

Listening Between the Lines:

A Case Study in Ethical Climate Assessment and Institutional Response

C.K. Gunsalus (Gun-SAY-Liss)
Director, National Center for Principled
Leadership and Research Ethics (NCPRE)

Julia L. Briskin
Director of Assessment, NCPRE



(c) 2026 C. K. Gunsalus and J. L. Briskin

NCPRE creates relentlessly practical programs, tools, and resources to advance institutional integrity.



Leadership Development

- Academic leaders
- Lab leaders and lab members
- Early career professionals
- Mid-career faculty



Work Environment Assessment

- Research Integrity: SOURCE
- Interpersonal Accountability and Respect: CARES, BESSI
- Academic Unit Diagnostic Tool: AUDIT



Educational Resources

- Leadership Collection
- Videos, expert interviews
- Quick tips, case studies
- Challenged Units Conference



We believe:

Healthy cultures comprise more than
what work is done, they are the
product of *how* work is done and the
environment in which it is done:

with rigor, reproducibility, respect, and integrity.

How Do You Know...

How people treat each other?

How conflicts get resolved?

What is mentoring/
advising like?

If people have what they need?
(Access to knowledge and resources?)

If people feel comfortable speaking up when there is a conflict?

... the answers to these questions?

Ask!

(Do a Climate Assessment)



Anonymously



Assure protection
of identities



Use benchmarked,
validated instruments



Administered by a
neutral party

Why Climate Assessments?

There is empirical evidence that work climates influence:



Productivity



Morale

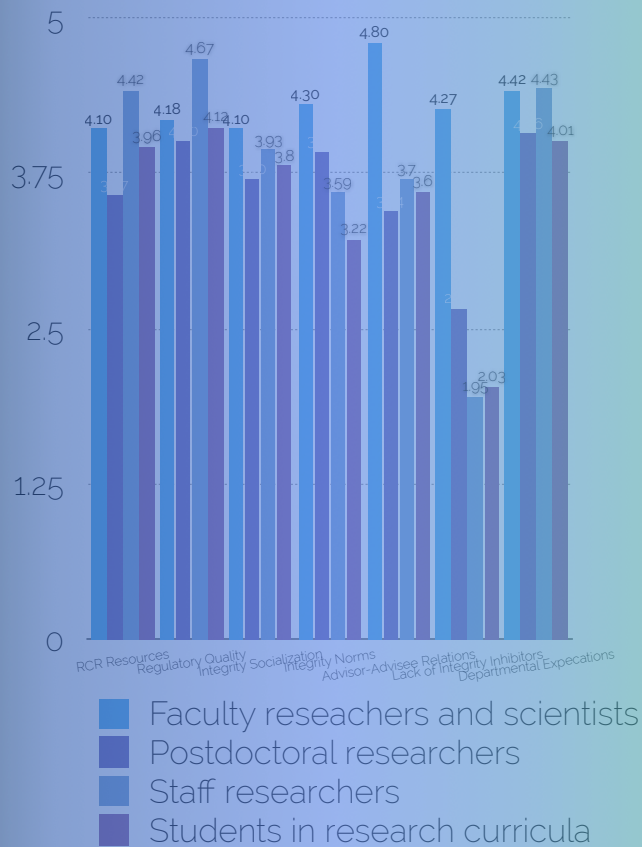


Turnover



Retention

Results Analysis Engine (RAE)



Survey deployment with validated instruments



Data collection and storage (quantitative & qualitative)



Data Visualization (three levels of analysis)



Data Comparison—benchmarking



Neutral third party administration, data collection



Work Climate Surveys

SOURCE

Survey of Organizational Research Climate

-  RCR Resources
-  Regulatory Quality
-  Integrity Socialization
-  Integrity Norms
-  Advisor-Advisee Relations
-  Lack of Integrity Inhibitors
-  Department Expectations

Developed by Carol Thrush and Brian Martinson

CARES

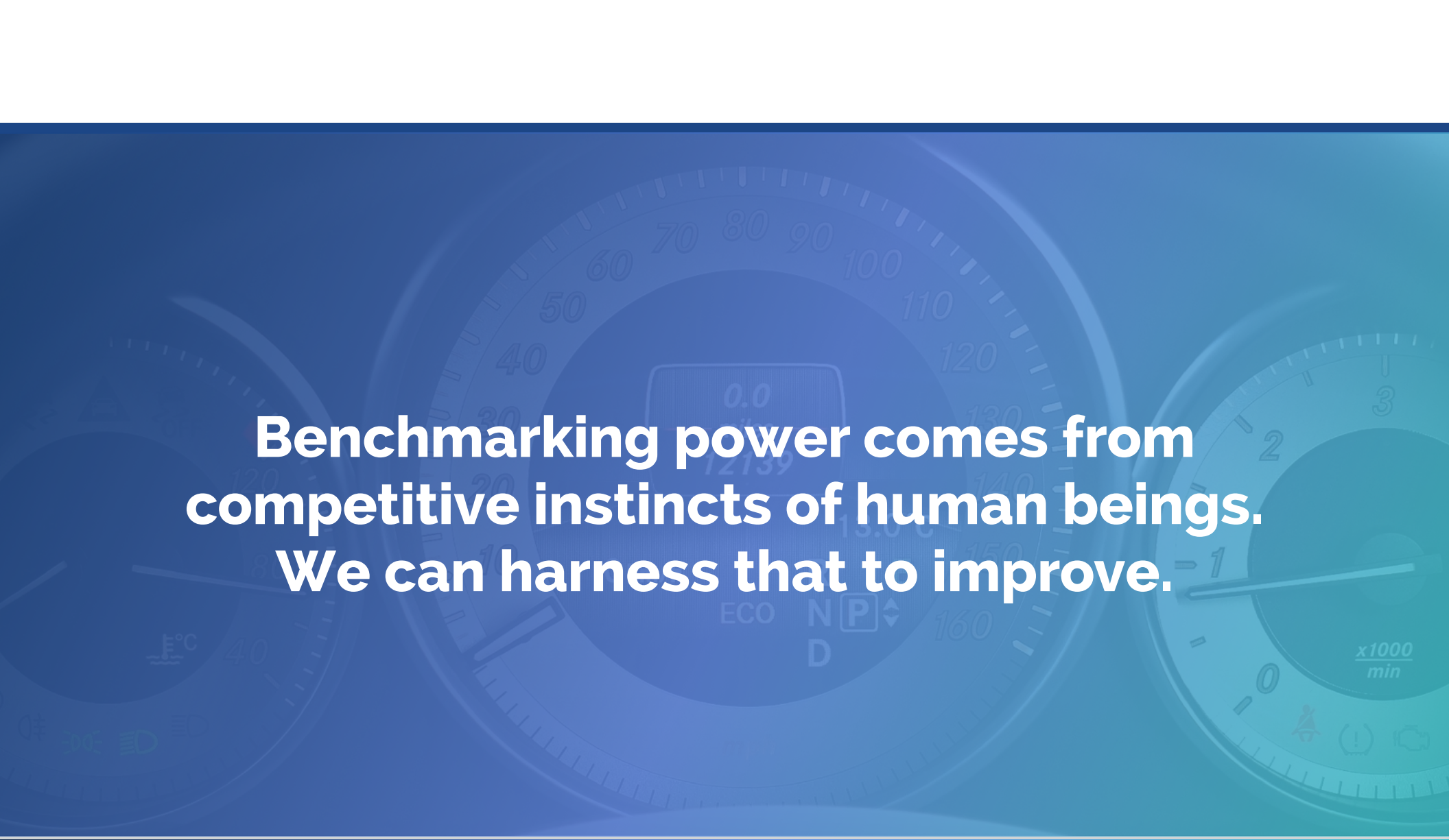
*Climate of Accountability, Respect & Ethics
Survey*

-  Civility Climate
-  Interpersonal Accountability
-  Conflict Resolution

Supported by the Sloan Foundation, with American Geophysical Union

Qualitative Data

*"What are some challenges
that you face at your
institution?"*

The background of the slide features a blue-tinted image of a car's instrument cluster. It includes a large speedometer in the center with a needle pointing to 0, a tachometer on the right with a needle pointing to 0, and a temperature gauge on the left. The text is overlaid on this background.

**Benchmarking power comes from
competitive instincts of human beings.
We can harness that to improve.**

NCPRE Results Analysis Engine DATA

SOURCE: 32  in database

Faculty
researchers
and scientists

14K

Graduate
students in
research

8.3K

Postdoctoral
researchers

2.1K

Staff
researchers

5.2K

Undergraduate
or non-research
grad students

3.5K

CARES: 8 

2.7K

1.5K

516

795

63

In Total



Total N = 30,205 for SOURCE

Total N = 6224 for CARES

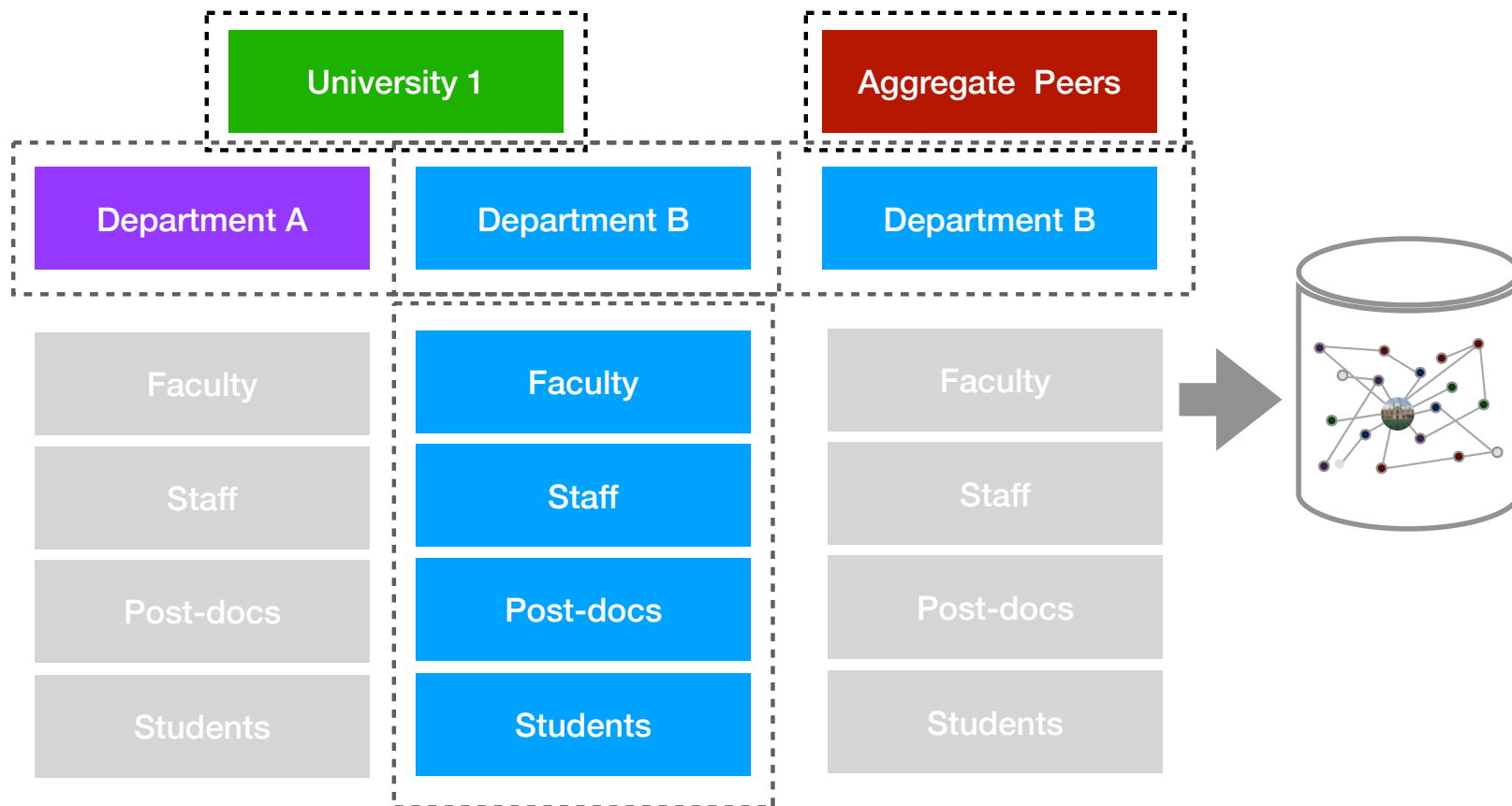


39 different surveys,
34 unique institutions,
3,670 individual units

Comparisons



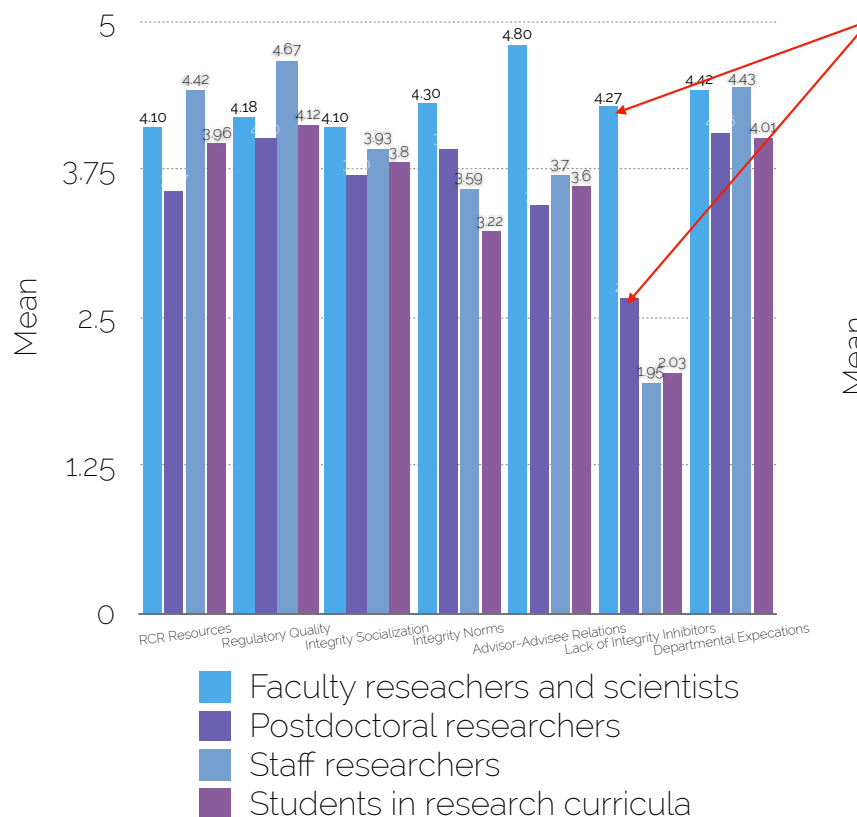
NCPRE
Analytics



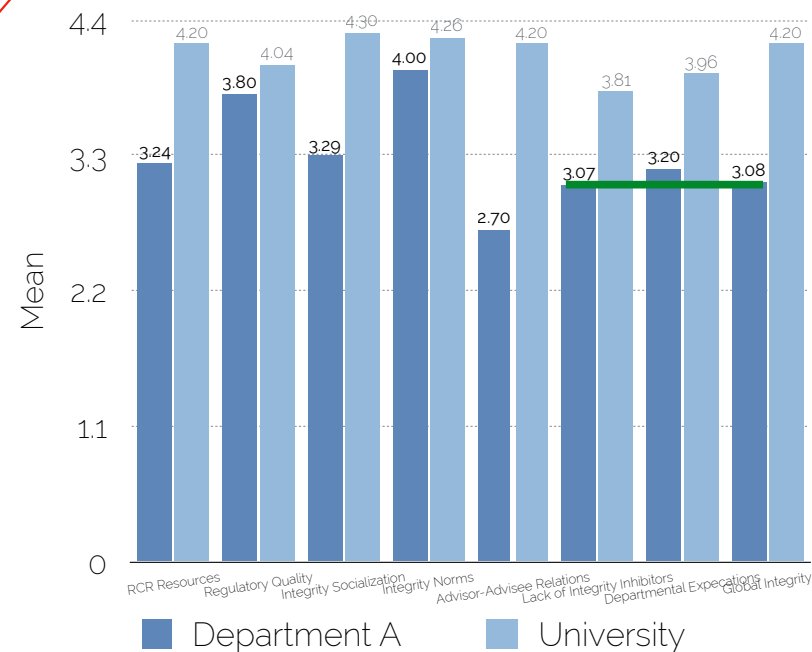


NCPRE
Analytics
Peer Comparison

Department by Roles



Compared to Institution



Why A Climate Assessment?

-  Benchmarking, improvement focus (monitoring, retention)
-  Federally mandated (required for monitoring)
-  Suspected problem (not sure of the nature or extent)
-  Known problem (not sure how bad or widespread)

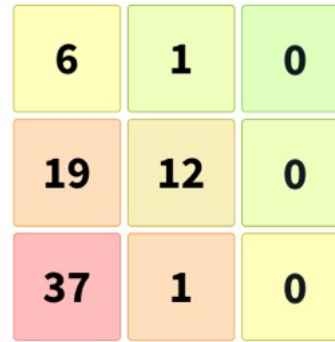
All require an action plan

Now What?

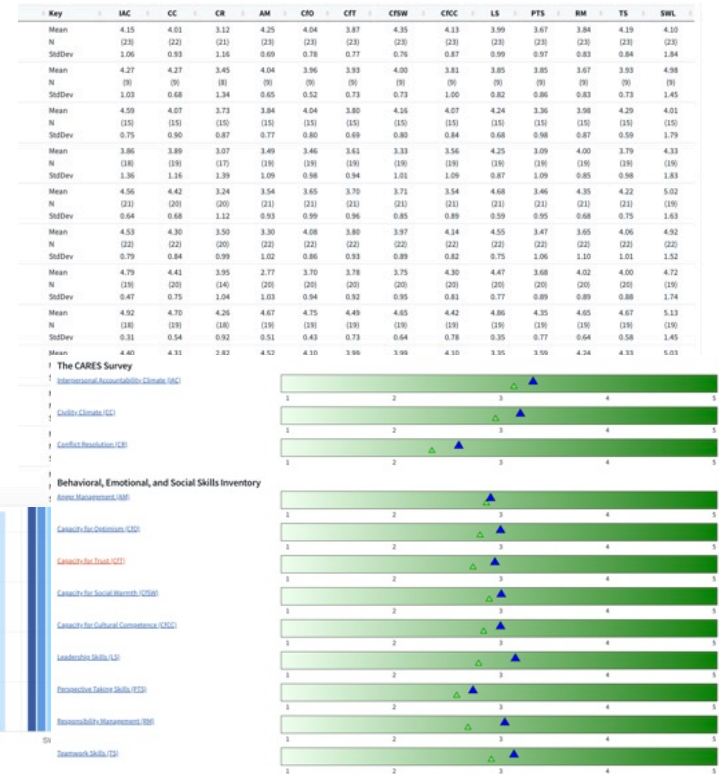


Spotlight Diagram

Scores Higher than Comparison



Higher Scores



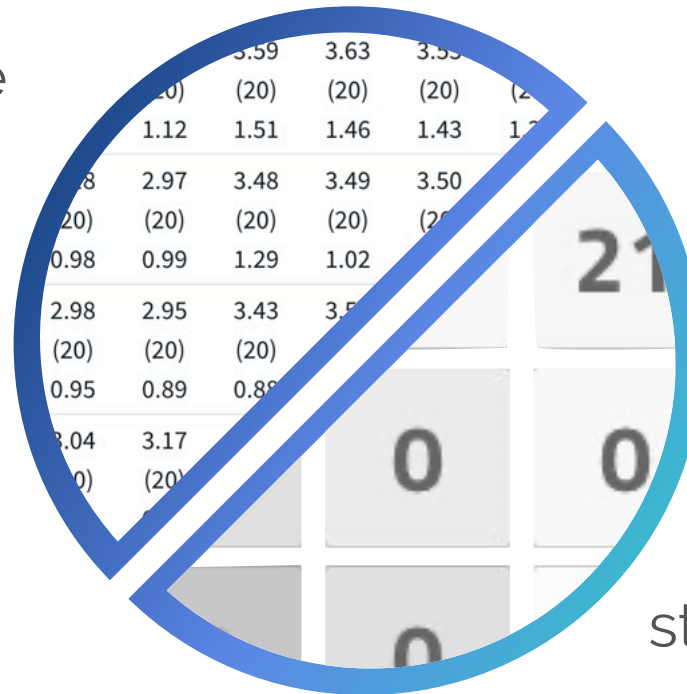


Measurement opens up
opportunities to *act*.

Overarching Goals: Data into Action

Use both quantitative data **and** qualitative data for a more comprehensive view of the institution

"Morale is at an all time low. Administration doesn't listen."



"They do not recognize the steps that go into completing tasks."

Use this information to inform action plans & strategies going forward



Interpret findings from our Results Analysis Engine



Mixed methods approach (quantitative and qualitative)



An institutional case study

2024 Case Study Design and Results

Survey of Organizational Research Climate 2024;
with additional followup data from 2025

Measures

Time 1

- N = 439; response rate = **32%**
- Survey of Organizational Research (SOURCE)

Time 2

- N = 464; response rate = **48%**
- Survey of Organizational Research (SOURCE)
- Climate of Accountability, Respect, and Ethics Survey

Qualitative feedback questions:

Is there anything else you'd like to share?

What are some challenges you face at your institution?



2024 Case Study

SOURCE: Example Items

Research Integrity Climates

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---



Regulatory Quality: “How respectful to researchers are the regulatory committees or boards that review the type of research/scholarship you do (e.g., IRB, IACUC)?”



Regulatory Quality: “How well do the regulatory committees or boards that review your research/scholarship (e.g., IRB, IACUC) understand the kind of research you do?”



RCR Resources: “How accessible are the university's policies/guidelines that relate to responsible research practices?”

CARES-R Example Items

Psychological Safety and Respect

1	2	3	4	5
---	---	---	---	---



Blind Eye Behavior examples (reverse coded): “Insults and subtle slights are tolerated”; “Leaders allow top performers to get away with bad behavior”



Support and Respect Norms examples: “Respectful interactions are the norm”; “Leaders model respectful behavior towards everyone”



Interpersonal Accountability examples: “Leaders have processes in place to help handle disputes”; “There are effective processes in place for reporting hostile behavior”

Measures: Survey of Organizational Research Climate

SOURCE Sub Scales: Research Integrity Climates



-  RCR Resources
-  Regulatory Quality
-  Integrity Socialization
-  Integrity Norms
-  Advisor-Advisee Relations
-  Lack of integrity Inhibitors
-  Department Expectations

2024 Case Study Results (Time 1; $M = 3.41$ $SD = 1.07$)

SOURCE Average Values (Regulatory Quality Focus)

Survey of Organizational Research Climate

[Responsible Conduct of Research Resources \(RCR\)](#)



[Regulatory Quality \(RQ\)](#)



[Integrity Socialization \(IS\)](#)



[Integrity Norms \(IN\)](#)



[Advisor-Advisee Relations \(AAR\)](#)



[Integrity Inhibitors \(II\)](#)



[Departmental Expectations \(DE\)](#)



2025 Case Study Results (Time 2; $M = 3.52$ $SD = 1.11$)

SOURCE Average Values (Regulatory Quality Focus)

Survey of Organizational Research Climate

Responsible Conduct of Research Resources (RCR)



Regulatory Quality (RQ)



Integrity Socialization (IS)



Integrity Norms (IN)



Advisor-Advisee Relations (AAR)



Integrity Inhibitors (II)



Departmental Expectations (DE)



2024 Case Study Results (Time 1)

SOURCE Box Plots



2025 Case Study Results (Time 2)



Zooming in: SOURCE Item Level Results

“How well do the regulatory committees or boards that review your research/scholarship (e.g., IRB, IACUC) **understand** the kind of research you do?”

Time 1: $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.09$ Time 2: $M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.11$

Quantitative results suggest **researchers perceive that review board members do not understand their research** as well as they should, driving a lower Regulatory Quality score.

There was no practical or statistically significant difference between Time 1 and Time 2.

Do qualitative findings support this?



Regulatory
Quality

Yes!

"There is also STILL a lack of understanding of non-FDA/ clinical trials research."

"...many unnecessary discussions and setbacks."

"There is a disconnect."

"The IRB is unfamiliar with the type of research the group conducts."

Combining Approaches

Taken together,
SOURCE
(regulatory quality)
and qualitative
remarks suggest:



Board members and researchers are disconnected; there is a lack of understanding



This institution should examine how to close the gap between researchers and reviewers (i.e., expertise of reviewers, clarity of researchers)

The interpersonal climate needs tending as much as the research integrity environment.

Comments in qualitative data suggested interpersonal disconnect drives the lack of understanding between researchers and regulatory staff members.

What did they say?

"PIs should be *fully immersed in the training process* to ensure RAs are measuring endpoints correctly and actually understand what they are doing and why! This seems to be something that no one does. *Where is the integrity in collecting data?* It is not to be found at [redacted institution name]."

"I know my thoughts will most likely be *brushed off* and annoy my supervisor."



We recommended an interpersonal
climate assessment—
the CARES-R.

CARES + SOURCE at Time 2

CARES Sub Scales: Psychological Safety & Respect



Blind Eye Behaviors
(Tolerating Bullying)



Support and Respect Norms



Interpersonal Accountability



Interpersonal
Accountability

Zooming in: CARES-R Item Level Results

Quantitative results suggest a lack of processes for handling conflict:

“Leaders have
processes in place to
help handle disputes.”

$M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.28$

“There are formal
processes for handling
conflicts.”

$M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.32$

Do qualitative findings support this?

Yes!

Interpersonal Accountability Quotes

*"The **head rarely listens to anyone**, frequently talks over people as no one can get a word in, is mostly dismissive, snarky, and **uses embarrassment and shame** as a tactic to not be questioned or to avoid conflict."*

*"**Mentors appear overburdened** to the point they are **unwilling to invest in professional development of mentees** beyond completing the research at hand, such as setting clear involvement/credit expectations, or resolving interpersonal issues within the work unit related to this."*

Result Trends

Do Quantitative and Qualitative Findings Always Clearly Converge?

Despite low reports of bullying behaviors,” including “Tolerating Bullying behaviors,” results suggested that **bullying may be more prevalent** than the quantitative results suggest.

No.

“no mentorship, guidance, or availability/responsiveness of supervisors, no career development opportunities, unequal work distribution within teams, workplace gossiping and bullying, no training opportunities from supervisors.”

Interpersonal Challenges Are Nuanced

***"Toxic hierarchical structure** which leads to treating 'underlings' badly/disrespectfully, **lack of promotion/recognition/appreciation** for long-time hard-working employees, **culture of blame** throughout the institution rather than teamwork/shared commitment."*

*"My area supervisor who also oversaw my project was an inexperienced assistant professor, **I was bullied, excluded and treated poorly.** Eventually the chair tried to talk to him, as a result he started to act nice but **retaliated** by badmouthing and **excluding from published work.**"*

Interpersonal Challenges Are Nuanced

*“falling behind on the **research** that needs to happen to secure an R01 and therefore career independence / funds to become fully staffed, **poor treatment** at the hands of area leadership **with no recourse**.”*

*“unfair treatment, **discrimination**, fear of **retaliation**”*

*“Any **questions** or requests for clarification are **seen as attacks**, which prevents open problem-solving.”*

Power and Interpersonal Accountability

*"The **supervisor holds a grudge** and openly claims that these normal inquiries are attempts to get them in trouble. As a result, we receive (un)preferential treatment from someone with the **power to make decisions** without providing the correct information or proof of the actions they claim to have taken. **Information is being hidden and manipulated.**"*



Do Quantitative and Qualitative Findings Always Clearly Converge?

*"On a personal level I do not feel that my treatment so far has been fair and balanced, and **while my immediate leadership is very supportive, the overall institutional culture has deteriorated substantially in the past few years. I have considered further escalations against relevant players in the past but after some consideration ruled against it. At the moment I am in a waiting game scenario.**"*



Climate Assessments: A Tool for Listening



Use the indicators to point to specific Units



Use a mixed methods approach to help tailor interventions (quantitative and qualitative)



Connecting Data Insights to Action



Find the bright spots



Intervene where problems appear



Consider institutional messaging, infrastructure

Message



Climate assessments are
useful and actionable



Using a mixed methods approach
helps tailor interventions to maximize
likelihood of success



*At NCPRE, we offer tools and programs to help support healthy work
environments and respond to climate needs (the good and the bad)*



The Coordinated Science Laboratory

National Center for Principled Leadership & Research Ethics

Search this site



About ▾

Programs ▴

Ethics and Leadership ▾

Research Ethics ▾

Assessment ▾

Pilot Our Programs ▾

Program Overview

Principled Academic Leadership
Programs

Academic Leadership Management
Institute (ALMI)

Transforming Challenged Units (TCU)

Customizing Your Mentoring Toolkit

Labs that Work for Everyone (LTW)

Professional IQ Coursera Course

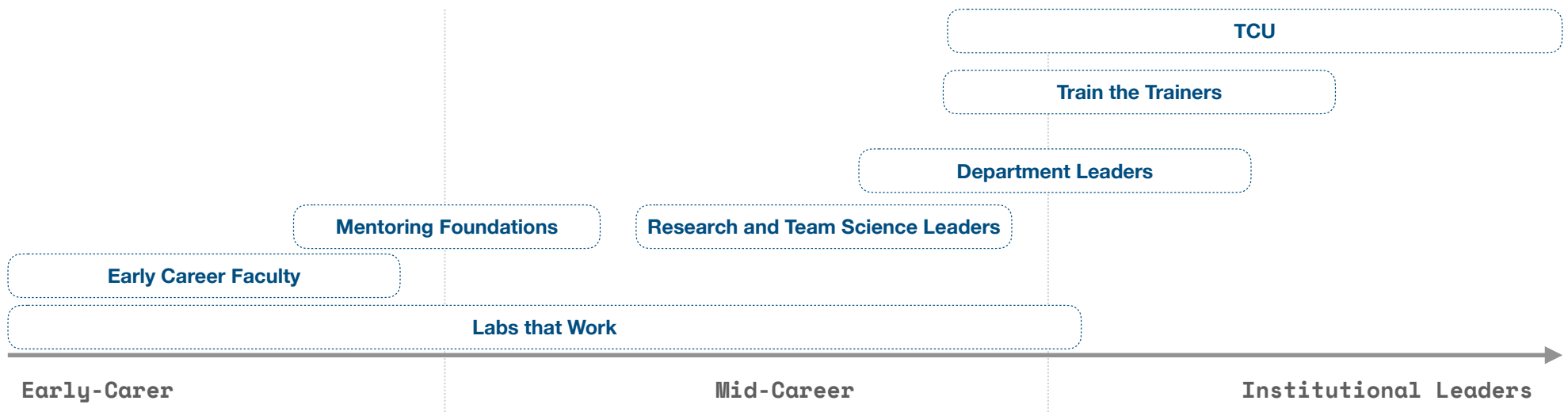
Other Programs

Nat Prin Res

er for Leadership & Ethics



Principled Academic Leadership Program Range



Principled Academic Leadership Foundations:



*Articulate
Values & Goals*



*Manage
Yourself*



*Norms,
Expectations*



*Leadership &
Legitimacy*



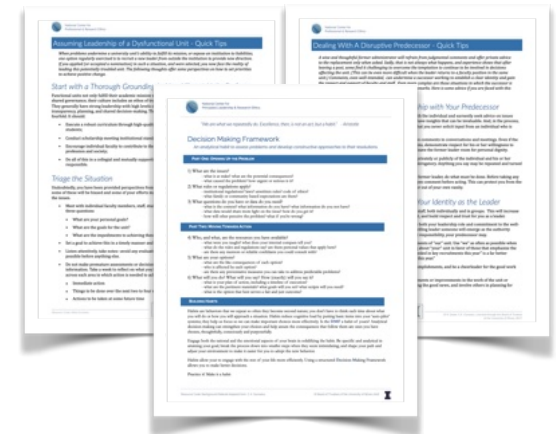
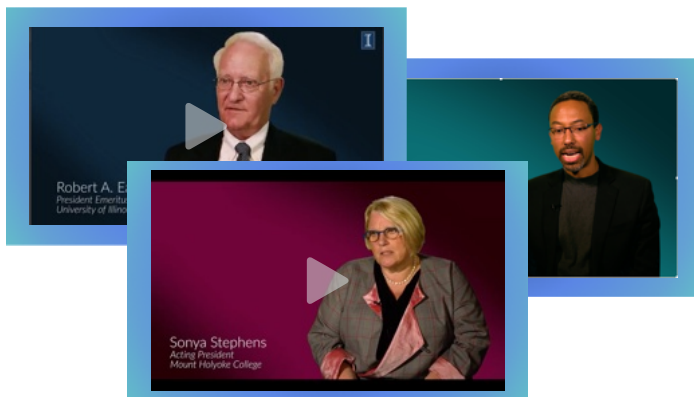
*Data and
Transparency*



ncpre

NCPRE Leadership Collection

Collection of resources for developing yourself, motivating, and leading strategically



Focal Areas

1. Developing Yourself
2. Leading and Managing a Unit
3. Leading Beyond the Unit

Collections



Just-in-time (now!)



Deep Dive (deep knowledge)

Updates

The Leadership Collection is regularly updated with new resources



ncpres

Questions?