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Student Activism at Harvard College: Who Uses Their Voice and Why?

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We affirm our awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.

Abstract

The paper, “Student Activism at Harvard College: Who Uses Their Voice and Why?,” investigated who are the leaders and members of student activist groups at Harvard College. Researchers assessed the general Harvard student body population's sentiment towards student movements and propensity to join social movements in an effort to understand what motivates some students as opposed to others to join student movement groups. They also investigated student activists’ perceptions of university administrators. Researchers focused on two student movement groups: Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard and the Harvard Student Labor Action Movement (SLAM). They conducted individual interviews with members of each group and asked both informational questions and questions about each student’s background, motivations, and perception of administration. They found that there were unified pathways to recruitment to each organization with interviewees in SLAM becoming introduced to the organization through their or their friend's participation in the First-Year Urban Program, a social justice focused pre-orientation program, while interviewees in Divest Harvard had participated in environmental activism before college. Interviewees from both organizations recognized that the time-consuming nature of the work, a lack of understanding of their work from the general student body, and risks that activists may incur could be a deterrent to activism. Researchers found that interviewees from the labor and environmental divest movement were motivated by a strong belief that Harvard’s moral obligation to advance each cause and that their activism was effective. While the perception of administration differed between groups, both groups felt that the administration was dismissive of their actions and had misaligned priorities with those of students. Researchers also used a quantitative survey, representative of the Harvard undergraduate population, to indirectly reveal subtle differences between student activists and non-activists. They found that activists post more frequently on social media, are more likely to major in the Social Sciences, and are more affluent than non-activists. Recommendations for diversifying recruitment in student movement groups include incorporating civic-engagement in high school curriculums and a unified recruiting system for activist groups at Harvard College.

Introduction

Higher education institutions as well as the general public have been grappling with issues of student voice, agency, and impact for decades. While universities, particularly elite institutions, proclaim to value student voice and agency with events memorializing activism, it is unclear whether students feel that administrators value their concerns (Sullivan, 2019). Nevertheless, student movements for divestment and unionization have found success with more than 40 universities divesting from some fossil-fuel stocks and over 33 recognized Graduate Student Unions (Dubb, 2018; CGEU, 2018). Our group's thematic research questions center around voice, agency and impact in issues of universities' divestment from fossil fuel and student union negotiations of labour contract for student workers on campus. These issues are of high relevance in contemporary higher education and have mobilised students to activism. This is a valuable topic to explore due to its impacts on different scales. One is global: these social movements, divestment and labor, are important more broadly to furthering social progress not only on higher education campuses, but around the world. It is also important to better understand the effects that social movements organizations at higher education institutions have on the institutions themselves- how students can best contribute to and challenge higher education institutions.

Student movement organizations have become a common feature of student campus life. In recent years at Harvard we have seen a rise in both the push for fossil fuel divestment and labor (specifically for getting a contract approved for student workers on campus) from students. Our interest in student voice, agency and impact in higher education lead us to exploration of three sets of questions: (1) Focusing on the divest and labor movements, we investigate student motivations to join the movement and the characteristics of student leaders in these movements. Our question here is who are the leaders and members of these two student movements? Student movements have limited mobilisation capacity. Not every student is actively engaged with the movements. This brings us to our second research question. (2) We also seek to assess the general Harvard student body population's sentiment towards student movements and propensity to join social movements (as a form of political action) in general and/or specifically the divest and labor movements. We hope to find out whether student sentiment/orientation/

favorable-negative perceptions of student movements are uniform or vary between subgroups of Harvard student population. Finally, we are interested in what student-administration relationships look like in the context of social movements; how do student activists perceive university administration?

While students may not always be considered the foremost vehicles for change, there has been a long history of political, environmental, and economic change across the world due to student activism. In the 1960s, four young black students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University sat on a segregated lunch counter and inspired what became known as the Greensboro sit-ins across 50 cities. In 1968, students at Columbia University occupied several buildings to protest the university's involvement in the Vietnam War, which Columbia stopped thereafter (Astor, 2018).

Today, university divestment and unionization are gaining ground on college campuses. Over the past few years, students have found some success in both movements. At the turn of the 21st century, in 2000, student unionization efforts in private universities began when the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled that student workers at private universities had the right to unionize (Kroeger, et al. 2018). It reversed that decision in 2004 and then reinstated in the 2016 Columbia University decision, which ruled that graduate student workers had a right to collective bargaining (Flaherty, 2016). In 2018, graduate student workers at Brandeis University became the first since the 2016 NLRB decision to reach a contract settlement with a private university (SEIU, 2018). Many fossil fuel campaigns on college campuses began after 2010, when 350.org launched their divestment campaign in 2012 and Fossil Free UK launched a campaign in 2013 (Howard, 2015). Just last February, Middlebury announced plans to divest from fossil fuels over the next 15 years (Toppo, 2019). Despite the strong push made by students involved in both divestment and unionization including protests and petitions, Harvard has proved resistant to change. The environment on a college campus, including quick turnover of students, constant schoolwork, and other extracurricular commitments can make sustained student activism challenging. Yet, both movements have been ongoing for a few years. They are particularly important at Harvard because of the unique social and political capital that the university holds, which can influence other institutions.

The Student Labor Action Movement formally began in 1998 as the Progressive Student Labor Movement to organize the living wage campaign to bring Cambridge's living wage ordinance to Harvard. In 2002, they succeeded and have since brought campaigns such as the 2016 dining hall workers strike and are currently supporting the Harvard Graduate Student Union in their strike (McCafferty, 2018). The divestment movement at Harvard started in the fall of 2012 after the founding of Students for a Just and Equal Future, which is a regional network fighting for climate action. The campaign had a speak during its heat week in 2015 where there was a very large rally, and then started to phase out in the spring of 2017. Many of the student organizers started to graduate out, the Harvard Management Company falsely signified they were committing to divestment when they actually were not, and there was general disillusionment among activists. The divestment campaign relaunched in the fall of 2018 and has received consistent student support for divestment.

Literature Review

Student Activism in Higher Education

Understanding the social identities, or a person's sense of self based on group membership, of student activists first requires a definition of the term. Student activism, as defined by Klemenčič, is "any political engagements of students to bring about political and social change" (2019). It was not until the 1990s that student activism was accepted as a form of political activism in discourse at the higher education level (Klemenčič, 2019). Altbach recognized this in the late 1980s, making the argument that the academic community needs to understand the dynamics of student activism because it made university reform and the disruption of academic institutions possible (1989). All activists tend to study in the social sciences and humanities fields and come from minority groups, while the only notable difference in the leaders is that they tend to come from affluent and educated families (Altbach, 1989). These findings provide context for the social identities of activists as we hope to draw connections between the social identities of activists and their motivations for becoming involved in an activist group.

Student activism is autonomous, and students can use activism to exercise their rights to free speech. However, activism itself may be threatened when free speech and diversity of thought on campus is stifled. Some may find that the arguments and opinions taken by others are morally untenable and should not be considered as a valid argument (Moses, 2017). In the context of student activism, administrators hold control and have decision-making powers; so what happens if one group finds the other's argument "morally untenable?" In student activism specifically, students will often work against the administration because they find their arguments on policy to be unsatisfactory. However, other literature examines these relationships in a positive light. Mitra's article delves into strategies for implementing youth-adult partnerships within schools (2007). While the case study for this research was conducted within a high school, the information is applicable to administrators in higher education. When arguing for the importance of youth-adult partnerships, Mitra says that they "can even lead to student participation in developing school reform efforts" (2007). But she constrains this by saying that the administration has to be the one to foster this growth. Is this also true for higher institutions? We may wish to consider interview questions which ask about an administrator's ability to grow student activism on campus. Using both Moses and Mitra's research together, this will help us understand the relationships between administrators and students in the context of social movements.

When it comes to determining the role of student activism in schools, the literature is dense. Charteris and Smardon argue that students can serve many different roles in secondary institutions, and examines how those roles fit into the context of relationships within the institution (2019). The authors note that "an emphasis on compliance and control can acknowledge the rights of the students to have involvement in decision making, however, their voices are used primarily to 'serve institutional ends' (Lodge, 2005, 133)" (Charteris and Smardon, 2019). This point argues that students are primarily under the control of administration when partnerships are struck. This makes the case for student activists to step into the role of oppositioners. In the context of higher education, students take a direct stand against the institution rather than becoming tokenized by it. Further literature finds that institutional change is not the only way activists make broad change. Theorizing, Wheatle and Commodore find that

the “connections between efforts of student activists and institutional and state-level policy change are much more direct than to federal policy and legislative change” (2019). While large social movements led by student activists are possible, Wheatle and Commodore argue that direct change is more likely at the institutional and state levels. Generally, the role of a student activists is within the institution they are confined to.

Further literature provides arguments for how student activism affects student behavior. Rhoads poses that while “involvement in student activism can at times detract from a student’s academic pursuits given time constraints and intense distractions, clearly such students have vast opportunities for developing more advanced organizational and social skills” (2016, p. 199). Students are often able to gain more ‘life skills’ organizing in the field, or by interacting with their team members, than they would by only doing academic work. Student activism, as Rhoads argues, is better for building up the character of an individual through the development of more advanced skills. Other researchers find that activism serves a similar role, as “attending a college where other students are committed to social activism goals had a significant and positive influence on students’ individual goals to help others in difficulty and influence the political structure” (Bryant, Gayles, Davis, 2011). Student activism has a direct and positive influence on other students. We may wish to ask students if they feel activism has had a direct influence on their lives. In the context of interviews, this may be a great way to examine not only the effects of activism, but an activist’s motivations.

Part of our project involves exploring what motivates student activists to be involved in social movements. More broadly, research has found that being a full-time student is significant in predicting whether someone will participate in a protest (Olcese, Saunders, and Tzavidis, 2014). It seems like being a student already makes one more inclined to participate in activism, but what other factors might motivate students to be involved in activism? Other papers have done research into what these factors might be. In 2013, there was a study conducted to investigate why students join contemporary activist groups (Winston). The study finds that students join these organizations for varying reasons from career opportunities to social networks to efficacy, or how well a movement can achieve tangible goals. Winston makes the argument that joining these social movement organizations is dependent on the group’s ability to make

change. A more recent paper explores student motivations for activism through a case study of the activism of black students in the 2007 Jena Six protests (Gibson and Williams, 2019). In this case study, they explore the connections between motivations and social identity, as was discussed earlier. In particular, they found interesting differences in motivations between people of different genders, men expressing anger as a motivation and women expressing concern for their future families as a motivation. Our research continues to explore how identity and experiences affect student motivation to participate in activism through a case study of social movements on Harvard's campus.

Divestment and Labor Movements: A History

In order to provide context and understanding for our own research, it's important to incorporate literature on divestment and labor movements and their respective goals. This will provide a base understanding to format interview questions for Harvard students participating in these movements. This section will briefly examine the importance of the student divestment and student labor movements separately.

Both the fossil fuel divestment movement and the student labor movement place pressure on administrative structures to encourage change. The divestment movement started in 2011, growing considerably in 2012, and "argues for collective political action, highlighting that individual action on climate change is not enough" (Bergman, 2018). The push for divestment in fossil fuels is also supplemented by reinvestment in renewable energy and other climate mitigation measures. Some argue that this movement has the potential to play a strong role in climate mitigation as a new variant of non-state climate governance, especially as it focuses "on third parties (investors), as opposed to first (state) and second (business) parties" (Ayling & Gunningham, 2017). Bergman takes this point a step further, finding that divestment provided a platform for social awareness, "changing discussions in the finance world and affecting some investors' and shareholders' attitudes towards fossil fuel companies" (2018). The divestment movement holds importance in shaping the context of how people view the fossil fuel industry. Even if respective organizations do not accomplish their goals, the movement has broken a stalemate in conversations about climate change.

The labor movement provides workers with “self defense -- in attempts of workers to protect themselves against the worst ravages of the industrial system” (Beard, 1921, p. 1). While literature from Beard may be considered outdated, the fundamental idea surrounding labor unions still stands: protecting workers. The description of the labor movement as “self defense” gets to the heart of it’s intentions, and helps to shape the importance for the contemporary movements seen today. The student labor movement had no definitive starting year, but during the 1990s, the AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations) organized a Union Summer college student internship program. Research finds that this summer program was instrumental in mobilizing college students for labor activism (Van Dyke, Dixon, Carlon, 2007). Before this direct organizing effort, the labor movement did not have a strong hold among college students. While information on labor movement activists is limited, personal accounts by Potter acknowledge the skepticism and distrust of universities that both students and campus workers shared (1997). Through conversations with students, Potter found that “students also began to see the university as an employer who holds power over student and non-student employees and thus labor organizing is important” (1997). Students at higher institutions have been important to labor movements since the early 1990s, forming opinions on labor which are similar to campus workers.

Methods: Interviews

In addition to a survey, we conducted a series of interviews with two populations. The two groups that we intend to interview are members of Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard and members of the Harvard Student Labor Action Movement (SLAM). In the following section, we will outline how we planned and executed these interviews. We will explain how these interviews will enable us to answer certain research questions, how we plan to recruit respondents, how we will conduct the interview, and what questions they will entail.

We chose to interview members of Divest and SLAM because we perceived differences in their demographic composition, and we were interested in investigating the causes of this discrepancy, wondering if it was tied to what motivates involvement in each movement. We also initially wanted to explore activist-administration relationships, and these groups both directly

interact with and make demands of the Harvard administration. Since we're using the divestment and student labor movements as case studies, we hope to compare the two populations of student activists. In this comparison, we will ask both groups of student leaders similar questions. One of the questions that we're asking is "what motivates your involvement in [Divest/SLAM]?" We are hoping to gain not only a broader understanding of why people join social movements, but also an understanding of why people join specific social movements. Through observation, we've noticed that the identities represented in the divestment movement are different than those represented in the student labor movement, and we were interested to investigate why that might be. In particular, we've noticed that the racial diversity of the two groups are disparate, and are hoping to better understand what the barriers might be for joining certain social movements. It is unclear whether our questions necessarily targeted this question directly, and in our results section later we discuss to what extent we are able to answer these questions.

We interviewed 6 student leaders in each student group. Recruiting interviewees from SLAM was relatively straightforward because one of our group members, Salma, is a member. Salma initially reached out by sending a message to the SLAM group chat, asking for individuals to reach out if they were interested in interviewing. After this initial communication, she reached out to people individually. Kalena initially reached out personally to an individual in Divest, who then referred her to a second interviewee. JD and Salma also leveraged personal connections to people in Divest to set up interviews. While we were in the process of interviewing, JD joined Divest, and recruited the remaining members through personal connections. After our initial recruiting proved to be difficult, we resorted to convenience sampling. Using connections to set up these interviews seemed to be the only way we could guarantee interviewees. Interviews ranged from 15-40 minutes, depending on the pace at which the interviewee spoke, the length of their answers, and whether we asked them the informational questions. We chose to only ask the informational questions to some of our interviewees, based on how much time they had for the interview and how much experience they had in their organization. We used our discretion when asking interviewees follow-up questions or to elaborate on their responses.

Since we are leveraging personal connections to SLAM and Divest Harvard, some of our interviewees may have been more comfortable and willing to share than others. Specifically,

Salma is involved in the Student Labor Action Movement, is a group that we will be interviewing. While we were in the process of conducting field work, JD joined Divest Harvard. While these connections may be helpful because our interviewees will be more comfortable interviewing with them, we avoided biases by having multiple members of our group analyze the transcripts of the interviews. Since we have personal involvement in student activism, some of us may have felt sympathetic towards these students, which may have manifested itself in our interview questions and tone. Our identities have inevitably shaped the ways that we presented ourselves and conducted interviews, but we tried to use that to our advantage, rather than swaying our interviewees' opinions. Part of our project is surveying people and asking questions about identity. This happened in the survey through demographic questions and also occurred in some interviews, when the interviewee was comfortable with sharing their background. While we tried to remove potential for people to be biased when answering these questions, we're aware that there's always room for bias and our identities will sometimes influence how we approach asking these questions. For instance, if we share certain identities with the interviewee, they might feel more comfortable and as a result disclose more about their background.

All of our interviewees were active organizers for their organization and currently involved this semester. While we considered Divest Harvard and SLAM organizations that participated in activism (actions to promote certain social movements), there was variation in whether students identified as "activists" or "organizers." Each organization had a prominent presence on campus at the time that we were interviewing. For instance, Divest collaborated with Fossil Free Yale to disrupt the Harvard-Yale football game in New Haven, and SLAM helped organize the Graduate Student Union Strike. These events, as well as others, are referenced in the interviews and give insight into the current state of the organizations, ultimately giving some context for the interview content.

Here, we will outline questions for the interviews with students from each of these student groups. The following set of questions was used for students in Divest Harvard. The informational section was only used for 2 interviews, whereas the main questions, will be used for every interview (refer to Appendix I for questions). Our questions for SLAM will be very similar to the main questions that we plan to ask students in Divest Harvard (refer to Appendix II

for questions). We asked all of the SLAM interviewees to answer the informational questions. Since we are hoping to answer both broad questions about student activism and comparative questions about why people are invested in certain social movements, the questions that we are planning to ask each group are very similar.

When we were initially planning our project, we wanted to conduct a third set of interviews with administrators. Due to scope constraints and uncertainty about the exact administrators we wanted to interview, we ended up not conducting interviews with administrators. However, we still asked our interviewees about their perception of the activist-administration relationship. Although we didn't seek the administrator perspective of this relationship, we hoped to investigate whether there were differences of perception between members of different organizations and whether these perceptions were tied to motivations to be involved in activism.

We intended that this series of interviews helps us better understand the student activists at Harvard, and how student voice plays a role at our university. Through these interviews, we sought to better understand why certain students might feel more empowered to leverage their voice than others, and how student activists navigate their relationship with the administration in charge of the institution they're in.

Since we are using human subjects in our research through interviewing, we want to ensure that our participants give us informed consent and that the information they share remains confidential for their privacy. All participation in our research will be voluntary. When participants will volunteer to be interview subjects, we will provide the interviewee an information sheet about our study and a consent form to sign. We will only proceed to interview them once they have given us their consent. We plan to record our interviews (this will be a part of the consent form). These interview recordings will remain internal within our team, and will not be shared with anyone else in order to provide privacy. After the interview, we will ask participants whether they feel comfortable with their name being featured in our paper (first, or first and last). If they feel comfortable, we will ask them to sign another consent form, specific to using their name in our paper. If they do not feel comfortable, we will use another name in our

paper, and note that their name has been changed in order to keep them anonymous. This system gives participants an option to keep their interview answers anonymous.

Methods: Survey

Our group's thematic curiosity centers around understanding who student activists are and what motivates them. We can broadly divide the expected responses into two genres: numerical and ethnographic. An ethnographic response is a long-form answer that delves deep into the complexities of an individual's experiences, identities, axioms, or beliefs. In short, ethnographic responses contain a complex string of stories that we must tie together to compose an overarching narrative. Thus, the ethnographic, long form interview style is best suited to answer the question: what motivates student activists? However, while formal interviews may help gather long-form, in-depth answers from respondents, they are inefficient to scale and daunting to analyze when the valid range of responses is categorical. We are aware that our identities could have influenced how we worded certain demographic questions on the survey.

Surveys are easy to create, especially with online software like Google forms, and accessible for respondents to answer because they can be filled out independent of the time of day and location of the applicant. A survey can also stretch to more people easily; that is, there is little to no marginal cost of interviewing an additional person. We interpret the question "Who are student activists?" through the lens of statistical prediction, a technique that is well suited to analyse our questions given data from a survey. The survey contains sixteen questions, all detailed in the appendix. Note that three questions (race, gender, and name of activist organization) are open-ended in that they have an 'Other' option to manually enter an answer whereas the remaining questions have predefined categories.

Survey Questions

There are many ways to understand who student activists are. For instance, we could observe the actions of student activists and conclude that student activists differ from non-activists in their proclivity to do sit-downs, protests, strikes, etc. Another approach is to understand how student activists respond to an intervention (increasing wages, mandating safe spaces) and compare the response to that of a group of non-activists.

We, however, interpret the question “Who are student activists?” as wanting to understand the attributes and features of a student that best predict whether or not she is an activist. An *activist*, for the purposes of this study, is defined as someone who self-identifies as being involved in one or more activist organizations on campus. The survey questions were designed to collect features about students at Harvard College so that a well-fit statistical model is able to predict whether or not a student is an activist on campus. Care was taken when designing the survey questions to ascertain that most questions have categorical answers and no one collected feature is deterministically predictive of the outcome (else the problem would be trivial). More qualitatively, the survey questions are designed to indirectly reveal subtle differences between student activists and nonactivists. For instance, one of the survey questions asks whether the student is vegan/vegetarian. Even though most students said no to being vegan/vegetarian, we find that if a user is vegan/vegetarian it greatly increases her chances of being an activist. The survey was made using Google Forms, and can be found [here](#).

Data sources

A good survey should be representative of the student population so we sent it out on multiple house lists and got 83 responses. The response rates per house did not matter because we wished to sample from the Harvard undergraduate population. However, the survey offered no direct incentives for completion, so we may have incurred a small selection bias. Nevertheless, the following graphs in Figure 1 depict activist proclivity, gender, race/ethnicity, class year, and class division of our survey sample. On first pass, the survey contained few activists (less than 10% of the group size) so we shared it with more activists groups to better represent the population under interest.

Inference Methods

The survey collected responses from 83 students but each feature contained categorical values and the open-ended features remained sparse. For instance, only one applicant wrote that they are Asian and Hispanic. To avoid overfitting, the categories were mapped onto three open-ended categories as follows (Appendix VIII):

1. Race/Ethnicity: White, Asian, and the remaining inputs mapped to Other.

2. Gender: Male, Female, and the remaining inputs mapped to Other.
3. Activist: Yes, if listed at least one organization else No.

Next, the dataset was randomized and split 75:25 into a training and test set. It is always an art to design the perfect model/architecture but a rule of thumb is to use a less complex model, where complexity is defined by the number of parameters in the model. We use a logistic regression with an L2 and L1 loss and note that more complex models such as random forests and gradient boosted learning did indeed overfit and had lower generalizability scores on the test set. There are three advantages to using logistic regression for the data collected. First, logistic regression implies a linear separation among features, and this parametric assumption makes the model more amenable to criticism and inspection. Logistic regression can also be used with L1 and L2 penalties, methods that can be interpreted as putting laplace and gaussian priors on weights, respectively. These penalties prevent overfitting on small datasets such as ours. Finally, logistic regression offers highly interpretable results. Unlike complex deep learning methods that act as black-boxes, logistic regression admits a clear understanding of important features and their direction of prediction. For instance, studying Science is negatively correlated with being an activist, and it happens to be the most important negative predictor of not being an activist. The dataset was fit to a logistic regression model using the Python package Scikit-Learn.

Interview Results

Unified Pathways & Perceived Obstacles

In our interviews, we asked interviewees how they became involved in the organization they were a part of and whether they had been involved in activism in high school (these were separate questions). We found that all of our interviewees in SLAM were introduced to the organization through either participation in the First-Year Urban Program (FUP), or their friends who had participated in FUP. FUP is a social justice pre-orientation program for first-year students. Each night of FUP, leaders involved in different activism organizations would speak about their organization to FUP participants. Additionally, FUP students attended a Workers Panel, where different workers at Harvard, such as dining hall and custodial staff, spoke to students about the struggles they've faced. While some SLAM interviewees had done service or

local political activism before attending Harvard, none had participated specifically in labor activism previously.

This was different than Divest Harvard interviewees, who all had participated in environmental activism in some form before college. Some had been involved in more climate-oriented campaigns before, whereas others had experience organizing individual consumer choice campaigns. While people joined Divest for a number of reasons—some interviewees revitalized the movement in fall 2018, others were drawn in by peers, etc.,—they all had some baseline experience not only in activism, but in environmental activism in middle or high school. One interviewee in Divest even had trouble really distilling his motivations to be involved in climate justice activism since it had been a given for him for such a long time. Although the pathways to Divest and SLAM are different, it's interesting that each seems to have a distinct pathway to accessing the organization. While it can't be assumed that our interviewees have experiences that are representative of the entire organization's members, it's still significant that there seemed to be such well-established points of entry.

In addition to understanding how our interviewees joined the organizations and movements, we were interested in hearing what they perceived as obstacles other students might face in joining their organization or activism more broadly. By comparing the pathways to entry and the perceived obstacles to entry, we hope to convey how these organizations appear within the Harvard community. Both Divest and SLAM interviewees cited time as being a factor to deter people from being involved in their organizations. The people we interviewed were all active organizers in their movements and acknowledged how time-consuming organizing can be. Connor¹, a member of Divest, said, "I think people just are busy and have so many other priorities and don't necessarily see why divestment is, you know, measurably important or believe that they can make a difference." Many who referenced time as an obstacle seemed to contextualize their answer with the assumption that Harvard students are generally busy and have to manage several other priorities.

¹All names of interviewees were changed in our paper for confidentiality purposes. For a list of names of interviewees from each student organization, please reference Appendix VIII.

We found that some interviewees thought that the risks and potential consequences for participating in activism deterred people from participating. Amy from Divest noted that “not everyone can take the same risks and actions, which is something that we fundamentally recognize.” Taking action against the university that one’s attending is something that not everyone feels comfortable doing. Annabelle from SLAM similarly noted that she found the organization “very welcoming,” but “it’s just like the intimidation of like, a picket, a walk out. All of those words are very charged. And so I think that some people are intimidated by that aspect of it.” There seems to be not only risks associated, but also stigma associated with activism that might prevent people from feeling comfortable participating.

Another concern for interviewees was whether the student body had an understanding of what their organizations and movements are. This is an interesting barrier because these groups tend to have a decent amount of visibility on campus (and beyond) through media. For SLAM, members felt that there might be a misunderstanding of what their organization does. One interviewee, Devi, said that “Some folks might feel maybe a little confused by what we do. Because labor organizing is not something that people do in high school generally.” Although students might know that SLAM exists and is active, it seems like members have noticed that their peers don’t fully understand what their organization and movement is.

While Divest members didn’t note thinking that students had a misunderstanding of what their organization does, they felt that people might not understand what the implications of divestment actually are. Emma said that “I think that divestment is not an intuitive cause to get behind. I don’t think that the idea of ending investment in the fossil industry isn’t immediately catalyzing one. And I don’t think it’s immediately clear its connection to social justice either, which I think is an obstacle.” Others Divest members noted that students might feel apathetic towards the cause because they don’t feel connected to it.

Common Motivations: Moral Obligation & Efficacy

Students in both Fossil Fuel Divest and the Student Labor Action Movement felt that Harvard as an institution has a moral obligation to advance each cause, whether through divestment or improving worker rights. They recognized that as one of the wealthiest institutions in the world, Harvard had a unique power. They could use that power in getting national media

attention for protests and actions. Connor, a student in Divest spoke to this motivation, “I realized that...activism here on campus would be picked up by national media or people which would make it out to be really important...the school's embedded in so much power and connection and privilege.” Noah, a student in SLAM echoed Connor’s statements, “being at a university like Harvard, where the news follows what's going on here and follows the big events and the big protests and everything. I think it's more important to be involved and to make sure that we're doing important work because it has an impact beyond this campus.” Students were aware that Harvard is a powerful institution and as such, it could garner significant media attention, which would make an impact beyond this campus.

Student activists also felt a personal moral obligation to organize for each issue. As students at Harvard College, they had access to power and privilege that they were benefiting from and felt a responsibility to use it to advance their respective causes. Connor of Divest also maintained that he was “uncomfortable with just benefiting from the institution without critically looking at how is Harvard making the world a worse place and how am I complicit in that.” Another member of SLAM, Annabelle asserted that she was motivated how she is “coming from this place of incredible privilege” because “we get to go to Harvard, we get to be a small class every single year that..has so much prestige.” This concept of responsibility to prevent them from being complicit in the institution’s action reflected a personal moral obligation for their involvement.

Members of SLAM mentioned a unique moral obligation of the labor movement of ensuring human dignity. Unlike Divest, the labor movement is focused on the direct impact of policies on people (workers) and not the impact on the environment, which in turn impacts people. For this reason, students in SLAM emphasized their responsibility to improve the lives of individuals. John, a member of SLAM told us that “It's a basic issue of human dignity...There are people who are doing the work that makes the gears turn, but they themselves are still being exploited by the larger institutions that they are employed by.” Devi also echoed John’s sentiments, but emphasized her desire for others to be free. She said of her motivations, “But the thing that motivates me is that in an ideal world, people only do the things that they want to be doing. They have control over themselves, their bodies, their work.” The importance of helping

individuals who are struggling against larger institutions such as Harvard, was a unique motivation to SLAM.

The efficacy of each cause was also a primary motivation of students in both SLAM and Divest. All of the interviewees in SLAM mentioned the successful 2016 HUDS strike in which dining hall workers went on strike for three weeks and won a contract, with the help of students from SLAM. They were confident in the success of their current campaign to help the Graduate Students Union win a contract because they had succeeded in the past. José told us that “there are definitely tangible impacts. Contracts like the fact that dining workers get the benefits they do, has been a result of advocating, both on the student part and the worker part.” SLAM’s long history on this campus gave them reference points for their current movements and optimism that they would succeed. In contrast students in Divest, a relatively new organization on campus did not have historical successes to refer to. Their motivation of the efficacy of their movement came from a deeply held belief that divestment is “practical, reasonable and solvable” and thus “one of the most productive ways, for students like me, to contribute to the fight against climate change ” as Taylor, a Divest member, stated.

Student Activist Perceptions of the Harvard Administration

Something that initially motivated us to study Divest and SLAM was the fact that both directly interact with and demand change of Harvard’s administration. While there were some broad themes across the groups—feeling that the administration is dismissive of their actions, misaligned priorities between students and administration—it seemed like the perception of the administration differs between the two groups. This could be due to the fact that Divest and SLAM are targeting and interacting with different administrators. One thing is clear though—members of both organizations feel like they’re being recognized, but not listened to by the administration. The resulting lack of trust in the administration is interesting to note that in contrast to the theme of efficacy we discussed earlier—even though working with administrators seems to be ineffective, members of both groups believe that they have the ability to reach their goals.

For SLAM, this means that they’re relying not on direct interactions with the administration to enact change, but on creating enough outside, public pressure to push towards

their goals. John said that “It feels like outside pressure is the actual way to make change. I mean, it's what the union is doing right now.” In comparison to Divest, SLAM has had a longer history at Harvard and previous successes to inform its strategies. In relation to the 2016 HUDS strike, John says that “it did not get accomplished by sitting down politely with administrators and not going on strike. And it wasn't accomplished by saying, ‘please give us better benefits.’ It was accomplished by walking off the job and saying we won't come back until you give us what we want.” John’s attitude towards the administration reflects the broader sentiment among SLAM members. Since previous attempts of “politely” interacting with administrators haven’t been effective, they’ve relied on creating “outside pressure” to make change. Other members of SLAM said they feel like the administration will only respond if under “legitimate pressure” or “after all the organizing happens.” Thus, SLAM is skeptical of direct discussion with the administration as an effective way to achieve their goals.

While members of Divest seemed equally skeptical of the administration’s willingness to change, unlike SLAM they are still engaging with administrators (President Bacow and Harvard Corporation members) through formalized meetings. Despite having these meetings, Divest members seem to also point to needing to build enough public pressure to achieve their goals. Amy from Divest says:

I think that they're not going to be responsive until we've gotten significant enough public pressure, because ultimately, at the end of the day, this really is not about reasoned dialogue. The arguments for and against divestment have been on the table since at least 2012.

It’s interesting that Amy notes that reasoned dialogue isn’t what will get Harvard to divest, but Divest members continue to meet with the administration to have conversations about it. Another Divest member Chris describes a meeting from earlier in the semester with President Bacow:

I wasn't at the meeting, but apparently they were treated pretty dismissively by the administration. One of the quotes was, ‘don't worry, we know how important you think this is,’ which is just so condescending. It seems pretty clear that they're not willing to consider divestment. I mean, even after the meeting, it seems like there's not a lot of room for debate.

It seems like there are a few reasons why Divest might be using a different strategy than SLAM in convincing the administration to change. One might be that they lack the historical successes to inform their current strategy. While they have divestment from South Africa in protest of Apartheid and other elite institutions who have already divested to learn from, perhaps they think that the situation is unique such that former strategies that didn't work might have different effects now. For instance, one interviewee said that the transition from President Faust to President Bacow was something that Divest thought intentionally about. Unlike President Faust, President Bacow has been willing to meet with Divest members. This development gave Divest the opportunity to convince President Bacow directly and they hoped it signaled that he might be more willing to support divestment.

Organization-Specific Themes

Another theme that emerged in the interviews of members of the Student Labor Action Movement was discomfort with the use of the term “activist” to describe themselves. Based on literature we found, we felt that it was appropriate to refer to members of SLAM and Divest as student activists. SLAM members, however, drew a distinction between an activist and an organizer, the latter which they felt was more encompassing of who they are. Devi asserted that, “there's a distinction between an activist and organizer...An activist is someone who shows up most of the time, but an organizer is someone who is dedicated to building relationships with communities in order to further a theory of change.” This idea of the necessity building community and coalitions was reflected in many other SLAM interviews. Another SLAM member, John also spoke to that distinction. He told us that, “the organizing component that occurs there is building community and that network which I don't think activism necessarily can do.” While we had not taken the idea of building community in consideration when defining an activist, but rather inclination to participate in social change, that was very important to our interviewees from SLAM.

One of the themes that emerged as a motivation for members of Divest was the intersectional nature of the issue of climate change and specifically the divestment movement. While SLAM members emphasized the direct impact they have on workers' lives, Divest pointed to how the divestment movement, part of a broader idea of climate justice, is connected to people

through its connections to many other social justice issues. Emma said that “I would not consider myself an environmental activist, I would consider myself a justice activist.” When asked about whether they were interested or involved in other social movements, several Divest interviewees pointed to how tackling climate justice meant being able to be connected to other social movements. Tyler emphasized that “there’s no such thing as a single issue movement” when talking about his work in Divest. Some interviewees felt the interconnectedness of the climate justice movement directly motivated their involvement. Some also felt like the intersectional aspect of the climate justice movement is what prompts their moral obligation to be involved in activism. For instance, Amy states:

I really think that there is no issue that is more important than climate justice. It's just fundamentally the intersection of every inequality in every injustice that we see in our society—socioeconomic, political, racial—every sense of the word of injustice. And so I think that everyone has a real responsibility not only towards our planet but towards the communities that it sustains, both human and non human, to get involved in this issue.

IC uses this intersection to assert why not only she’s motivated to work on climate justice, but why *everyone* should be motivated to do so. It seems that the intersectional nature of climate justice may drive their personal moral obligation to work towards it. While this approach to climate justice, and therefore divestment, is perhaps a more inclusive approach, it also has the potential to be a divestment-centric one. Thus, using fossil fuel divestment as the link between all social justice movements can be a complicated strategy.

Survey Results

Results

After performing one-hot-encoding, a technique which adapts count data for classification, the resulting data set was used to train a logistic regression model with an L2 penalty and the results are reproduced below. The appendix contains more information about features found through the more restrictive L1 penalty. Each list below corresponds to a survey question and its inferred importance. High positive coefficients correlate with being an activist and low negative coefficients correlate with being a non-activist (Appendix IX).

Finally, the goodness of fit was measured using the standard classification metrics:

1. Mean accuracy on train set: 98.27%
2. Mean accuracy on test set: 92%
3. Precision: 0.85
4. Recall: 0.85
5. AUC of ROC: 0.91
6. F1 score: 0.86

An interesting exposition would be to generate a human who embodies features such that our logistic regression would predict whether or not they are activist with a very high probability.

Simply reading off the coefficients, here are the top 5 features of the most activist student:

1. Studies Social Science
2. Has family income in the range \$200k to \$500k
3. Shares articles on social media platforms very often
4. Leans liberal
5. Is vegetarian/vegan

Similarly, here are the top 5 features of the least activist student:

1. Studies Science
2. Shares articles on social media platforms infrequently
3. Believes the Harvard administration often listens to student demands
4. Leans slightly conservative
5. Is very religious

The goal of the survey was to understand who student activists are at Harvard College. Using the framework of statistical prediction, the analysis was able to infer with high accuracy whether or not a student is an activist on campus. In turn, the classifier learned an interpretable representation of important features that revealed nuanced differences between activists and nonactivists. We underscore that our research results are faithful to Harvard College students but may not generalize to other institutions of higher learning. However, our analysis does validate the prior consensus that student activists tend to come from higher income families. Our results show that having a family income of \$200k to \$500k is more indicative of being an activist than

having a family income of \$100k to \$200k or \$50k to \$100k. Moreover, our results affirm previous research [1] that majoring in Social Sciences is correlated with being an activist whereas majoring in Science is highly indicative of not being a non-activist. A striking result from the research is that non-activists post sparingly on social media, whereas activists post frequently. This bias in viewing activist agenda might obscure the fact that there are fewer activists than people might think, and that the activist community is small but vocal. The analysis also suggests that identifying as female is more indicative of being a non-activist than identifying as male, although these coefficients have smaller values so may be noisy. Overall, non-activists are more likely to believe that the administration listens to student needs and demands, and their lack of desire to participate in student activist groups on campus may be symptomatic of this belief. We thus conclude that student activists differ from non-activists in their tastes, beliefs, identities, and socio-economic status.

Limitations

The analysis was conducted on a small sample of Harvard College students. Even though the models were implemented to ensure no overfitting and allow for interpretability, some of the features with low coefficients may be ordered by noise and not signal. Moreover, sampling biases (small sample size with respect to the true population) did not allow us to conclude that, for instance, identifying as Black is indicative to activism. Overall, the research results remain conclusive although a larger sample size will only help reduce noise and make the results more robust.

Conclusion

Because of its historical impact and current presence at Harvard and in other higher education institutions, analyzing student activism is useful in understanding student engagement with the university and how broader social movements exist in the higher education environment. While our research project was not designed with the intention of advising SLAM and Divest, our finding of unified pathways prompts us to think about how these groups might be more inclusive. We have hypothesized some methods of expanding recruitment. For the Student Labor Action Movement, they need to inform the student body of what their mission is and

historical successes. They can do this through posters or an email campaign with SLAM history of the living wage campaign and the 2016 HUDS strike.

A potential barrier to joining Fossil Fuel Divest is not having environmental activism experience. Since involvement in activism in high school might be tied to the resources of the high school, and therefore socioeconomic status, it's possible that Divest is lacking diversity in its population of organizers. Many pointed to the strong community as a strength, however, it might also play a role in keeping the organization exclusive to those with environmental justice background. Their recent action at Harvard-Yale has helped publicize the organization, and they could capitalize on that event, as well as future large scale events, to encourage less experienced students to join the organization.

More generally, this project has emphasized why different individuals are more attracted to social justice, with more affluent students being overrepresented in activist groups. In order to make activism more inclusive perhaps there should be more unified recruiting. At Harvard, this can look like a form with centralized list of activist groups and their missions, which would allow students to understand what groups exist and indicate interest. One additional, higher-level recommendation is that social justice and civic engagement should be incorporated into high school curriculums to expose students at a younger age.

The survey results confirm that the Harvard student activist population seems relatively representative of the broader student activist population. However, it seems like the student activist population is not representative of the communities they advocate for, or even the broader Harvard population. While we have some leads to reasons that explain this, we continue to ask: why do these discrepancies exist? While we asked Divest and SLAM members of the obstacles they see to joining their organizations, we might want to ask the broader community what barriers they face. Do students fear risks whether retaliation by the university or the government? Is there an emotional toll that may deter students from involvement? While we were able to scratch the surface of these questions, further research needs to be done to fully understand what draws people of certain identities towards activism. While we are not sure whether it is a problem that activist organizations are not representative of the Harvard

undergraduate population, we want to acknowledge this and hope that future work is done to understand its implications on our community and broader trends in student activism.

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Appendix I: Interview Questions for Students in Fossil Fuel Divest Harvard

Informational Questions

1. What is the history of the divestment movement at Harvard? What does it look like in its current state?
 - a. When did the divestment movement start at Harvard? How did it originate?
 - b. What are some of the key events, or significant moments of the movement?
 - c. Who have been key players in the movement?
 - d. How many active members do you have currently?
 - e. Is Divest Harvard connected to groups, such as similar student groups or larger national organizations, outside of Harvard? If so, which groups and what do those collaborations look like?
2. How did Divest Harvard form? Can you describe the organization's structure?
 - a. How is it related to Harvard Undergraduates for Environmental Justice?
 - b. Who is in leadership? What does the leadership hierarchy look like?
 - c. Who are the members of Divest Harvard? Is it only comprised of undergraduates? How is it related to divestment movements at other schools within the University?
3. What is the mission of Divest Harvard? What are its goals?
4. What does Divest Harvard's work look like?
 - a. What are the events that Divest Harvard holds?
 - b. What does week-to-week work look like in Divest? Does most of the work go towards planning these events?

Main Questions

5. How did you get involved in the divest movement at Harvard? How long have you been involved?
6. What motivates your involvement in divest?
7. Were you involved in student activism in high school? If so, how did you get involved?
 - a. What movement were you involved in? Were you involved in something environmentally-related?
8. Are you currently involved in, or interested in other social movements?
9. Who, in your mind, are the administrators that Divest Harvard is trying to engage with?
 - a. Can you describe how the administration responds to your activism?
 - b. Do you feel that the administration is responsive and listening to you? Why or why not?
 - c. Can you tell me about the last time you engaged or spoke with an administrator? What happened?
10. What obstacles do you think the Harvard administration faces when trying to understand the demands of student activists?

11. What obstacles do you think students might face in joining the divestment movement?

Appendix II. Interview Questions for Students in SLAM

Informational Questions

12. What is the history of the student labor movement at Harvard? What does it look like in its current state?
- When did the student labor movement start at Harvard? How did it originate?
 - What are some of the key events, or significant moments of the movement?
 - Who have been key players in the movement?
 - How many active members do you have currently?
 - Is SLAM connected to groups, such as similar student groups or larger national organizations, outside of Harvard? If so, which groups and what do those relationships look like?
13. How did SLAM form? Can you describe the organization's structure?
- Who is in leadership? What does the leadership hierarchy look like?
 - Who are the members of SLAM? Is it only comprised of undergraduates? How is it related to student labor movements at other schools within the University?
14. What is the mission of SLAM? What are its goals?
15. What does SLAM's work look like?
- What are the events that SLAM holds?
 - What does week-to-week work look like in SLAM? Does most of the work go towards planning these events?

Main Questions

- How did you get involved in the student labor movement at Harvard?
- What motivates your involvement in this movement?
- Were you involved in student activism in high school? If so, how did you get involved?
 - What movement were you involved in? Were you involved in something labor-related?
- Are you currently involved in, or interested in other social movements?
- Who, in your mind, are the administrators that SLAM is trying to engage with?
 - Can you describe how the administration responds to your activism?
 - Do you feel that the administration is responsive and listening to you? Why or why not?
 - Can you tell me about the last time you engaged or spoke with an administrator? What happened?
- What obstacles do you think the Harvard administration faces when trying to understand the demands of student activists?

7. What obstacles do you think students might face in joining the student labor movement?

Appendix III: Survey Questions

1. The Harvard administration listens to student demands
 - a. 1-5 scale; Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree
2. The Harvard administration values student voice
 - a. 1-5 scale; Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree
3. How often do you share/post articles on social media platforms?
 - a. 1-5 scale; Almost Never to Very Frequently
4. Did you participate in student activism before you came to college?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. Are you involved in student activist organizations on campus? If yes, write in the organization you're involved in.
6. How would you best describe your political views?
 - a. 1-5 scale; Liberal to Conservative
7. I wish to work for a non-profit after graduation
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Maybe
8. I am vegetarian/vegan
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
9. Do you work part time on campus?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
10. What year are you in?
 - a. Freshman
 - b. Sophomore
 - c. Junior
 - d. Senior
11. What is your academic division?
 - a. Arts and Humanities
 - b. Science
 - c. Social Science
 - d. SEAS
12. I am religious
 - a. 1-5 scale; Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

13. Please indicate your gender:

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. Non-binary

14. Please indicate your family income:

- a. < \$50k
- b. \$50k to \$100k
- c. \$100k to \$200k
- d. \$200k to \$500k
- e. > \$500k

15. Please indicate your race/ethnicity:

- a. White
- b. Asian
- c. Hispanic
- d. Black
- e. Native-American