

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

Seeking a New Lens: Improving the Visibility and Recognition of Dorm Crew on Campus

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ABSTRACT

As a Dorm Crew captain, my primary responsibility is to manage a team of workers in the cleaning of on-campus dorm bathrooms. This includes hiring, training, delegation of roles, inspections, maintenance of supplies, and fostering an inclusive and enjoyable environment. From the outside, the day-to-day work of Dorm Crew seems far from appealing. Common misconceptions are apparent across campus—many see Dorm Crew as an inferior on-campus job, others view Dorm Crew as a position for the lower-class. What many outsiders fail to recognize is the incredibly tight-knit and welcoming community that has made Dorm Crew such an influential organization for many students. As a member of Dorm Crew for the past four years, I have seen the profound impact this organization has had on myself and many others. Yet, I have also seen the judgment and false perceptions associated with Dorm Crew across campus. Therefore, this project is aimed at improving the recognition and visibility of Dorm Crew at Harvard. I took a 3-step approach to attacking this purpose: (1) understand the general student body's perceptions/attitudes towards Dorm Crew; (2) understand Dorm Crew captains' and member's perceptions/attitudes towards this organization; (3) use this insight to inform actionable steps towards improving visibility and recognition of Dorm Crew on campus.

I am willing to share this paper on www.husrhe.fas.harvard.edu.

HONOR CODE

“I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.” – *Meghan Tveit*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

My research project focuses on improving the visibility and recognition of Dorm Crew on campus. As a member of Dorm Crew for the past four years, I feel as though the Dorm Crew community and their work is under-recognized by the student body and the university as a whole. Through this project, I aim to target potential misconceptions and work to diminish the negative stigma behind Dorm Crew through the spread of real, personal experiences. In order to inform the necessary steps of action, I first needed to develop a firm understanding of the currently held perceptions and beliefs surrounding on-campus employment, specifically as it relates to Dorm Crew. My findings and conclusions are based on data collected from two surveys. I launched an internal survey to the Dorm Crew community and an external survey to the general student body.

Results from this study led me to five key findings. First, I found a striking parallel between the student employment incentives held by Dorm Crew workers compared to their working peers. Second, I found that students across campus feel that their on-campus employment has influenced their Harvard experience. This finding is supported by the literature. Third, the data supports the idea that the general student body is hesitant to support Dorm Crew services. Fourth, there was an apparent divergence between the feelings and emotions associated with in-room engagements when comparing feelings expressed by the general student body to Dorm Crew workers. Finally, I came away with four key recommendations for improving visibility that serve as the next steps of action: (1) Diminish negative stigma – “*show people what it’s really like on the inside; it’s not just cleaning bathrooms, but a community!*”; (2) Increase recognition through the houses—more house sponsored emails and shout outs; (3) Start early – ask Proctors and PAFs to introduce the idea of Dorm Crew to their entryways and set the norm of respect and cleanliness; (4) Include an image of the Dorm Crew team for each house in the entryway so that students can put a face to a name when they encounter a Dorm Crew worker in their rooms.

I have also crafted a video compilation of anecdotal evidence of personal experiences to aid in the transformation of perceptions around Dorm Crew and improve visibility. This video will be shared with the Harvard community through distribution across house email-lists and on the Dorm Crew website.

INTRODUCTION: Finding my Team Outside of Soccer

I distinctly remember the moment I told my parents about my first job at Harvard. I strategically started with statements like— “It’s such a great job because the hours are flexible and I essentially choose when I want to work.”, “I get paid more than I was getting paid in my job in high school.”, and “I can even listen to music while I work!” My parents were so excited for me and as you can imagine, followed up with the simple question “So what do you do?”. I paused before responding, “Oh, I work for an on-campus organization called Dorm Crew”. I obviously wasn’t giving them enough information because they proceeded to question me— “Well, what’s your role in Dorm Crew?”.

It was around the end of freshman fall, life had calmed down a bit, I was no longer in season for soccer, and I had started to get a handle on my classes. I was hired to work for Dorm Crew and I was delighted to finally have some source of income. As a Dorm Crew worker, you are required to clean the bathrooms of other students living on campus. You are instructed to fill a bucket with all the cleaning essentials and walk across the yard with your bucket, a floorpol, and gloves in hand. I was terrified I would see someone I knew so every time, I would frantically sprint to my first bathroom. Once I had made it through the process of knocking on the door, praying it wouldn’t be answered by a familiar face, I would put on my headphones and get to work! As fun as cleaning dirty toilets or unkept sinks may sound, there really is something timeless about listening to music and performing mindless



work. I continued to work for Dorm Crew throughout my freshman year and once the spring came, I decided to apply for the “Trial Captain” role for Spring Clean-Up. A “Trial Captain” must successfully make it through the duties and responsibilities given to them throughout Spring Clean-Up in order to be considered for the “Captain” role for the following school year.

At this point, I hadn’t met too many people through Dorm Crew as most of the work I was doing was done individually. However, once Spring Clean-Up began, I quickly realized what I was missing out on. The members of Dorm Crew are a tight-knit and loving family. Everyone seems to understand each other and it’s truly unlike any other team I’ve ever been a part of. The people in Dorm Crew are hard-working and selfless individuals that I have had the pleasure of getting to learn and grow from.

Following my trial captain experience, I was selected as a Clean-Up Captain in Adams House. As I have continued to grow within the Dorm Crew community, I have come to realize



many things. First, I have realized that the embarrassment or humility I once associated with this job was completely unwarranted. I am extremely proud of the work I do and I would happily share my experience with anyone interested in listening. Secondly, I realized that tight-knit teams do not always

come from sports. The Dorm Crew team that I am fortunate enough to be a part of is just as much of a family as the soccer team I love and care for across the river.

So now, whenever my parents ask me, “What’s your role in Dorm Crew”, I



cheerfully respond with, “I work with some of the coolest people at Harvard cleaning dirty toilets, and I love every second of it!”

What is Dorm Crew?

Founded in 1951, Dorm Crew is a student employment and leadership program for undergraduates. Dorm Crew offers employment opportunities, leadership development, and mentoring resources to more than 800 students annually.

Mission Statement

“Dorm Crew is a student employment and leadership program that is entirely managed and operated by Harvard undergraduates. Through our employment opportunities, mentoring resources, and leadership development program, Dorm Crew advances Harvard College’s vision for a welcoming, supportive, and diverse community that cultivates rewarding and transformative student experiences while delivering valuable services to the University community in a sustainable way.”

Research Question

As I reflect on these past four years, I have come to realize the incredible impact that Dorm Crew has had on my college experience. As a senior leaving campus, I can only hope to give back to an organization that has given so much to me.

The question I aimed to address through this project is—*How to improve the recognition and visibility of Dorm Crew on campus?* This proposed question has various components that I will leverage in the process of answering this overarching purpose. The components I plan to address include:

1. General student body perceptions/attitudes towards Dorm Crew (survey)
2. Dorm Crew captains and members perceptions/attitudes towards Dorm Crew (survey)
3. Transforming perceptions and improving visibility (video compilation)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Employment and Student Success

A comprehensive review of the role and influence of various on-campus, student employment opportunities sheds light on a uniquely diverse set of challenges, assumptions, and benefits associated with student-labor jobs. In the context of Harvard, there are a number of options for acquiring a rewarding and fulfilling job on campus. The Student Employment Office (SEO) provides students with a thorough database of job opportunities, making the job search as seamless as possible. In fact, according to the SEO, 78% of students have a part-time job at one point over the course of their four years. Additionally, 39% of seniors reported that they began working during their freshman year (Harvard Student Employment Office).

The literature provides ample evidence suggesting the benefits of student engagement and campus employment for improvement in the classroom and beyond. According to Manning, et al., student participation in educationally purposeful activities on-campus promotes student outcomes in the classroom, reflected in measures like—grades, student persistence/graduation rate, and educational attainment (Manning et al., 2014). The importance of student service has been further applied to systems that mandate student labor—requiring students to work *X* number of hours per week in order to fulfill a graduation requirement (Cochrane, 2013).

It is important to acknowledge that engaging students in on-campus employment or volunteer positions is a two-way street—requiring effort from both the students themselves and the institution. According to Perna, “Although students who work have an obligation to fulfill their academic responsibilities, colleges and universities also have a responsibility to ensure that all students—including those who work—can be successful” (Perna, 2010). It therefore requires a “campuswide effort” to create an institutional culture that promotes the success of working students (Perna, 2010). The literature also indicates that it is the role of the institution to provide “enabling environments” with support systems in place to improve apprenticeships and teaching as a public and communal craft (Boyte, 2008). The institution must establish conditions to promote success—clear institutional mission, out-of-class contact with faculty, high standards,

focus on first year, respect for diverse talents, and integration of learned experiences (Manning et al., 2014).

Beyond the measurable educational benefits, on-campus employment also serves as a vital source of income for many students. “Working is now a fundamental responsibility for many undergraduates. Many students must work to pay the costs of attending college” (Perna, 2010).

Review of Dorm Crew in the Press

Harvard employs students in various spaces across campus. For example, students can lead tours for the admissions office, work in the stacks at one of the more than 60 libraries, or become members of student-run organizations like Harvard Student Agencies or PBHA (Harvard Student Employment Office). When it comes to student-labor organizations at Harvard, it would be naïve to dismiss the fact that some job descriptions are more fruitful or attractive than others. Dorm Crew, for example, which is a unique form of student employment, extends beyond typical “labor work” for a number of reasons. In reviewing the press specifically related to Dorm Crew, it has become more apparent that individuals, especially those that are not Harvard affiliated, share intense opinions around the inherent problems and benefits that Dorm Crew offers to its workers and the Harvard community.

In a recently publicized book titled, *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students*, author Anthony Jack, attempts to “better comprehend the unnoticed, heterogeneous experiences of first-generation, low-income students who have landed through perseverance and good fortune at an elite university in the United States” (Jack, 2019). Through over one-hundred interviews and years of first-hand observation, Jack specifically targets and criticizes the work of Dorm Crew on Harvard’s campus. Jack highlights the systemic problems associated with students cleaning the bathrooms and toilets of their peers. He narrates a specific situation in which a student walks through campus carrying a bucket of cleaning supplies and a floor mop, only to walk up to their room assignment with a recognizable name written on the door. The student is forced to knock and enter the room of their fellow peer and immediately get

to work. Using this narration, he describes the overwhelming stratification and humiliation that stems from this program (Jack, 2019).

This novel sparked a fiery debate over how Harvard University, one of the country's wealthiest institutions, is using tax-payer dollars to pay for students to clean the bathrooms and toilets of their peers. "The online dispute has prompted questions about whether Harvard, with its nearly \$40 billion endowment, even deserves federal-work study dollars—but also more generally, whether many institutions take advantage of the money by offering jobs that entail manual labor and not opportunities that are career focused" (Bauer-Wolf, 2019). Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, a Professor of Higher Education and Sociology at Temple University and the Founder of the Hope Center for College Community and Justice, publicly spoke out on this issue stating, "Low-income students at HARVARD working 20 hours a week in the first year of college cleaning dorms? And we keep giving this wealthy place our public dollars why exactly?" (Goldrick-Rab, 2019).

The backlash continues in an article written in *The Harvard Crimson*, titled *Down with Dorm Crew*. Author Elizabeth Bloom states, "Harvard needs to put more effort into creating high quality part-time work opportunities for its undergraduates... As Harvard becomes more accessible to low- and middle-class students through financial aid, it should reevaluate the ways it provides meaningful and well-paying employment opportunities to them. Dorm Crew offers community, character-building work, flexible hours, and solid pay, but there can be other ways to achieve these ends" (Bloom, 2012).

Given these stark reviews, I now turn to what the press has to say about the benefits of Dorm Crew. In an article written in the *Harvard Magazine*, student Breeanna Elliott comments on her personal experience— "In Dorm Crew, I found a sense of fellowship devoid of academic competition or unclear social conventions, because that was simply not part of the ethos. Yet it exposed me to a rich diversity of interests that inspired me to study abroad, change concentrations (twice), take time off from school, and move beyond my comfort zone. I was able to develop as a person because I felt comfortable being vulnerable, uncertain, and ignorant in this

community—there was always room to grow within it” (Elliott, 2016). This sense of belonging and community emanates throughout Dorm Crew. Elliot goes on to write, “Nowhere else on campus did I feel like I belonged in the way I felt when I was working with Dorm Crew. It was this sense of belonging in a diverse community that gave me the opportunity to embrace the variety of lived experiences of Harvard students, including my own” (Elliott, 2016).

“Dorm Crew has not only provided me with a well pay job, but more importantly with a close-knit, supportive community of down to earth individuals with diverse backgrounds, interests and passions.” —anonymous Dorm Crew worker

Additionally, the SEO website includes excerpts from recent and previous Dorm Crew workers who share their diverse experiences. Current Dorm Crew captain Aranza Caballero states, “I get to interact with different people and work in different situations and that has helped me grow and become a better version of myself... I definitely feel like I’ve grown a lot” (Harvard Student Employment Office). There is a very apparent negative stigma associated with Dorm Crew, yet, what many outsiders fail to consider is the personal experiences and impact an organization like this has on its members.

METHODS

In order to address the research question — *How to improve the recognition and visibility of Dorm Crew on campus?* — I plan to breakdown this question into three different components.

(a) External Perspectives

The first component is focused on gaging the on-campus, general student body’s perspective on Dorm Crew. To measure this, I launched a comprehensive survey through the house email-lists. This survey was designed to gather a firm understanding of the underlying beliefs held by students not involved in the Dorm Crew community.

(b) Internal Perspectives

The second component focused on the internal perspectives and opinions of Dorm Crew. I surveyed the captains and members of the Dorm Crew community through the Dorm Crew email-list. This survey looked fairly similar to the survey sent to the general student body, however, it included important questions regarding personal experiences, allowing space for qualitative analysis of first-hand Dorm Crew involvement.

(c) Promoting Visibility and Recognition

The final component aimed to promote the unique benefits and experiences of Dorm Crew through a video compilation of various members and captains. This video was intended to be a space for Dorm Crew members to share their personal views and experiences to help improve the visibility and recognition across campus.

Ethical Conduct

Informed consent begins with the recruitment of participants and continues throughout the subject's involvement in the study. The surveys themselves were completely anonymous and included a couple of demographic questions at the end. I made sure to include a statement of consent in the survey launch email to ensure that participants understood that the survey was both anonymous and optional.

For participants interested in contributing to the video compilation (through indicating interest in the survey), I sent a detailed email including specific information about the study and how their video would be featured. I was sure to offer space for any questions to ensure that the participants were fully aware of the process. I did not pressure or sway the potential participant in their decision. Finally, I obtained written consent from each of the participating individuals to ensure that the inclusion of their video into the final compilation was consensual.

Positionality

I understand and recognize that as a captain of Dorm Crew, my unique and personal experiences have shaped this research inquiry and therefore may influence aspects of the study, such as data collection and interpretation. My experience in Dorm Crew has been

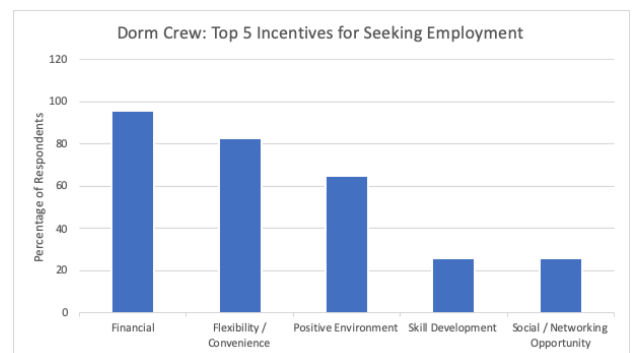
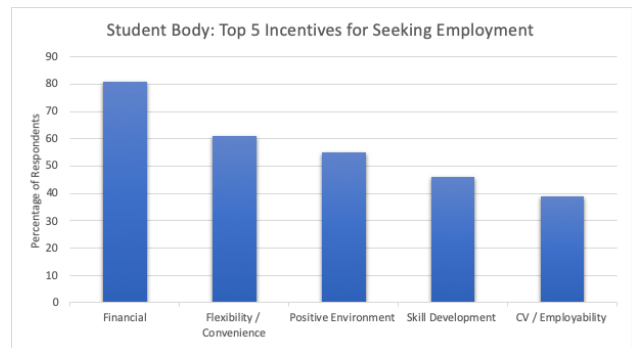
overwhelmingly positive and I acknowledge that this is not the case for everyone. Therefore, in order to diminish potential confirmation bias in my survey and beyond, I attempted to actively tend to my biases as well as have my survey protocol reviewed by my teacher and peers prior to launching.

Table 1. Methods of Data Collection

Research Question Component	Source (interview, survey, sources)	Questions addressed in interview
C1. general student body perspective (external)	Survey through house email-lists	Appendix: Survey A – External Survey on Dorm Crew and On-Campus Employment
C2. Dorm Crew members perspective (internal)	Survey through Dorm Crew email-list	Appendix Survey B – Internal Survey on Dorm Crew and On-Campus Employment
C3. Promoting and recognizing on-campus organizations across campus	Video interviews from Dorm Crew captains and workers	Appendix: Form C – Video Consent Form

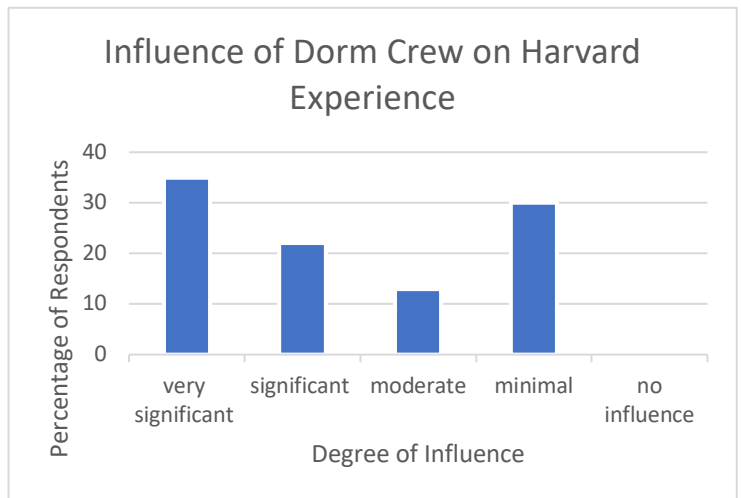
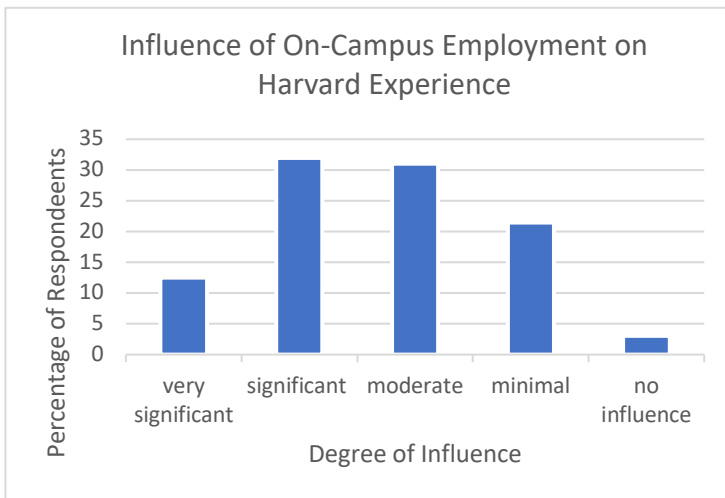
DATA AND FINDINGS

To inform my blueprint for action, I began by synthesizing and analyzing the data collected via the two surveys. In doing so, I was able to generate five succinct findings. Firstly, I found that across campus, the incentives for seeking out an on-campus, paid position, are fairly paralleled regardless of employment through Dorm Crew or elsewhere. The identified top four reasons to seek out employment were as follows—financial, flexibility/convenience, positive environment, and skill development. There was variance observed in



the fifth incentive, which differed for Dorm Crew employees—social/networking opportunity—and general student body workers—CV/employability.

Secondly, I was able to conclude that students at Harvard agree that their on-campus employment opportunity has influenced their college experience, which is supported by the findings shared by Manning and colleagues (Manning et al., 2014). There is a slight discrepancy between the results of Dorm Crew workers as compared to the general student body. Overall, we see that around 70% of Dorm Crew workers indicated that their involvement in Dorm Crew has had a moderate – very significant influence on their college experience. While around 75% of the student body indicated the same.



Thirdly, it was found that when asked about in-room encounters with Dorm Crew workers cleaning their suite bathrooms, students were more uncomfortable than the workers themselves. The data shows that 43% of the student body respondents used the words *awkward*, *uncomfortable* or *weird* to describe their interaction with a Dorm Crew worker in their suite. While, 52% of Dorm Crew workers recorded their interactions as *neutral*, 9% said *proud*, and 13% said *slightly embarrassed*. The final key finding was geared towards general feedback for improving visibility of Dorm Crew on campus and sheds light on potential next steps, which will be discussed in the next section.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In establishing a plan for the future, I have generated four essential lines of action:

1. Diminish negative stigma

“show people what it is really like on the inside, it’s not just cleaning bathrooms, but a community!”

In order to tackle this approach, I have created a video compilation of various Dorm Crew worker’s personal experiences, anecdotes, and feelings about their involvement in Dorm Crew. This video is intended to be shared with the community to help inform the realities behind the work of Dorm Crew and establish a sense of welcoming and inclusivity to others.

Link to Video: https://youtu.be/jML_bTyyQKg

2. Increase recognition through the Houses

This can be enacted in a number of ways— (1) promotion and recognition of Dorm Crew through house-sponsored emails; (2) images of the Dorm Crew team in each entryway so students can put a face to a name when they encounter Dorm Crew workers in their room; (3) occasional shout outs from Proctors into the entryway email-list.

3. Start early

Set the precedent of cleanliness and respect for Dorm Crew starting in freshman dorms. Proctors and PAFs should discuss the value of Dorm Crew during Opening Days so that students are not shocked by their first encounter with a Dorm Crew worker in their suite. Also, by normalizing this work, more students may be inclined to join and less likely to judge!

Dorm Crew has been an essential part of my Harvard experience and I am incredibly grateful for the opportunities and lasting friendships it has given me. When I return to Harvard in the future, I can only hope to see a transformation in the respect and value that this organization and its members receive from the student body and the university as a whole.

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