://www.weber.edu/AboutWSU/>

¹⁰ <https://www.weber.edu/AboutWSU/studentbody.html>

¹¹ <https://www.weber.edu/AboutWSU/>

¹² <https://www.sltrib.com/news/education/2018/02/28/lawmaker-wants-to-promote-good-information-by-restricting-public-employees-including-elected-school-board-members-from-talking-to-lawmakers/>

¹³ https://ballotpedia.org/Utah_State_Legislature

¹⁴ https://ballotpedia.org/United_States_congressional_delegations_from_Utah

¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/utah>

¹⁶ <https://idhe.tufts.edu/college-student-vote-potential-2018>

Strengths

A Student-Centered Environment: Participants often spoke about the importance of teaching and the focus on students that permeates the institution. There are strong student-faculty relationships, a robust teaching mission, and a tendency to celebrate teaching. Several participants noted evidence of this, including a \$1 million-dollar endowment for seeding innovation, recognizing excellence in teaching, reducing class sizes, faculty development, and improving faculty-student advising and relationships. Importantly, researchers repeatedly heard that teaching is strong and well-supported at WSU.

Openness to New Teaching Methods: While discussion-based teaching is limited to pockets and certain classrooms, it is more prevalent now than in the past. There seems to be a relatively new openness to teaching using political issues as content that some professors are leveraging to have discussions. With the strong faculty development practices noted above, a new emphasis on these discussion-based methods could have a significant positive impact on the political climate once it reaches saturation throughout classrooms.

Tradition of Shared Governance: Shared governance is widely valued, and the faculty appears to have significant power in institutional decision-making. Several participants noted the strength of the faculty senate. Others said that the relationship between the faculty and the administration at the time was strong. Additionally, faculty felt supported, including in the security of their academic freedom in the classroom. Many praised the president for communicating and collaborating with faculty on institutional matters.

Growing Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion: The administration, and specifically the president at the time, was praised for, among other things, leading on issues of diversity. The president hired the institution's first Assistant Vice President for Diversity & Chief Diversity Officer in 2015, which catalyzed new programming and attention to both diversity and civic engagement. It was clear from the focus groups and interviews that the president saw diversity as a priority and acted on that priority. While the president has since left WSU, participants say he helped make the campus more welcoming. Many participants, in fact, noted that with the strong faculty-student relationships, an open enrollment mission, and the new focus on diversity, WSU is a welcoming and engaging institution. There are some caveats to this that will be discussed in the next section.

Some Infrastructure for Political Learning: WSU offers programs that support inherently political learning and discussion, such as the Center for Community Engaged Learning (CCEL), the Women's Center, the American Democracy Project, and the Walker Institute of Politics and Public Service. Under the prior director, the Walker Institute organized political programming; the new director focuses more on local community service and service learning. It also offers student internships in Washington. And indeed, these and other organizations offer events and programming. There are many physical spaces on campus, such as in the library, for political discussions. Professors offer classes with political themes: one offered a math course on voting districts, another ran a social justice class on racism.

Strong Community Ties: Participants also emphasized WSU's strong ties to the local community, something built by the president. As evidenced by the signing of the College Town Charter, the administration made it a priority to build relationships with the community of Ogden and to be a "community university."

Some Basic Political Engagement: Students said that, in the student union, a television is turned onto the news all day. The institution supports many activities during the election season: candidate visits, visitors collecting signatures for ballot initiatives, debate watches. It also provided “day after” resources after the 2016 election.

In short, the university’s infrastructure – an interested faculty, strong student to student relationships, the advancement of discussion-based teaching, a tradition of shared governance, a new diversity officer, strong ties to the local community, and physical spaces conducive to convening and dialogue – could support more political learning and participation, but, as noted in the challenges below, the culture inhibits deep or meaningful political engagement.

Challenges

No Habits of Discussion: Despite the noted increase in discussion-based teaching, there do not seem to be widespread *habits* of discussion or political discourse. Students seem averse to talking about controversial issues; one participant notes that there are limited issue discussions outside immediate “safe” friend groups. Faculty, some participants say, are not trained enough in how to handle conflict in class. Some participants’ responses indicate that there may be a political dynamic at play in the classroom: conservative students see the content as liberal and thus will not engage in conversations. Other participants note that the religious climate makes some topics taboo. The sum of this evidence speaks to a culture of avoidance around controversial discussions.

A Culture of Politeness: There is a strong emphasis on civility, and several participants viewed civility as a barrier to political engagement on campus. At the time of the researchers’ visit, civility was the theme for the year’s engaged learning series, and signs promoting civility were visible around campus. Student explained that they can’t swear or “discuss coffee,” tattoos are bad, and there’s a focus on modesty. While the intention was seemingly to help students learn how to discuss issues with one another respectfully, the emphasis on civility also reinforced underlying tendencies to avoid controversial dialog and political action.

Lack of Political Learning Across the Curriculum: While students described courses with political themes (noted above), they also said that the courses were based on the “political influence of the times.” One student described a social justice class as “preaching.” Another noted that the Walker Institute sends interns to Washington D.C. but is otherwise is “not prominent.” There is a first-year experience, but it covers issues like the transition to college and does not include training or practice in political discussions.

Lack of Interest in Political Issues: Campus leaders noted that there is no history of mobilization or issue-based activism at WSU. A staff member noted that students have not learned how to engage in political action. Faculty members noted that they were disappointed in the lack of interest in political issues. Some theorized that students do not get engaged because of how “red,” i.e., Republican, Utah is, thinking that their vote or voice will not make a difference. Other participants spoke of a “culture of niceness” and a sense that politics were taboo among students. Student government was described as weak; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints institute, some participants noted, had more power than the student government on campus. Some seats on student government go unfilled. Participants also said that it is difficult to get students to events put on by student affairs. Despite pockets of infrastructure for engagement (e.g., CCEL, the Walker Institute, and the Women’s Center), there does not seem to be a systematic effort to

increase and improve political learning. Participants noted that although these and other entities on campus offer programming, the programs are not widely attended.

External Political Pressure: Faculty seem wary of the potential consequences of bringing political learning into the classroom. WSU, as a public institution, is subject to regulatory and funding decisions by the state government; participant responses indicate that the state government's control over the campus contributes to a stifling atmosphere for political discussion and engagement. That is, if the institution or faculty were seen to be too political, they might suffer consequences, including termination. Many participants seemed concerned about the legislature's impact on the institution. A recent shift away from the Board of Regents to the Board of Trustees was viewed by some participants as problematic, along with recent laws passed that restrict the ability of public employees, including faculty, to contact legislators and give the state government more administrative control of the university. Participants also noted that the shift from Regents to Trustees reflected a "takeover" by the state legislature, which, technically, cannot set rules about the institution. Some focus group participants and interviewees suggested that the president might have been forced to resign for not being conservative enough. Paired with the influence of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, the legislature's perceived control of the university makes for a politically cautious and stifled climate.

Strong Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Influence: Dynamics around the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints also played a role. In one focus group, participants discussed a professor who was fired because he disagreed with the Board of Regents. Participants described the students as more conservative than the professors, largely due to their church affiliation. There is also a large Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints student association. The church also operates a very large building adjacent to (but more or less on) campus. Students will go there rather than to social events, meetings, or the student center on campus. Participants mentioned that the church "covers political issues." It is closed to nonmembers, but open to anyone "willing to learn." Many behavioral norms are shaped by church leaders rather than the institutional culture.

Challenges of Being a Commuter School: Further contributing to the lack of engagement is the commuter nature of the institution. While physical spaces for discussion exist and are functional, they are not frequented for that purposes; one explanation offered for this was that it was hard to get commuter students to stay on campus for more than class time. Others also said that having a large number of commuters made it difficult for the campus to be truly inclusive.

Separated Non-Utah Students: Not all students commute, of course, and WSU has a sizeable population (about 10%) of students from out of state. The open access and reasonable tuition attracts students largely from the East coast. Many of these students are student leaders or residence hall advisors. These students are more socially diverse than the local or commuter students, and more politically progressive. The out-of-state students band together, which creates some division among students.

Inadequate Progress on Diversity & Inclusion: On issues of diversity, despite the efforts by the president and demonstrable progress such as the hiring of a chief diversity officer, some participants noted deficits in the climate for diversity on campus. One participant noted that more could be done for disabled students. Furthermore, when white supremacist flyers were posted on campus, students and others complained, and while the administration took them down, it was for a posting rules violation rather than content. Despite recent progress, there is more room for growth on issues of diversity.

Election Challenges: With respect to voting conditions, students complained of long lines at the polling place and the need for more polling locations. The out-of-state, more politically progressive students complained about “gloating comments” by some students after Donald Trump was elected.

Little Student Activism: Many faculty members complained about the tepid response by students to public incidents or institutional affairs. They said that protests are rare, but that when they happen, they attract roughly five to ten students, if that many. Despite a strong faculty senate and shared governance, students do not appear to play a significant leadership role on campus.

Below is a chart summarizing the Strengths and Challenges discussed above:

WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS CLIMATE – STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES		
Politics 365 Themes	STRENGTHS	CHALLENGES
Social Cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong faculty-student relationships. • A culture and commitment to caring. • Student centered teaching; teaching is taken seriously and is central to the faculty responsibilities. • Engaged faculty development and efforts to improve as teachers. • President embraced diversity of all kinds, saw diversity as an asset. • Strong ties to the local community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The social cohesion is possible because of the homogeneity of the students. • Students are cohesive because they avoid conflict and political controversy. • See challenges under diversity.
Political Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New commitment to discussion-based teaching. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No habits of discussion or political discourse. • Over-emphasis on civility chills speech. • Students feel that there are many topics that are taboo.
Diversity and Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcoming for new students, commuters, and diverse populations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large number of students from out-of-state, who are more ethnically and politically diverse, feel isolated. • Persistent struggles with issues of diversity, despite recent progress.

Democratic Decision-Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong shared (faculty) governance due to the good relationship between the faculty and the outgoing president. • Faculty feel supported; no questions about the security of academic freedom in the classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influence of the legislature and perception that lawmakers will intervene and punish faculty or administrative leaders. • Inconsistent interest in student government; little leadership training or support for student involvement in institutional affairs.
Active Political Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditional election activities. • CCEL strengthens democratic engagement for the handful of self-selecting students. • Women's Center provided a forum for student discussion, training, and organizing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived student apathy. • Low levels of student political engagement and leadership. • No systematic approach to civic and political learning across disciplines or campus; there are pockets, but there is a lot of apathy. • Strong culture associated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints that stifles discussion and action. • Commuter school nature limits opportunities for political engagement. • Culture of "niceness" and civility may be chilling political speech and action.