

# ClimateQUAL and People-Focused Strategic Planning

Susanna M. Cowan and Lauren Slingluff  
University of Connecticut, USA

## Overview

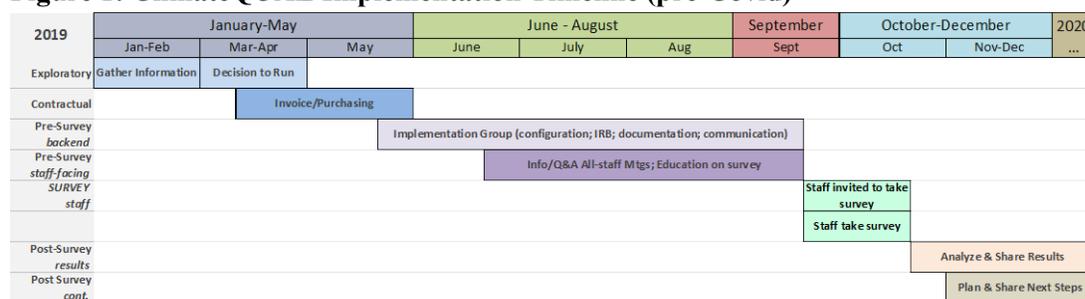
The University of Connecticut (UConn) Library conducted the Association of Research Library’s (ARL) ClimateQUAL®: Organizational Climate and Diversity Assessment in the fall of 2019, the same period we were undertaking a strategic planning process which resulted in the Library Strategic Framework. This unplanned alignment of two significant organizational priorities resulted in two major but markedly different assessment initiatives running in parallel. One, ClimateQUAL, was a mostly quantitative instrument, whereas the second, the strategic framework process, comprised a mixture of environmental and contextual data and a small set of qualitative feedback instruments. What started as an accidental alignment led to the discovery that these two processes spoke to each other in ways that strengthened each.

## Two Strategic Initiatives

Both ClimateQUAL and the strategic framework planning process supported library priorities. The former specifically supported the library’s ongoing commitment to fostering professional development, work satisfaction and productivity, and a renewed commitment to expanding library diversity in staff representation, organizational structure/function, and work practices (for example, taking part in national efforts to repair nomenclature and broaden inclusion in metadata). The latter directly supported the Dean’s commitment to refashioning the library’s strategic priorities so that they more directly furthered her aim to have the library “be the best library for UConn”<sup>1</sup>—i.e., effectively meet the specific needs of the stakeholders at the University of Connecticut and reflect the university’s mission and values. Both processes also directly supported the recently articulated UConn Library Values: Curiosity and Inquiry; Equity and Inclusion; Kindness and Trust; and Having Fun!

The running of the ClimateQUAL survey was the culmination of months of preparation that began in January 2019 (see Figure 1), when library leadership approved the funds for its implementation. In the months following, the survey was customized for the UConn Library and, during the summer of 2019, staff were introduced to the survey’s design and demographic breakdowns in preparation for the late September survey launch. The strategic framework process launched in spring 2019 with the formation of the Strategic Framework Steering Committee, which spent the summer clarifying the scope, method, and timeline of its work, which included a broad environmental scan of library strategic plans and key readings on strategic planning processes.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: ClimateQUAL Implementation Timeline (pre-Covid)**



ClimateQUAL is of course a well-established tool, offered since 2008 as a part of ARL’s ever-growing suite of assessment tools, which includes or has included LibQUAL, the ARL Salary Survey and ARL Statistics, MINES for Libraries, LibValue, the SPEC Surveys, and more recently, the Research Library Impact Pilot projects. ClimateQUAL is an organizational climate survey, first developed in 1999 by a scholar in industrial and organizational psychology at the University of Maryland and made broadly available to both ARL and non-ARL research libraries by ARL beginning in 2009. This well-regarded instrument is grounded in social science survey methodologies. The survey has three types of questions. Key to the survey is the set of questions that ask respondents to self-identify by demographic categories, which in turn become the pivots for reporting specific demographic-level means (for example, by specific age or salary bracket). It is worth noting that “demographic” is a broad term in ClimateQUAL, encompassing not only questions commonly associated with representational diversity such as race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and age, but also categories such as role, rank, salary range, and longevity. The bulk of the survey comprises a long series of 7-point scale questions, which range across the many climates and sub-climates (also called scales and sub-scales) ClimateQUAL measures—for example, the Organizational Climate for Justice, which is broken into four sub-scales: Distributive Justice, Procedural Justice, Interpersonal Justice, and Informational Justice. Lastly, ClimateQUAL offers respondents a single open-ended question for optional comments.

By contrast, the methods selected for data gathering to support the strategic framework process were a mix of “found” data and relevant readings and a small set of entirely qualitative instruments created for this purpose. Existing data ranged from institutional data gathered from UConn’s office of institutional research such as admissions and degree statistics to staffing and budget pictures pulled from local and comparative data (namely IPEDS, ACRL, and ARL) to national data often used to benchmark local work—for example, the influential Ithaca S+R Faculty Survey, the EDUCAUSE Horizon Report, and both case studies and best practices such as those described in Hanover Research’s report on the 21<sup>st</sup>-century library.<sup>3</sup> These benchmarking reports, cumulatively, described not only now-familiar trends of common and collaborative library spaces, student success alignments, flexible technologies, an ongoing commitment to information literacy, and adaptive spaces, but they also described the key role of staff as both enactors of vision and, critically, constituents, alongside institutional stakeholders, in the formation of library mission: “Transitioning to a modern library requires thoughtful planning, including gaining buy-in from library staff, faculty, and students. This transition involves communication and a transition plan to guide a shift in organizational culture, as well as concrete steps to solicit meaningful input from a variety of stakeholders and end-users.”<sup>4</sup> This note was echoed in the words of those librarian-scholars who have become the profession’s mirrors, prophets, and pragmatic advocates; for example, David Lewis, who writes in the concluding chapter (“Ten Things to Do Now”) of *Reimagining the Academic Library*, under the heading 7. Understand the Demographics of Your Organization and Have a Plan to Hire or Develop the Expertise the Library Will Need: “There are two truths about the people now working in your libraries that need to be recognized. The first is that the people you have are the people who will need to make the change.”<sup>5</sup> In the subsequent paragraph (“8. Get the Culture Right”), Lewis continues “The changes that are coming require an organization that has a culture that embraces change and the challenges it brings.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Two Initiatives: Shared Objectives**

Thus, even before ClimateQUAL rose to the surface as a significant piece of the strategic framework data gathering process, preliminary research was focusing the work of the Strategic Framework Steering Committee on the critical role people, and specifically library staff and the organization’s culture, would play in forming any strategic vision. It was with this in mind that the steering committee devised its data-gathering methods to solicit stakeholder feedback. As the coincidence of ClimateQUAL and data gathering for the framework became a point of discussion near the start of the fall 2019 semester, some concern arose about the possible confusion that would arise out of the juxtaposition of the two, especially

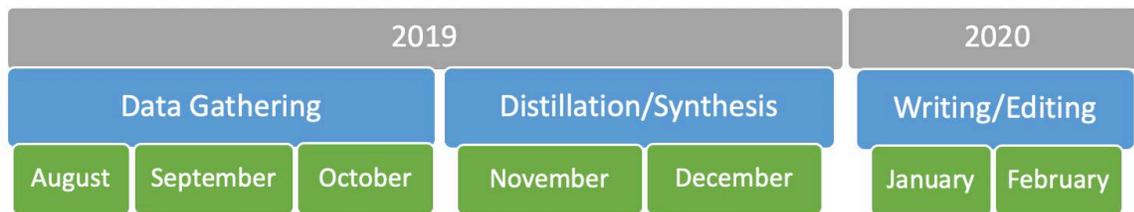
in October, when ClimateQUAL would still be active and we would cluster feedback mechanisms for the framework (see Figure 2). Influenced by our research to date, conversation shifted to seeing the efforts as both complementary and distinct. Whereas ClimateQUAL would generate a trove of descriptive statistics about organizational climate and staff attitudes, the methods we envisioned for the framework would focus on qualitative responses to open-ended questions. The previous would capture a moment in time in our organization; the latter would ask staff to articulate what they valued about libraries and imagined they could be. Importantly, ClimateQUAL would tell us something about, as Lewis put it, “the people we have” and the organizational strengths and challenges that would both support and inhibit our ability to embrace any strategic plan.

Specifically, we chose to use three questions across all our methods of collecting open-ended feedback from our three principal stakeholder groups: faculty and campus partners, students, and library staff. We had arrived at this approach after lengthy conversation, and sometimes passionate debate, about what method best suited our goal. Initial ideas ranged from running a detailed survey of existing library services that we could augment with focus groups to a range of other methods. We quickly saw the value of combining some sort of survey with live conversations but lacked consensus initially on what questions each should ask. Finally, we returned to the questions that propelled the framework process we had set in motion, core to which were two ideas: that we wanted to be open to hearing what our stakeholders envisioned in a library and that we did not want to presume that any existing library function or service was a part of this vision. This helped us clarify that our goal was not to evaluate existing services (that could come later); our goal was to learn what mattered most to our stakeholders. To this end, we crafted three open-ended questions that we hoped would offer respondents the opportunity both to reflect on what they valued in libraries and to help us focus strategic work:

- What does the library mean to you?
- If the library had unlimited resources, what would it look like in terms of collections, space, services, and/or staff?
- If the library had extremely limited resources, what collections, space, services, and/or staff would be most critical to support?

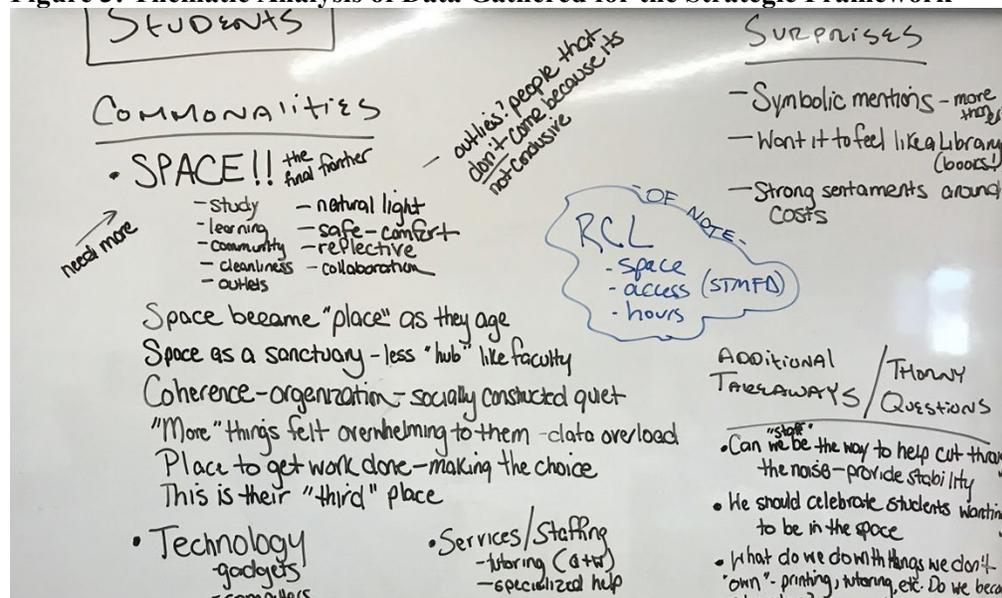
Instead of creating new questions for each method of soliciting feedback, we made the decision to use only these three questions across all methods. We formatted the questions as a survey, which went out to students, faculty/staff, and library staff. We held a number of open conversations, including several set aside just for library staff. Finally, we posted the questions on whiteboards, which we set up in the library as well as at various locations across our five campuses. We had discussed as we narrowed our defined stakeholder groups the importance of hearing from parts of our university community that had never stepped foot into any of our library spaces. Our questions, while deceptively simple, had been revised multiple times in an attempt to strip them from unintended prompts and value judgment (for example, the wording “the library” rather than “the UConn Library” and the choice not to ask “what do you like best about the library?” or “which library services are most valuable to you”—the latter implying that *any* library service was valuable). The first question was intentionally unspecific, and it left open the possibility that respondents would read “The Library” (as a concept) in it—which a number did, describing how their current understanding of libraries was formed in childhood, over years of using libraries, etc. The second question was intended to encourage limitless future thinking; the final question, we hoped, would help us identify the most vital resources to our community.

**Figure 2: Timeline for Strategic Framework**



The real value of ClimateQUAL to the strategic framework process appeared as we moved out of the data-gathering phase and into synthesis and distillation in preparation for writing the report in late 2019 and early 2020 (see Figure 2). During this stage we transcribed, collated, and analyzed the feedback we had gathered from our three mechanisms, which culminated in a full day of thematic analysis by the Steering Committee (See Figure 3).

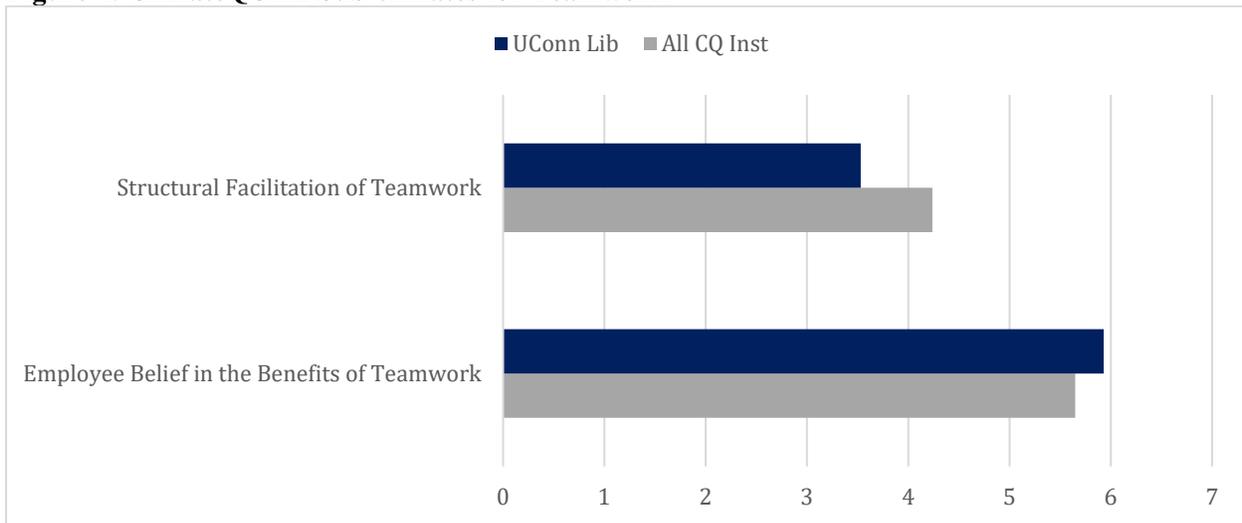
**Figure 3: Thematic Analysis of Data Gathered for the Strategic Framework**



It was quickly clear that ClimateQUAL would be important in informing our understanding and use of the data we had gathered for the framework. With the blessings of the library leadership, we made the decision to give the steering committee a preview of the complete ClimateQUAL numerical report shortly after receiving those results in November, which we did before completing the detailed analysis of that report, and well before the formal executive summary of ClimateQUAL was completed and results shared with library staff. However, we had completed initial analysis of the important summary data in the ClimateQUAL report and had identified our top strengths and areas most in need of improvement, judged by the numbers alone and by comparison with normative data ARL had provided us that allowed us to compare our results with summary data for institutions and individuals who had taken ClimateQUAL.<sup>7</sup> This data helped us frame the results of our thematic analysis, and was especially helpful in framing the framework itself. Understanding our particular strengths and challenges from the perspective of our staff guided us in the drafting of the strategic framework, particularly as we considered the role of staff in each area of the framework. These areas were the culmination of the research, environmental work, data collection, and analysis and became the framing categories of the framework: Connect, Empower, and Engage. Harkening back to Lewis’s admonishment, all areas would depend on engagement with and cultivation of our staff, but that felt particularly true with regard to the Empower section, which focuses

on leadership and collaboration, inclusiveness, and leveraging the skills and knowledge of our staff. ClimateQUAL told us that core strengths included a commitment to diversity and inclusion, strong task engagement and a belief that we were empowered by our functional units. Of our ClimateQUAL strengths, this last one was particularly noteworthy, as “teamwork” encompassed both striking highs and lows in our ClimateQUAL data. While we stood out among ClimateQUAL peers in the teamwork sub-climate Employee Belief in Benefits of Teamwork, we were notably weak within our own results and against other institutions in the second sub-climate in that area, Structural Facilitation of Teamwork (see Figure 4). This seeming dissonance particularly resonated as we further focused the framework’s core concepts and began to draft our final recommendations. How to strategically draw on the strength of our work ethic and functional units while better sustaining and empowering and giving voice to both functional and cross-functional work was a continuing discussion as we worked.

**Figure 4: ClimateQUAL Sub-climates for Teamwork**



In essence, ClimateQUAL kept us honest and rooted, reminding us to build our vision of the UConn Library’s future work on the *library we were*, with a clear understanding of ourselves in our own eyes, not an idea of ourselves removed from that grounding. In turn, the strategic framework influenced the framing and language of the executive summary of the ClimateQUAL findings. The primary purpose of the report was of course to highlight our notable strengths and areas in need of further investigation and focused improvement. But what the strategic framework process provided was an understanding that both strengths and concerns were *strategic* and that giving them attention—leveraging strengths and bolstering where we fell short—were essential to the library’s forward motion. In other words, the strategic framework further grounded the purpose behind ClimateQUAL: to build on our strengths and address our challenges so that we can do great work. The strategic framework therefore provided an articulation of our future as an organization and in so doing became the first place we put into writing some of what we had learned in our assessment of organizational climate.

### Reflection and Hindsight

Hindsight is 2020. Our discovery that the implementation of ClimateQUAL and the strategic framework process were mutually informing was an accident of timing, although their importance to each other emerged quickly. Strategic planning requires significant input from key stakeholders and library staff were of course a core stakeholder as we devised means to gather data for the framework. Having ClimateQUAL run almost alongside the strategic framework process increased our confidence that the values and vision being expressed in our framework data gathering methods were representative of the culture and beliefs of our staff.

As described above, our strategic framework data gathering drew initially from three main sources: existing institutional data, national benchmarking data, analysis of answers to three open-ended questions asked via several methods. Adding ClimateQUAL as a powerful, mostly quantitative source of data that provided a macro view of staff perceptions of our organization was a tremendous boon to the process and added context to the range of responses that emerged from our qualitative work.

ClimateQUAL is a complex assessment instrument and its influence on our organization is only just being tapped. Both *as* a tool (the fact that we were running it) and as a rich distillation of staff perspective on a range of issues related to our library as an organization, ClimateQUAL became an essential component of the feedback, analysis, distillation, and articulation stages of the framework. It is difficult now to imagine one process without the other.

Both processes also turned out to be unplanned gifts to our organization. For us, as for many academic libraries around the country, Friday, March 13 was the last day in the office for most of our staff. Just over a week before, on March 4, we had formally shared the strategic framework during an all-staff forum. Although emergency response and focus on the priorities of maintaining service levels when we re-opened in fall 2020 delayed our completion of the ClimateQUAL report (it was formally shared November 24, 2020), by mid-March we had completed our analysis of the data and had drafted several versions of a summary report.

Taken together, the processes put us on strong footing as we entered the months of dislocation and remote work caused by the pandemic. Both processes also refocused our attention on diversity in the broadest and deepest sense. Although we scored high in most of ClimateQUAL's diversity scales, we emerged from ClimateQUAL aware that broad commitment to diversity neither meant *we* were fully diverse nor that we had captured the Voices (capital V) of our least-represented populations and perspectives. Data collected during the strategic framework process increased our certainty that our evident strengths, as much as those needing improvement, required further investigation and articulation. Like UConn at large—and higher education in general—we find ourselves reassessing DEI initiatives, not because any evidence shows us having failed in any particular area (in fact, we have data suggesting this as a strength), but because both local and national data have invigorated a commitment to dig deeper to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion work is ongoing, sustainable, and impactful.

On one hand, ClimateQUAL allowed us to consider how our organizational health could be both leveraged and bolstered by future strategic focus and work. It made our focus on the people who would carry forward the strategic work of the library concrete and solidified our commitment to have the voices of our stakeholders, including the critical ones of our own staff, rise to the surface in strategic planning. Its influence was tangible in our conversations, our choice of data-gathering methods, and our synthesis of findings. On the other hand, the strategic framework provided important qualitative nuance to what ClimateQUAL told us. In responses to our questions, library staff (and all stakeholders) articulated both their vision and their greatest concerns in words numerical data simply could not capture. Both processes allowed us to hear the voices of individuals as we looked forward to our future. These two initiatives did so in very different ways, but ones that ultimately strengthened each and our organization.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This has been a cornerstone of Dean Anne Langley’s leadership of the Library since she assumed the role in early 2018. She has emphasized that our work must be to build the “right library for UConn” on numerous occasions. See for example, her brief vision statement on the library’s Office of the Dean page (<https://lib.uconn.edu/about/departments/office-of-the-dean/>).
- <sup>2</sup> The following is not an exhaustive list, but consulted strategic plans included the Indiana University Libraries Strategic Plan (<https://libraries.indiana.edu/document/iub-libraries-strategic-plan-pdf>); the University of California Berkeley Library Strategic Plan (<https://stories.lib.berkeley.edu/strategicplan/>); the University of Washington Libraries Strategic Plan (<http://www.lib.washington.edu/about/strategicplan>); the University of California Los Angeles Library Strategic Plan (<https://www.library.ucla.edu/about/administration-organization/strategic-plan-2016-19>). We were in particular influenced by the University of California San Diego Libraries strategic planning process, as described in Jeff Williams, Tammy Nickelson Dearie, and Brian E. C. Schottlaender, “Bottom-Up Strategic Planning: The UC San Diego Libraries Experience,” *Library Leadership and Management* 27 (2013), no. 3: 1–13. Foundational documents included (but were not limited to) “Strategic Principles for Competing in the Digital Age,” accessed April 17, 2019, <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/strategy-and-corporate-finance/our-insights/strategic-principles-for-competing-in-the-digital-age>; David Lewis, *Reimagining the Academic Library* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016) and Loretta Parham, “21st Century Academic Library: The Promise, The Plan, a Response,” in *Proceedings of the 2017 Charleston Library Conference: What’s Past is Prologue*, November 6–10, Charleston, South Carolina, ed. Beth R. Bernhardt, Leah Hinds, and Lars Meyer (Sullivans Island, SC: Charleston Information Group, 2017), 1–6, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/charleston/2017/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Specifically, we reviewed data from these versions of those reports: the 2018 *Ithaka S+R US Faculty Survey*, prepared by Melissa Blankstein and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg (New York: Ithaka S+R, April 12, 2019), <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/2018-us-faculty-survey/>; the 2019 Higher Education Edition of the *EDUCAUSE Horizon Report*, prepared by Bryan Alexander, Kevin Ashford-Rowe, Noreen Barajas-Murphy, et al. (Louisville, CO: EDUCAUSE, 2019), <https://library.educause.edu/-/media/files/library/2019/4/2019horizonreport.pdf?la=en&hash=C8E8D444AF372E705FA1BF9D4FF0DD4CC6F0FDD1>; *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University Library* (Arlington, VA: Hanover Research, September 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Hanover Research, *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century University Library*, 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Reimagining the Academic Library*, 157.
- <sup>6</sup> Lewis, *Reimagining the Academic Library*, 157.
- <sup>7</sup> The normative data we received showed summary descriptive data for all individuals and all institutions who had taken ClimateQUAL through 2016.

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