

Sociology 1130: Higher Education Policy and Service at Harvard and Beyond: Action

Research Project

Coming Back to Harvard: How Leave of Absence Policies Affect Student Success

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How do students experience taking a leave of absence from Harvard University, and then reintegrating back into university life? To gain insight into this question, a survey of Harvard students who had taken a leave of absence was completed by 34 respondents. Survey results showed that students received a wide range of information on Harvard's policies during the process of taking a leave of absence, indicating that more information should be provided to students to supplement Harvard's existing publications. In addition to survey responses, a comparative analysis of the policies and information provided by Harvard University and Princeton University was conducted to formalize a list of recommendations for improvement. Recommendations include a revisit of the work requirement for students who take a medical leave of absence and the improvement of the online materials presented to students searching for information on the Leave of Absence policies.

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code. I received editing assistance from my writing tutor, Graciela Briceno.

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Executive Summary

The majority of higher education institutions have specific policies for when students need or want to take time off. Students can take a Leave of Absence for medical, professional or personal reasons. This study compares Harvard University's policies to those of other institutions, and through a survey analysis and interview, tries to answer the following research question: how do Harvard students experience reintegration from a leave of absence?

Research results indicated that the information provided to students during the leave of absence process is not always complete or uniform. Additionally, some students found that the work requirement hindered their reintegration. Based on these findings, the following recommendations are suggested to improve the Leave of Absence experience at Harvard:

1. Develop a website dedicated to Leave of Absences, including Frequently Asked Questions section and links to additional student support systems. Harvard could use Princeton's Leave of Absence website as a template/model.
2. Reexamine the work requirement policy, especially reasons for its implementation, since data shows it proves beneficial for some students, but detrimental to others.
3. Have Faculty Deans reach out to students returning to campus, to improve reintegration into House Life.
4. Further study existing Leave of Absence policies and the impacts of these policies, by directly surveying and interviewing students who have taken time off.

Introduction

The typical experience of students at Harvard University is to complete their coursework in four years. Yet there are times when circumstances arise – whether those be professional, personal, or medical – in which it is in a student’s best interest to take a hiatus from their education. In fact, 1 in 20 Harvard students take a leave of absence every year and only 86% graduate in four years (Schugart 2017). The time off from attending college is meant to allow students the opportunity to continue their education when they are better suited to do so. Harvard and many other higher education institutions encourage students to take time off if they believe it could be beneficial, and have set policies in place for taking a leave of absence.

As an example, due to medical reasons, it was in my best interest to take a leave of absence from my education during my junior year. The challenges I faced in both taking time off and reintegrating into Harvard life made me interested in researching how other students who had taken time off experienced this process. This study and subsequent discussion are timely, given that, “Harvard currently faces a complaint filed with the United States Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, alleging that the College’s 2018 decision to place former student Ty Pelton-Byce ’20 on a mandatory leave of absence constituted disability-based discrimination” (Avi-Yonah, 2019).

My primary research interest is the exploration of how students at Harvard University experience the process of taking a leave of absence and then reintegrating back into university life. The specific research questions for this project are:

- How does Harvard facilitate the process of reintegration for students who have taken time off due to medical, professional, and/or other reasons?

- What are the discrepancies between official Harvard policies and how faculty and administrators respond to such leave and reintegration requests?
- How do Harvard's policies and support systems compare to that of other private higher education institutions (specifically, Princeton University)?
- How are students who are reintegrating to Harvard life *experiencing* the process?

To determine whether Harvard's course of action regarding return from time off is optimal for students, a literature review was conducted of studies that analyzed higher education leave of absence policies, and the benefits and detriments that such policies cause students. A comparative analysis of Harvard's leave of absence policies and those of Princeton University was also conducted. Finally, original research was conducted in the form of a survey and interviews of Harvard students who had taken time off.

There are various reasons for why students decide to take time off from Harvard. These include financial (such as needing to work for a year in order to save money for tuition and college costs), family leave (such as needing to take care of sick family member or provide for younger siblings), medical leave (such as treatment for a chronic health condition or mental health issues), pregnancy and parenting, and career opportunities (Schugart 2017). Even though taking time off is precedented, an article by Annie Schugart and Emma Scornavacchi, published in the *Crimson* in 2017, stated that "Students like Daurio have also found difficulty in the process of returning. Conditions of leave are determined on an individual basis, so students who choose to explicitly disclose their reasons for taking time off to the University may face special conditions or additional hurdles" (Schugart 2017).

Another issue is that the amount of information that students choose to disclose to the administration directly impacts how their return is either facilitated or hindered. For example, if a

student reveals medical or mental health reasons for taking time off, she is required to petition the University prior to returning. On the other hand, students who request time off without an explicit reason merely have to email their faculty dean expressing willingness to return. This policy encourages a level of distrust between administration and students, and encourages students to choose secrecy over honesty, which ultimately impacts their reintegration. When a student attends an institution of higher education, the University is meant to serve in the student's best interests. However, the way that the policy currently stands, the University inadvertently encourages students to keep information hidden, making it difficult for the University to act in the students best interest.

The findings from my research could prove beneficial for Harvard University's Administrative Board and the Dean of Student Life. If the data and recommendations layed out in this paper are followed, in particular, revisiting the existing leave of absence policies and providing additional information online, this research could also prove beneficial for future Harvard University students who are considering taking time off.

Literature Review

Accounts of personal experiences from students who have taken a leave of absence during their time at university are readily available, including online blogs, news sources, and mental health magazines. For example, a 2017 Harvard Crimson article documented how one student chose to take a medical leave of absence rather than fail her courses, and how other students experienced little contact from administration during their leave (Schugart 2017).

A primary source for this research is a study conducted by Miriam Heyman (2018), a developmental psychologist who directs the Disability Inclusion Program at the Ruderman Foundation. The study scores eight Ivy League schools' leave of absence policies on 15

indicators that demonstrate sufficient “institutional support for students with mental health disabilities” (Heyman 2018). The indicators include topics from transparency to language surrounding accommodations. This source provides a comprehensive, objective, and methodological review of the leave of absence policies that inform my research. The following are key findings from the Ruderman White Paper:

- Four of the Ivy League schools’ policies (including Harvard) **cite “community disruption”** as reason to invoke an involuntary leave of absence.
- Four of the Ivy League schools’ policies state that students are **prohibited from visiting campus** while they are on leave.
- Four of the Ivy League schools **do not state that students are entitled to reasonable accommodations** that could mitigate the need for a leave of absence. This goes against the legal requirement that students with disabilities are entitled to reasonable accommodations in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- Five of the Ivy League schools have a **minimum length of time for leave of absence**

With regards to this last finding, Heymen (2018) writes:

“The trajectory of mental illness and treatment varies from one person to the next, and the student should be allowed to return whenever he or she is ready. If there is a minimum length for leaves of absence in general (including leaves not pertaining to mental health), the policy should include a statement noting that students with disabilities are entitled to modification of the time restriction— this modification is an example of a reasonable accommodation, under the Americans with Disabilities Act” (p. 7).

Overall, this investigation of the leave of absence policies for eight Ivy League schools finds that “components of the policies are ambiguous at worst and discriminatory at best” (p. 5).

Another related paper, by Philip Meilman (2016), deconstructs Georgetown University’s 2011 revision of its medical leave of absence policies. Georgetown’s policies were revised because of parental complaints that “the policy unfairly imposed a burden on the students’

attempt to return” (p. 54). The changes were made to confirm with the most up-to-date “standards and interpretations of disability law” as it pertains to university students. Before finalization, the new policy was reviewed and approved by the United States Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. Meilman’s research highlights key tenets of the new policy, including getting rid of the minimum length of time that students could take off (six months). This change is in accordance with Heyman’s findings that there should not be a minimum length for a leave of absence. It should be noted that Harvard University does not have a minimum length of time requirement. The other key change in Georgetown’s policy was:

“Our new policy no longer recommends only employment or volunteer work or coursework elsewhere, and instead asks generally that the student engage in some kind of productive activity during the course of the leave; other options include community service, an internship, preparation for elite athletic competition, and other daily or near-daily activities. We also provide a rationale for making this request in our leave letters; previously we did not state a rationale” (p. 60).

The change to get rid of the work requirement/recommendation is also in accordance with Heyman’s findings that students taking a medical leave of absence should not be forced or enticed to work before returning. Eliminating this requirement provides greater flexibility to students who were seeking medical treatment. Harvard’s existing policy requires students who take a medical leave of absence to work for six months before they can petition to return. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) also requested that Georgetown’s policy give more weight to medical providers’ opinion in determining when a student could return. Meilman describes, “although we had always relied, in part, upon an outside provider’s report of a student’s readiness to return, OCR has asked us to give greater weight to the provider’s opinion, even though we believe the outside provider may not fully grasp the issues manifested by the student while on campus” (p. 62).

Meilman states that minimal research has been done on voluntary medical leaves of absences, and this literature review found that to be true for all forms of leaves of absence. In searching various academic databases, little was found on this topic. Although significant literature does not exist on the impact of leaves of absence, vast research has been conducted on methods for improving student success and completion rates at higher education institutions, specifically focused on institutional support. One such paper is Zepke and Leach (2010), which synthesizes 93 studies “to develop a conceptual organizer for student engagement” (p. 167). A key finding is that nontraditional students, which in the case of Harvard includes students who do not complete college in a four-year time span, often feel uncomfortable and marginalized (Zepke and Leach, 2010). It shouldn’t be left to students to seek a sense of belonging, but instead, institutions should make “students feel accepted and affirmed and that they belong” (p. 172).

Methods

A comparative textual analysis was conducted of the leave and reintegration policies at Harvard University and Princeton University. Princeton was selected as a comparison because it is a similar, elite, private institution with a highly regarded and rigorous undergraduate program. A key difference between the two schools is that Princeton has few graduate schools and is therefore more focused on its undergraduate community. The comparative analysis included all of the published policies found on the websites of the two schools, and focused on the similarities and differences between the two policies. Specifically, each policy was analyzed for word choice and the quantity and quality of information provided to students.

Using findings from the comparative analysis of policies, especially the differences, a survey was designed on Qualtrics and administered to Harvard University students who had taken a leave of absence. The purpose of this survey was to gain insights on students’ experience

with the leave of absence policies. First, snowball sampling was attempted, starting with emails to small group of students who had knowingly taken time off, as well as Sociology 1130 classmates. Six responses were received from this method. To increase the number of responses, messages were sent to Kirkland House, Quincy House, and Mather House listservs. The survey was distributed and open to collect data from April 1st, 2019 to May 1st, 2019.

From these methods, a total of 34 responses were collected. Six of these responses were incomplete, with the student answering none of the questions or only the first two questions. The survey was structured to begin with questions on basic information regarding the student's house affiliation and gender, as well as the length of and reason for the student's leave of absence. Next, the survey asked respondents about their decision to leave Harvard and what information was taken into account when leaving, such as whether the student read Harvard's leave of absence policy. The survey also asked about students' experiences during their time off and finally, about reintegration, such as participation in house life and extracurricular activities.

Responses for multiple choice questions were tabulated and calculated to find an average, and responses to open-response questions were analyzed for word choice and tagged as either positive, neutral, or negative.

The surveys provided respondents with an option to be interviewed. Of all respondents, three indicated an interest in being interviewed. Of those three, only one interview was scheduled due to time constraints. The interview was conducted on April 27th and lasted approximately thirty minutes. The interview was conversational, focusing on the student's experience reintegrating to Harvard and what could be improved of the entire process, if anything.

One limitation of this study was that it did not survey students at Princeton University, to serve as a comparison to the survey results of Harvard University students. Another limitation

was scheduling for interviews. Although the goal was to conduct three to five student interviews, and three survey respondents indicated a willingness to be interviewed, only one was completed due to scheduling issues around the end of the semester. Ideally, this survey would have been sent to all Harvard University students who have taken a leave of absence, both this year and in the past few years. Unfortunately, there is no existing to identify and contact these students. To avoid bias, survey questions were reviewed prior to the survey's publication to ensure that my positionality was not reflected in the survey questions.

Findings: Comparative Analysis of Policies

The first part of this research is a comparative textual analysis of the leave of absence and reintegration policies for Harvard University and Princeton University. All of Harvard University's published information regarding leaves of absence can be found in the Harvard College Handbook for Students, 2018-2019. This handbook states the following:

“Students who wish to interrupt their studies at any time before graduation must petition the Administrative Board for a leave of absence. To petition the Board, the student and the student's Resident Dean work together to determine what pertinent information to present to the Board with the petition, and then the Resident Dean brings the petition to the Board on the student's behalf. With respect to a voluntary leave of absence for medical reasons, the Dean of the College may consult with Harvard University Health Services. Students whose previous academic and disciplinary record is satisfactory and who have petitioned by the seventh Monday of the term will normally be granted a ‘leave of absence’” (p. 1).

Beyond this published statement, there is no additional information readily accessible to students. When students decide to take a leave of absence, they are provided information regarding the conditions of their leave from their resident dean.

The published policies from Princeton University can be found in Princeton's Office of the Dean of College [website](#) under the advising heading. Included in this policy is a link to a website specifically dedicated to taking a leave of absence (timeaway.princeton.edu) that

provides additional information. On the website Princeton has dedicated for students' there are six categories of information for students: "considering a leave," "taking a leave," "on leave," "planning your return," "welcome back," and "FAQs." Each of these is further broken down to address topics students may have questions regarding. This website includes the stated policy, as well as considerations for why to take a leave of absence, frequently asked questions, how to "stay connected," and transfer credits. The official Princeton University guidelines state:

"A student may decide to take a leave of absence from their studies at Princeton for many different reasons. These can include, for example, time away to pursue a personal, professional or volunteer opportunity, to recover from a health concern, or to assist in a family matter at home that requires the student's attention. Regardless of the reason, a student contemplating time away should speak with their residential college dean as early as possible. The dean handles all leaves and reinstatements, and can provide advice on the best way to approach taking a leave. The dean can also assist in connecting a student with resources that could be helpful during their time away from Princeton. The [Time Away from Princeton \(link is external\)](#) website is designed to help students navigate the leave-taking process, thrive during their time away and plan for a successful re-entry into the Princeton campus community."

The stated policy in Harvard's guidelines have a word count of 2825, while Princeton's word count is 599. Harvard's policy covers the reasons in which a student would be placed on an involuntary leave, information regarding cancelling housing, what a student's financial obligations are when leaving, and housing policies and deadlines. The policy provides contact information and an external link for Student Health Insurance Services. Harvard's Policy states that students may not participate in extracurricular activities or use the libraries and other facilities during their leave. If students want to take a class during their time off, they must apply to the Office of International Education before beginning the course work. The next section of Harvard's policy covers the process for students' returning to Harvard. Specifically, if a student takes a medical leave of absence, they must petition the administrative board in order to return. The policy states, "Evidence of stability must include a written statement describing how the

student's time away has been spent and often includes a substantial period of regular employment at a non-academic job and a suitable letter of recommendation from the employer or employment supervisor.” Harvard's policy mandates that students be working during their time off, however, working is not necessarily a possibility for students seeking to address medical issues and may prove counterproductive for students, as demonstrated by Meilman's research at Georgetown (2016).

Princeton's policy provides information on the same topics as Harvard's policy, but also links to several other websites that provide students with additional information, including:

- Request for Reasonable Accommodation: information regarding educational opportunities for students with disabilities and what the term 'disability' includes.
- An alternative option for students who feel uncomfortable speaking with their student dean about taking a leave of absence.
- Examples of what students do during a leave of absence (in a student voices video).
- Link to a support group for students who have taken a year off, so that they can reconnect to the Princeton University community
- Information for international students to help with visa concerns

Regarding information on Reasonable Accommodation, Heyman (2010) reported that four schools, including Harvard, did not provide adequate information.

Students reading these policies may be impacted by specific word usage and tone. For example, the opening of Harvard's leave of absence policy is “Students who wish to interrupt their studies...” The word 'interrupt' may be taken as abrasive to some students. Whereas Princeton's opening statement is “A student may decide to take a leave of absence from their studies.” The words 'may decide' give students more agency in their process. The rest of

Harvard’s policy is strictly factual, whereas Princeton includes language that is more encouraging to students. Take the following example:

“Maintaining your health and well-being while also navigating life as a full-time student can be daunting. There may be times when your health or well-being issue impedes your ability to achieve your academic goals. If this is the case, taking time away to address the issue is often helpful.”

As demonstrated in Heyman’s analysis of the eight Ivy League school policies, neither Harvard nor Princeton’s policy is without fault. However, the supplemental website dedicated to Princeton students considering a leave of absence and the tone offered by varying word choice establishes a more supportive environment.

Student Survey Results

The gender breakdown of survey respondents was 14 male and 18 female, totalling 32 responses to that question. Harvard house affiliation included Quincy, Lowell, Mather, Adams, Cabot, Winthrop, Elliot, Pforzheimer, and Currier, covering 9 of the 13 houses. All leaves of absence were taken by students whose first year of admittance was between 2013 and 2019.

Table 1 shows the different reasons for taking a leave of absence.

Table 1. Leave of Absence by Reason

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Medical	40.63%	13
2	Academic	12.50%	4
3	Professional	9.38%	3
4	Other	37.50%	12
	Total	100%	32

For respondents who chose to type in another response, four typed in ‘personal’, three stated mental health related reasons, one typed ‘burnout’, and one typed ‘Harvard’s overwhelming’. The next part of the survey focused on whether or not students had questions

when considering a leave of absence. Many students had questions regarding how to return, housing, academics, and what to do with personal belongings during their leave. 21 students reported that they read the official university policies regarding a leave of absence, and 8 reported that they did not. When asked if these policies answered their questions, 5 students responded ‘yes’, 5 responded ‘no’ and 4 students responded that they were partially helpful.

Other comments included:

“The are inefficient and arbitrarily restricting.”

“They were confusing and brought up more questions.”

When asked if the written policies affected their decision to take a leave, 12 students responded ‘no’, 2 students responded that the policies made them not want to take a leave of absence, and 1 student stated that Harvard has a good policy. Table 2 summarizes students’ satisfaction with the information provided by the university regarding leave of absence regulations. This includes any form of university-provided information, beyond the written policies, such as meetings with the Dean or academic advisors. There is higher satisfaction with overall university provided information, than information provided through the policies. This is important because, given the variety of leave experiences, more information should be readily available to students online.

Table 2. Satisfaction Regarding University-provided Information

#	Answer	%	Count
1	Very satisfied	11.11%	3
2	Somewhat satisfied	48.15%	13
3	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	7.41%	2
4	Somewhat dissatisfied	18.52%	5
5	Very dissatisfied	14.81%	4
	Total	100%	27

When asked whether or not students talked with anyone in making their decision to take a leave of absence, 12 students stated that they did not speak with anyone. Table 3 summarizes students' sentiments during their leave of absence. Approximately 23% of students did not feel connected during their leave of absence, and only 54% felt supported by their resident dean.

Table 3. Student Sentiments During Leave

#	Question	Very Much So		Somewhat		Ambivalent		Not so much		Not At All		Total
1	Did you feel supported by your Resident Dean?	46.15%	12	7.69%	2	11.54%	3	19.23%	5	15.38%	4	26
2	Did you feel connected to the Harvard community?	7.69%	2	30.77%	8	19.23%	5	15.38%	4	26.92%	7	26
3	Did you feel comfortable visiting Harvard?	23.08%	6	30.77%	8	3.85%	1	11.54%	3	30.77%	8	26

With regards to working, 24 students worked during their leave of absence. For 13 of these students, working was a mandatory condition of returning to Harvard. Of these, six wrote negative comments regarding how the working condition impacted their transition to being a full-time student, such as “it was irrelevant to being a student” and “it felt like a punishment”. Four respondents wrote neutral comments and two wrote positive comments, such as “It gave me a sense of stability and a sense of purpose, so I felt prepared to return”. Of the six negative responses, five were from students who had taken time off due to medical reasons. According to Harvard’s policy, the purpose of work is to “demonstrate stability”. Perhaps this is a difficult requirement for a student to meet while concurrently trying to improve and maintain their physical or mental wellbeing. In addition, the work skills are not always translatable to student life, and some may find it challenging to balance medical appointments with work. This finding relates back to Meilman’s 2016 research on Georgetown’s medical leave of absence policy, in

which the school no longer recommended employment and stated further their rationale for the request that students engage in daily activities during leaves of absence.

Students' biggest concerns when returning from a leave of absence included how it would be to reintegrate with friends and in their social circles, the academic process, and if their mental health would return. The next question asked respondents how they were made to feel during the process of reintegration. 10 responses were coded as negative, 6 were coded as neutral, and 8 were coded as positive. In summary, only 33% of respondents felt positively about the process of returning to Harvard.

Table 4 summarizes support when returning to Harvard. Approximately 34% disagree with the statement "I feel supported by their Resident Dean."

Table 4. "I felt supported by _____ when returning to Harvard"

#	Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total							
1	My Resident Dean	12.50%	3	8.33%	2	12.50%	3	4.17%	1	12.50%	3	16.67%	4	33.33%	8	24
2	Other Administrators	25.00%	6	8.33%	2	12.50%	3	25.00%	6	4.17%	1	16.67%	4	8.33%	2	24
3	Faculty	12.50%	3	0.00%	0	12.50%	3	20.83%	5	29.17%	7	16.67%	4	8.33%	2	24
4	Classmates	8.33%	2	8.33%	2	4.17%	1	12.50%	3	16.67%	4	25.00%	6	25.00%	6	24

Upon returning to campus 24% of students participated in more activities and 40% participated in fewer activities. 44% of students stated that participation in house life was affected by their leave of absence. Of those who said that their participation in house life was affected, only one made a positive statement. Responses included the following comments:

"I saw it as a means to an end, somewhere to sleep, no longer as a community."

"I became invisible"

"It became non-existent post-leave of absence."

These findings relate back to Zepke and Leach (2010) who demonstrate that student success and course completion is impacted by levels of student engagement. Universities can enhance these levels of engagement by making students of diverse experiences feel welcomed and affirmed as part of the school community. Houses at Harvard are where the majority of students live, eat, and socialize. For students to feel uncomfortable or invisible in these spaces goes against the university's goals of inclusivity and student success.

Finally, the survey asked if students wanted to provide any additional information. One student mentioned that there are information gaps in the policy for international students, low-income students, and students without supports at home. Several also stated that Deans did not provide adequate information.

Findings: Interview

One interview was conducted of a student who had taken a leave of absence, to gain anecdotal information on the student experience. The interview provided insights into how a student who had taken a medical leave of absence experienced transitioning back to Harvard. The interviewee indicated, "The greatest challenge for me coming back was academics. I didn't study for three semesters so it was really hard to start writing papers again." The work skills that the student was required to complete were not translatable into the academic environment. Additionally, the student mentioned that he did not receive information from his dean about the possibility of taking a reduced course load as an alternative to taking a leave of absence. He instead heard this information from a peer. The student went back to the dean to confirm this possibility and is now taking a reduced course load as a form of medical accommodation. This reiterates the finding from the survey that information provided to students by Harvard administration is not always complete or uniform.

Discussion / Conclusion

Based on findings from the comparative textual analysis of Harvard's and Princeton's policies, as well as student surveys and interview, the following are four recommendations to improve Harvard's leave of absence procedures:

1. Develop a website dedicated to Leave of Absences, including Frequently Asked Questions section and links to additional student support systems. Harvard could use Princeton's Leave of Absence website as a template/model.
2. Reexamine the work requirement policy, especially reasons for its implementation, since data shows it proves beneficial for some students, but detrimental to others
3. Have Faculty Deans reach out to students returning to campus, to improve reintegration into House Life.
4. Further study existing Leave of Absence policies and the impacts of these policies, by directly surveying and interviewing students who have taken time off.

The first recommendation is that Harvard develop a more comprehensive website. From the survey, students had a wide variety of questions that were not addressed in the existing website and published policies. Additionally, students received different information based on who they talked to for advice. Based on the comparative analysis of the Harvard and Princeton policies, it was evident that Princeton's supplemental website filled the gaps demonstrated by Harvard students in the survey.

Given that Harvard currently requires students who are taking a medical leave of absence to work during their time off, and that several students from the survey had negative experiences in fulfilling this requirement, the second recommendation is that the work policy be revisited.

Five students who were mandated to work during their time off due to medical reasons found the policy unbeneficial, and in some cases, detrimental, to their transition back to Harvard.

The third recommendation is that faculty dean's reach out to students who are returning from a leave of absence. Social reintegration was a concern that was voiced throughout the surveys. 44% of students stated that their participation in house life was altered when returning. By having faculty dean's encouraging students who have returned to attend more events, students can begin to socialize with more and new members of their house. Specifically, reaching out to students who have taken a leave of absence could provide impetus to becoming more involved.

Given the limitations of this study, including not being able to survey more students or interview administration and faculty, the final recommendation is for Harvard University to seek additional feedback regarding students' experiences of taking time off. Although these experiences vary on a case-by-case basis, feedback on the challenges faced by a large number of students (or trends in feedback) as they reintegrate to university life could illuminate avenues to help students who go through this process in the future. For example, one international student voiced issues with figuring out visas, housing, and medical insurance. The university should determine whether this is an issue commonly faced by international students who take time off.

How higher education institutions such as Harvard account for students' time off and how universities can best support students during the reintegration process requires further research. How leave of absence policies impact students' emotional wellbeing and social growth is as important as and interrelated with students' academic experience.

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