Envisioning an Ideal Departmental Community

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This report is the output of a process that started at the Access Assembly in 2020. As part of a "Future of Access" session, we began to explore an idea to promote systemic change in academia, and a team has been collaborating to discuss how we can best do so. The idea has grown and evolved, and we developed a Visioning Activity that required input from folks in Access. This Visioning Activity asked them to envision their ideal departmental community and overall culture and to articulate characteristics of that department/culture. Everyone in Access was invited to contribute their ideas, by way of a Google Form. Their position in academia did not matter—in fact, we wanted responses from a diversity of perspectives to represent everyone in Access. Demographics of contributors are given in Appendix A. We wrote a specific prompt with questions to help them think about what the ideal departmental community and culture mean to them. After collecting anonymous responses, our team moved them into a Padlet to sort them by groups. We now present to you this document that details the topics shared about their ideal departmental community. Our hope is that this document can serve as a handy reference for those at any level of the university to use to promote a diverse, equitable, accessible, and inclusive community within their department.

The ideas in this document are organized into 14 themes. The specific responses to the Visioning Activity are included in Appendix B, organized by theme and numbered (numbers start over from 1 with each new theme). The specific responses are synthesized into a sentence or a paragraph within each theme, and are cited by their appendix number (for example, the summary of responses 2, 3, 4, and 5 of one theme includes a (2-5) at the end of the summary).

This document is intended to be used by members of the community of academia, either inside or outside of the Access Network. It is made available here on this website for educational purposes, and we do give permission for it to be used in this manner.

Theme 1: Science as Work

What types of work are valued? In an ideal department, **teaching, equity** and **diversity** work**, communication** and **outreach, logistics** and **administrative work,** and **research** are all **equally valued**. Both visible and invisible forms of labor are recognized (1-5).

Science is a **public** form of labor. Scientists at universities and national labs are public employees, and work closely with K-12 teachers to communicate science to students. In general, all knowledge and data generated through **science is free and easily accessible** for all (6-10) .

Faculty are unionized, and collectively define success in a document that is reviewed every 5 years. **Redundancies** are built in to make the **workload more reasonable** (11-12).

College students should have **ample opportunity to work** in science and be **adequately compensated**. This includes high quality research internships, as well as teaching and organizing/leading student groups. The outcome of their training is that they are prepared for the workforce (12-15).

Theme 2: Relationship between Faculty and Students

Everyone recognizes each other as **full human beings** (1).

Faculty are role models that **reflect the identities** of their students, and **provide holistic support**, as opposed to purely academic support (2-4).

As a result, **students feel valued** and comfortable bringing their whole selves to the science community (5-6).

Theme 3: Distribution of Power/Student Voice

An ideal physics department consciously works to include and respect the voice of every member of the community (1). In particular, **student perspectives are valued** (2-4).

Even distribution of power means there are leadership opportunities at all experience levels, and **decisions** are made with input from all members of the community (5-8), perhaps through **consensus** (9-11).

In addition, there is **built in flexibility** in department rules and programs to meet new demands as necessary (12-13).

Theme 4: Open Communication/No Problematic Faculty

Communication is **frequent, open, and encouraged** among all members (1-2). Feedback and critique, **especially from students towards leadership**, is encouraged and **acted upon** constructively (3-6).

The community has **clearly established core values and norms**. Check-ins could be used at the end of each academic period to ask members of the community if they had recognized or experienced the core values which the community had set out to embody (7), and there are **mechanisms** in place to **address individuals who violate norms** (in particular, problematic faculty members), which ensures the community remains welcoming and supportive of student well-being (8-11).

Theme 5: Involved with Equity Work at Many Levels

The department is involved with **equity work both internally and externally** (2).

Examples of actions and practices that can support equity work internally are listed: **paid positions** for equity work; **physics education reforms**; teaching practices with awareness of the **cultural context** and how that affects students in the classroom; and a physics community that is **conversant in practical ethics** (1,5-6).

Examples of actions and practices that can support equity work externally at the university level are listed: **heeding and amplifying petitions started by Black campus members**; **partnering with campus groups** that address gender, sexuality, race, etc. (3).

Supporting equity work externally at the national level can include **involvement in organizations** like the Access Network, APS-IDEA, the APS National Mentoring Community (NMC), Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS), National Society of Black Physicists (NSBP), etc. (4).

Theme 6: Department Improvement is Data-Driven

An ideal department regularly **collects data on its performance** in a variety of ways, and that data is **safely accessible** to the community (1-3).

Theme 7: Network of support

Members of the community have **multiple people they receive support from** (1-2), not just as scholars, but as whole people (3-5). The network includes **multiple people in similar roles** to support different needs and prevent isolation (13).

While members have primary points of contact/other community members with whom they have very strong relationships, there is a **broader network** they are connected to (6). **New connections are suggested** when opportunities that are valuable to them and/or help them achieve their goals are available. This includes a broad range of paths (7-9). The community is focused on supporting members and filling needs and all members are **empowered to create solutions,** regardless of position on the traditional academic hierarchy (11-12).

Theme 8: More holistic and growth-oriented measures of success

Measurements of success are re-imagined or expanded to focus on **student growth in service of students' goals**. Traditional **numeric grading is de-emphasized or removed** (1-4) in order to **minimize gatekeeping** based on snapshots of students' skills. Instead, failure is normalized (4-5) and students are given feedback and support to improve (1). Success is measured holistically and in service of individuals' goals (6-7).

Theme 9: Multi-disciplinary Collaboration

Research questions are tackled by **collaborations across multiple disciplines** to incorporate many perspectives and types of expertise into **solving common problems** (1-2). There is camaraderie within departments but not to the exclusion or alienation of those working outside their departments (3).

Theme 10: Understanding the purpose of science and its connection to other disciplines

Science is a **mechanism to solve problems** and **explore the natural world** while actively **valuing and relating concepts from other disciplines** (1-3). There is an overarching effort to take into account **interest and needs of all communities** and to have an **identified goal** (4-5).

Theme 11: Community, mentoring, and holistic support across undergrads, grads, post doc, faculty

Across all levels of the university, there is a **sense of community** with **recognition as individuals** and as a group (1-2).

Sustained mentoring relationships are available to everyone in **several forms and modalities** (3-5).

The mentors are **well-trained, reviewed, and given resources** so that they can provide mentees with information on **career paths** and allow them to **engage in authentic research** to gain **usable skills** (6-8).

Theme 12: Safety, security and support for those most vulnerable

An ideal department is one where **physical safety and security** (7) are guaranteed for all students. As a whole, the department explicitly **recognizes its role in either perpetuating or combating racial, gender and other inequities and consistently and actively works to address them** (1,5). This means that racial, sexual, and all other forms of harassment is proactively prevented (2, 5, 7); when issues do come up, everyone knows the right procedure, and restoring real security is the priority, over protecting the careers of the famous. This environment helps **recruit and retain department-members outside of dominant identities**, so that more than half the department is made up of people who are not white men (4). Students of color experience **university resources as being designed to serve them, rather than a source of fear** (e.g. no harassment by campus police) (2, 7). Students who have less-visible marginalized identities have their **physical safety and needs met** such as students have a safe place to go to the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity and students with disabilities have **access to accommodations** (physical and otherwise) that make their participation equitable (2-3,6).

Theme 13: A culture of support and strong interpersonal connection at all levels

An ideal department will foster a culture of support and community, like a network that **protects its members** instead of a culture of internal competition (1-4). This culture of support includes undergrads supporting undergrads, grads supporting grads, staff supporting staff, and faculty supporting faculty in addition to each group supporting the others (**both intergroup and intragroup support**). This is realized through normalizing activities like:
- Greeting people by name (5-8)
- Self organized study groups among undergrads and grads (1-4)
- Giving aid to others in your research group (or other groups) (1-4)
- Making classes and assignments deliberately for learning concepts with less emphasis on grades (2)
- More community events instead of cliquishness (3-5)
- Regular attendance of social department activities in addition to academic activities (5-7)

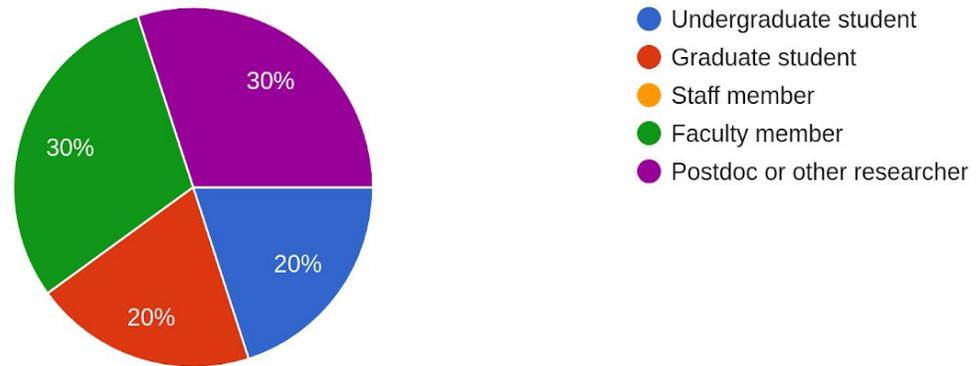# Theme 14: Drives healthy passion for science and learning

An ideal department will create an environment where **learning and doing science is fun and invigorating** (1) instead of draining and oppressive. We can't always be at 100%, but the environment of a healthy department is one that **celebrates the learning process and all forms of work** (2,4), both in effort put in and achievement (3). The work being done in an ideal department is exciting to its members, both because of its subject and the fact that the **work environment is enjoyable** (1-2,5). Community members encourage and aid each other both when progress is slow and when things are going well (5). No one is given "busy work" to occupy their time, and **everyone's contribution is valued** (3).

Appendix A: Contributors' Demographics

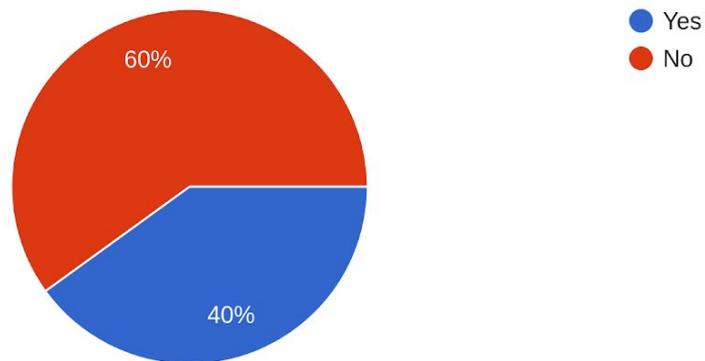Anonymous responses to the activity were contributed with the following aggregate demographics:

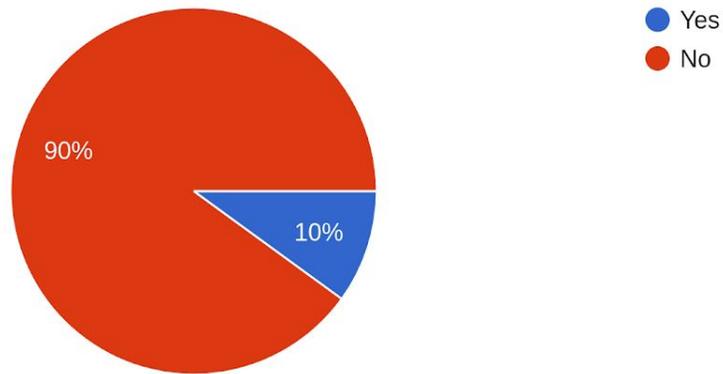### What is your current position in academia?
10 responses

- ● Undergraduate student
- ● Graduate student
- ● Staff member
- ● Faculty member
- ● Postdoc or other researcher

Have you ever received a Pell Grant?
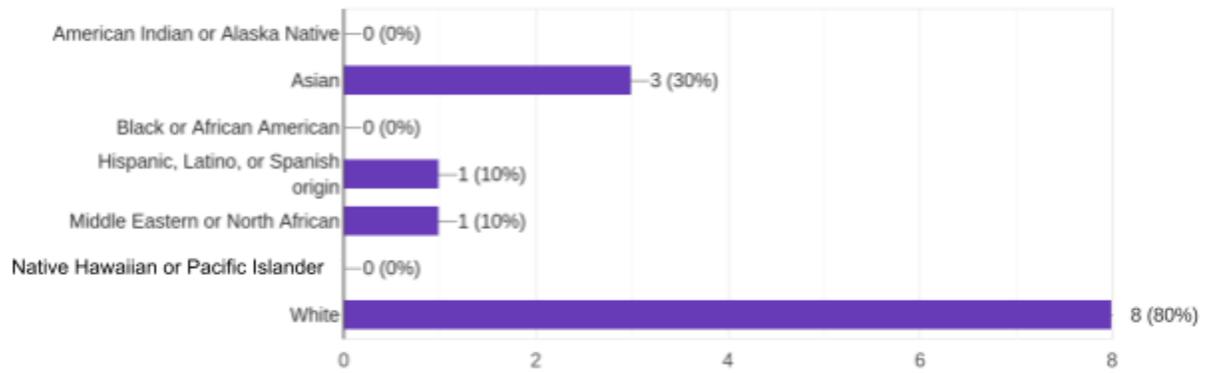10 responses

- ● Yes
- ● No

Are or were you a transfer student?
10 responses

- Yes
- No

90%

10%

With which racial and ethnic group(s) do you identify? (Mark all that apply)
10 responses

Category	Value
American Indian or Alaska Native	0 (0%)
Asian	3 (30%)
Black or African American	0 (0%)
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	1 (10%)
Middle Eastern or North African	1 (10%)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0 (0%)
White	8 (80%)

How do you describe your gender identity? (Mark all that apply)

10 responses

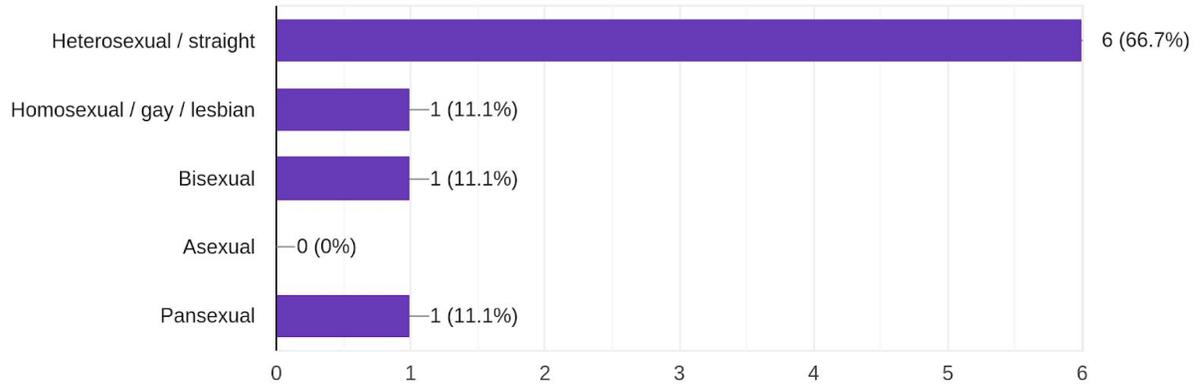| Gender identity	Count
Woman	5 (50%)
Man	4 (40%)
Genderqueer	1 (10%)
Agender	1 (10%)
Cisgender	3 (30%)
Transgender	0 (0%)
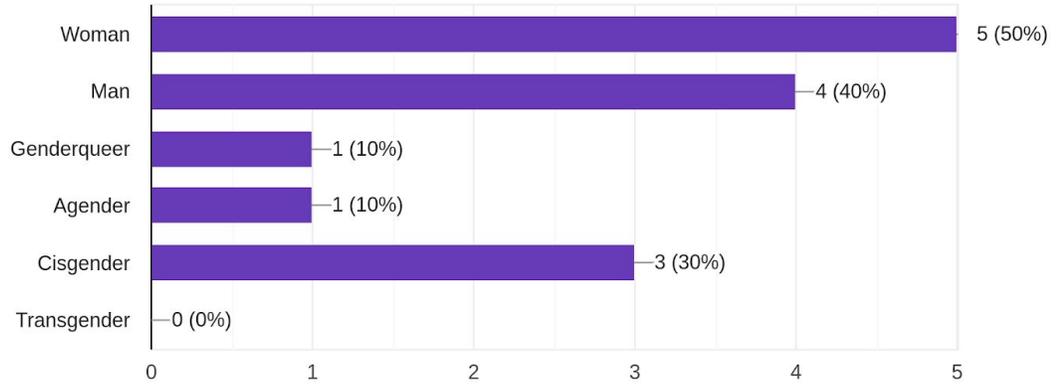
How do you describe your disability / ability status, regardless of whether you typically request accommodations for this disability? (Mark all that apply)

9 responses

Disability / ability status	Count
A sensory impairment (vision or hearing)	1 (11.1%)
A mobility impairment	0 (0%)
A learning disability (e.g. ADHD, dyslexia)	0 (0%)
A mental health disorder	3 (33.3%)
A long-term medical illness (e.g. epilepsy, cystic fibrosis)	0 (0%)
A temporary impairment due to illness or injury (e.g. broken ankle, surgery)	0 (0%)
I do not identify with a disability or impairment	6 (66.7%)
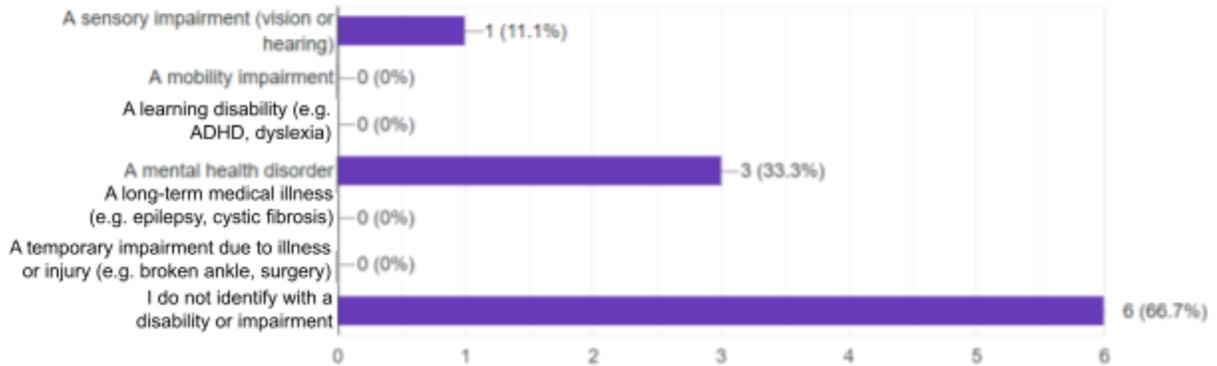
How do you describe your sexual identity? (Mark all that apply)
9 responses

Category	Value
Heterosexual / straight	6 (66.7%)
Homosexual / gay / lesbian	1 (11.1%)
Bisexual	1 (11.1%)
Asexual	0 (0%)
Pansexual	1 (11.1%)

Appendix B: Survey Responses

This appendix lists the verbatim text from survey responses, categorized by theme.

Theme 1: Science as work
1. The community recognizes and values all the efforts of its members
2. All forms of work are recognized (invisible and visible labor) and valued
3. Each member (faculty, student & staff) feels supported and valued
4. Teaching is valued as much as research
5. Equity and diversity are valued as primary goals, and work towards them is compensated similarly to research and teaching
6. Science communication and outreach is seen just as important as science
7. Scientists and public school K-12 educators work very closely to communicate science to students.
8. Science is seen as a public service and an integral part of the public education system
9. Any person who does science is seen as a public employee and receives adequate compensation.
10. Knowledge, education, and data is free and easily accessible to everyone, unless doing so will harm the safety of others.
11. We are a unionized faculty so success is spelled out in a document that is developed by both faculty and administration and lasts for about 5 years. It basically counts things like # papers/#grants/types of service (leadership counts more than just serving)
12. Collaborative spirit: there is enough money to support multiple people in similar roles to spread the workload
13. Students have access to paid high quality internships and research experiences
14. Opportunities should be provided that further experience in areas and positions of interest, especially if an individual is looking to work into a previously unexplored field or role.
15. Paid opportunities for undergraduate students to perform research, teach as learning assistants, and organize/advocate/lead student groups.
16. graduates are prepared for workforce

Theme 2: Relationship between Faculty and Students
1. People see each other as full humans, not disembodied intellects
2. research advisors/professors check in with students when necessary
3. Faculty work to connect students with a wide range of resources to support their wellbeing, rather than just doing course/research advising
4. Students see multiple role models sharing their identity, including intersectional ones
5. People feel safe to be who they are/express their true selves
6. students feel like a valuable and meaningful addition to the research team or class

Theme 3: Distribution of Power/Student Voice
1. A community that consciously works to ensure all voices are heard and respected
2. The voices of undergrads are sought and included in work on department processes (from courses to research)
3. Awareness of need for student voices, paired with defined practices that ensure students are heard at all levels from classrooms to advising to leadership
4. Student voice is valued and students contribute to decision making
5. Power/decision-making/leadership is meaningfully shared among all members of the department (not just faculty)
6. power is distributed as even as possible- professors/research advisors have a healthy amount of authority and still allow for feedback and student voice/leadership
7. There are many leadership opportunities in different areas of the field. These are open and known to all.
8. Department decisions include input from the whole community (students, staff, postdocs, as well as faculty) and are voted on by representatives from all groups.
9. Shared leadership and decision making between faculty, staff, and students at all levels, with equal decision-making power and consensus
10. Driven by consensus-based decision-making
11. Generally, decisions are made by consensus which is usually gained by initial large discussion (to introduce topic), smaller discussions between 2-4 people, and then a final meeting/vote.
12. Procedures in place for flexibility, able to adapt rules and r=programs to meet new demands when necessary, not totally rigid
13. professors are flexible- within reason, allow for extensions when "life happens."

Theme 4: Open Communication/No Problematic Faculty
1. communication is always open and encouraged
2. Frequent, open, and transparent communication between leadership and community
3. feedback is gathered from students to ensure everyone is feeling listened to
4. People (esp those w/ less experience in dept) feel comfortable bringing up critiques, and people (esp those w/ more experience in dept) feel comfortable receiving critiques
5. feedback is encouraged and actually taken into account
6. People are able to call each other out. Criticism is valued and acted upon constructively
7. Check-ins could be used at the end of each academic period to ask members of the community if they had recognized or experienced the core values which the community had set out to embody.
8. The group has a set of clear norms and mechanisms for addressing when those norms are violated
9. norms/expectations are posted for the research group/class to follow so students know that this is a welcoming community and that those who violate the norms will be spoken to
10. a reporting system is in place if a faculty member acts in a way that does not support the well-being of all students to allow for these behaviors to be addressed and corrected

11. There are no widespread whispers of problem individuals (e.g. faculty); these people are identified quickly and forced to amend their behavior

Theme 5: Involved with Equity Work at Many Levels
1. There are staff positions dedicated to equity work
2. The knowledge and experiences of individuals within and external to the department are valued and their suggestions heeded. Examples: PER reforms are prioritized; when Black campus members start petitions, the department enact their own changes and put pressure on the broader administration.
3. The department partners with campus groups (such as Gender and Sexuality centers and Black student groups), both utilizing their expertise/space and in turn highlighting their importance.
4. The department seeks and supports involvement with larger networks (Access, APS-IDEA, etc.)
5. Teaching considers context- both the history of physics and who had the chance to study it, as well as the current students' lives and why they're in the class
6. community is conversant in practical ethics

Theme 6: Department Improvement is Data-Driven
1. Frequent department review both internally and externally, observations made with both quantitative data and qualitative observation
2. The department gathers data on their goals continuously and in various forms (climate surveys, anonymous feedback boxes, exit surveys + interviews, town halls)
3. Structures in place for safely accessing community data, both in raw form and presentable form

Theme 7: Network of support
1. A network map of community communications & partnerships is dense, with few isolated members or clusters.
2. Each member (faculty, student & staff) has multiple other members within the community that they can turn to for support
3. Living a well-rounded and balanced life is normalized.
4. In this community, one should feel both supported and recognized. Being seen as a valued individual is key.
5. A supportive community where people can be open about their needs, vulnerabilities, and find sympathy and resources
6. There should be individuals who acts as points of contact, for faculty, staff, and students, to communicate with everyone and ensure they are doing well.
7. students are aware of all opportunities available to them - a norm for faculty to send students opportunities that may be value to them to stay in the know
8. Faculty value students' individual professional and personal goals, and work to support those
9. People are supported in pursuing a wide variety of personal and professional goals -- there is not just one "right" path to "success"

10. The focus of the department would ideally be on supporting its members and finding ways to make a positive change.
11. There is an attentiveness to the needs of the community and working to fill these needs is encouraged, no matter who the idea comes from. Students feel like they can create solutions to problems they see
12. Members of the department are not conflicted about recruiting marginalized individuals, knowing they will be supported and welcomed
13. Collaborative spirit: there is enough money to support multiple people in similar roles to make research less isolating/ make teaching more tailored to student needs.

Theme 8: More holistic and growth-oriented measures of success
1. No grades. Feedback is written/in-person discussions on student strengths and ways to improve further.
2. Grading is not a sole factor in determining success.
3. Grades are not announced to the class and professors do not put students down for low grades.
4. No gatekeeping.
5. Failure is normalized.
6. Success is judged by quality, not quantity.
7. Success is broadly defined and everyone is encouraged to reflect on their personal goals. These individual ideas of success are supported and encouraged just as much as the traditional academic path.

Theme 9: Multi-disciplinary Collaboration
1. Science is no longer divided into disciplines, but into topics of solved and unsolved questions.
2. I appreciate my research collaborations with external collaborators as they keep my knowledge of the field fresh and because I can engage with students on projects that are clearly of importance to other people in the field.
3. Although the sense of community is important for the department, it should not extend so far as to cause isolation. Members from other departments should still experience a caring environment when cross-discipline work arises, and members of the community who decide to leave should not feel alienated.

Theme 10: Understanding the purpose of science and its connection to other disciplines
1. Science is seen as a mechanism to solve problems that living creatures encounter, and to explore the natural world.
2. Explicitly valuing the connections between science and society, history, politics, ethics, etc
3. My goal in classroom teaching is to help students relate the mathematical, microscopic, and macroscopic views of matter through active learning.
4. Department members and the research questions being addressed represent the interests and needs of all communities.

5. My goal in research is to work with experimental colleagues to explain mechanisms of electron transport.

Theme 11: Community, mentoring, and holistic support across undergrads, grads, post doc, faculty
1. Students and faculty have a strong sense of community
2. Postdocs are recognized and supported individually and as a group
3. There is mentoring available to everyone, from students at different levels to faculty.
4. Continual mentorship and contact with faculty/grads/staff for undergrads, not only one-off events
5. All members of the department participate in mentorship in several forms (peer, postdoc-grad-ugrad, faculty-student) and modes (scheduled & formal consults, informal coffees, QA point-people)
6. Faculty are teachers and/or research mentors: they are hired, trained, given abundant resources to learn/improve, and reviewed based on their ability to engage and support their students.
7. Information and mentoring for diverse career paths, in academia, industry, policy etc
8. My goal in teaching students as a research mentor is to let them engage in authentic research that leads to publishable data while they gain skills that they can take to future job/graduate school experiences.

Theme 12: Safety, security and support for those most vulnerable
1. The department explicitly recognizes its role in perpetuating racial, gender and other inequities and consistently and visibly works to address them.
2. women and underrepresented groups receive support and encouragement
3. differences are accepted and celebrated - students feel like they can be themselves without repercussions
4. White men are less than half of the department
5. Actively anti-racist/oppressive
6. Most of those with less-visible marginalized identities (disability, LGBTQ, white-passing POC) are comfortable with department members being aware of their identities
7. sense of physical safety: black students are not harassed by police; sexual assaults prevented

Theme 13: A culture of support and strong interpersonal connection at all levels
1. A heavier focus on trying your best rather than who gets the best grade/finishes assignment first/produces the most data in their research
2. Our job is to help each other become our best selves, not to weed out people
3. Strong camaraderie between undergrads, not a culture of vicious competition where peers are ostracized or rejected
4. There is a sense that everyone is working together towards a shared vision/mission

5. Faculty in my department are generally good colleagues who meet regularly and also in hallway chats. It is a small department so everyone interacts with everyone to some degree
6. Everyone knows everyone else by name
7. Relationships are professional but casual -- there are feelings of warmth, caring, and (non-problematic) love between people
8. Established norms: be kind

Theme 14: Drives healthy passion for science and learning
1. Work is energizing
2. Curiosity/constant desire to learn
3. Motivated by doing high-quality work
4. Celebration of the learning process (growth mindset)
5. Atmosphere is motivating and uplifting