

Sociology 1104: Higher Education: Institutions, Inequalities and Controversies
Final Paper

Radical Shifts in Higher Education:

Understanding Student Willingnesses and Preferences During Financially Difficult Times

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Abstract

Harvard University, with the largest educational endowment in the world at approximately forty billion dollars, is concerned about financial stability. President Lawrence Bacow and other Harvard administrators cite two facets of higher education that may contribute to future instability: negative returns to the university endowment due to adverse market conditions and the cost of education gap, defined as the difference between the actual cost of a Harvard education (over \$100,000) and the average net cost of attendance after financial aid (approximately \$35,000). Nevertheless, reversing the current trend and repositioning the university to ensure financially solvent times in the future is a difficult, yet necessary task. Not only will it require concentrated and coordinated efforts to identify financial weaknesses across the institutional system, but it will require administrators to make difficult choices and changes to the very fabrics of higher education around the world. However, before reshaping the university's central functions or financial position, it is important to consider the potential effects of such changes on students and their higher education experience. This study does this through surveys and interviews which gauge student preferences and provide insight into which Harvard College programs students would rather see cuts to in dire times. The paper also ends with a challenge to the traditional solution binary—either raise tuition or cut student programs—by garnering student feedback on alternative program structures that simultaneously allows students to affect their own environments and reduce the cost of education gap.

I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College Honor Code.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Aman Panjwani". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Aman" being more prominent than the last name "Panjwani".

Aman Panjwani

Introduction

Harvard University, with the largest educational endowment in the world at approximately forty billion dollars, is concerned about financial stability. Specifically, administrators are not worried about financing the next major construction project on campus or establishing a new professorship; rather, they are apprehensive about the university's ability to last into perpetuity, continuously contributing to both the knowledge pool and global workforce along the way. President Lawrence Bacow perfectly expresses this belief in his recent installation speech. In his address to the broader Harvard community and higher education institutions around the globe, Bacow emphasized that, in the future, colleges and universities "may have to do more with less" (Bacow, 2018). This is because "higher education is one of the few industries where competition tends to drive costs up" and, given that "tuition [costs] and student debt [are] rising", "the current trend is not sustainable" (Bacow, 2018).

The university's financial concern is not an isolated belief or sentiment. Across the institution, at all of Harvard's schools, administrators are actively engaged in "scenario planning for when the markets inevitably dip" (Bacow, 2018 qtd. in *Crimson*, 2018). This is because of a sustained belief that "there will be a recession" and, as a result, "it's important to think about it in advance" (Bacow, 2018 qtd. in *Crimson*, 2018). Moreover, since the memories and effects related to the recent Great Recession still linger throughout the university, administrators are naturally financially cautious. Only a decade ago did the Harvard community watch the university endowment fall \$11 billion, returning negative 27.3 percent in a single fiscal year (*Crimson*, 2018). In this light, President Bacow's guidance is even more significant: "Traditionally, colleges and universities have been great at doing more with more. But in the future, we may have to do more with less" (Bacow, 2018).

Nonetheless, negative returns to the endowment as a result of poor market conditions are one of many concerns for the university. Harvard Vice President Leah Rosovsky offered insight into another important financial concern relevant to the student body: the cost of education gap, defined as the difference between the actual cost of a Harvard education (over \$100,000) and the average net cost of attendance after financial aid (approximately \$35,000). According to Rosovsky, in the long-run, this \$65,000+ cost of education gap per Harvard undergraduate student, of which there are approximately 6,500, is financially unsustainable. In many ways, this is true. Multiple small colleges across the United States—such as Mount Ida College, Marian Court College, Wheelock College, and Concordia College Alabama (Jaschik, 2018)—have either closed their doors

or merged with larger institutions for the same financial reason within the last five years. While Harvard may not need to take such dramatic steps in the foreseeable future, significant cost control measures on the university's operating budget are likely.

The cost of education gap is largest in magnitude and most unsustainable during times of great financial distress. This is true for three reasons: at this time, (1) students and their families need more financial aid to make up for a loss in income, (2) the university operating budget is least subsidized by the endowment due to diminished or negative returns, and (3) donation and grant amounts are at their lowest levels since foundations and alumni reprioritize their spending habits. Taken together, these factors both widen and further entrench the cost of education gap as individual student and family contributions decrease and the university is forced to reallocate funds within its budget to continue to pay for vital infrastructure, rather than forward-looking, cost-saving measures.

Reversing the current trend and repositioning the university to ensure financially solvent times in the future is a difficult, yet necessary task. Not only will it require concentrated and coordinated efforts to identify financial weaknesses across the institutional system, but it will require administrators to make difficult choices and changes to the very fabrics of higher education around the world. Nevertheless, institutions can and should be innovative throughout this process. President Bacow, again within his installation speech, mentioned a few of the shifts the system should explore: "shared infrastructure for research, joint graduate student and faculty housing, or exchanges that allow us to eliminate some of the redundancies in our curricula and to double down on our specific strengths" (Bacow, 2018). In this way, colleges and universities can come together, improve their own productivity, and end up stronger and more prepared for the future.

Nevertheless, before reshaping the university's central functions or financial position, it is important to consider the potential effects of such changes on students and their higher education experience. On a daily basis, Harvard's voluminous resources, reach, and reputation allows the undergraduate body to be uninformed and unconcerned about matters like the cost of education gap. However, as seen by the student response to the HUDS strike, social organization sanction ruling, and shopping week discussions, if university-wide policies deeply affect students, they both efficiently organize and effectively express their opinions to influence the institution's actions. Essentially, students are key constituents to administrators, regulating the level of legitimacy university decisions carry and the relative amount of ease by which policies are implemented. As

such, it is vital to understand their preferences and reactions to specific institutional shifts during financially difficult times.

This paper sets aside the well-explored question of whether to raise student tuition (and, if so, by how much) during financially difficult times, and, instead, attempts to outline how Harvard College could significantly decrease its undergraduate expenses to narrow the cost of education gap. Specifically, through surveys and interviews, this study gauges student preferences and provide insight into which Harvard College programs students would rather see cuts to in dire times. It also studies how student backgrounds and experiences influence these decisions and the value and attitude with which each student approaches the respective program. Finally, in-line with President Bacow's previously stated innovated solutions, the paper ends with a challenge to the traditional solution binary—either raise tuition or cut student programs—by garnering student feedback on alternative program structures that simultaneously allows students to affect their own environments and reduce the cost of education gap.

This paper is organized as follows. In section I, the Literature Review, I discuss tangentially related literature related to student higher education preferences in order to refine and reapply peer-reviewed methodologies to this paper's unique context and central question. Section II, the Methodology, describes this paper's survey and interview design and the relevant choices and tradeoffs made to ensure the collected data was as useful and unbiased as possible. Section III, the Findings, is divided into two sub-sections, each presenting a unique insight related to student preferences at Harvard during financially difficult times. In section IV, the paper concludes with an analysis of potential implications for the university and posits future research questions relevant to this topic and the general discussion at hand.

Literature Review

Academic researchers have yet to analyze student preferences within higher education institutions during financially difficult times. This is because student decision-influencing variables are inherently difficult to measure and generalize across a diverse set of institutions and student bodies. Moreover, during a financial crisis, no two institutions shift course in the same way. This makes it near impossible to compare student preferences across institutions, given numerous confounding factors that are unique to each situation. Nevertheless, I limit this paper's analysis to Harvard University and, as such, look to tangentially related studies to provide

context and underpin this paper's methodology. By analyzing studies related to student preferences to academic offerings, facilities, social climates, sports, and technology availability, all within a higher education setting, this paper hopes to reapply methodological elements from previously peer-reviewed papers, in an effort to isolate and summarize new insights related to student preferences during financially difficult times.

Wiers-Jenseen, Stensaker, and Grøgaard, in "Student Satisfaction: towards an empirical deconstruction of the concept," attempt to identify the key determinants that significantly impact student satisfaction within a higher education institution. The authors begin by identifying eight sub-categories that may impact student satisfaction:

"(1) the quality of teaching (academic and pedagogic); (2) quality of supervision and feedback from academic staff; (3) composition, content, and relevance of curriculum; (4) balance between different forms of organized teaching activities and self-tuition; (5) quality of support facilities; (6) quality of physical infrastructure; (7) quality of, and access to leisure activities; and (8) social climate" (Wiers-Jensen et al., 2010).

Using a series of surveys over three years, the authors attempt to analyze and weigh the average effect of each sub-category on a student's overall feeling of satisfaction. In essence, the study finds that the quality of academic offerings and teaching at a higher education institution most significantly impacts student satisfaction, insofar as this one subcategory is the "crucial determinant" of a student's assessment of their own learning experience. The authors also find that factors such as an institution's physical infrastructure and social climate "should not be underestimated when trying to improve student satisfaction and opportunity for learning" (Wiers-Jensen et al., 2010). This secondary finding points to the fact that student preferences are very complex within higher education settings and, as a result, it is important to further analyze these specific sub-categories.

Price et al. (2003) analyzes the effect that a college or university's facilities have on enrollment decisions and student satisfaction. In order to precisely isolate the feature that most satisfied students, the authors designed an 87 question survey which asked students to rank their preferences on a standard five-point Likert scale. After analyzing the survey's results and comparing the findings to previous literature, the authors conclude that high-quality, aesthetically appealing facilities significantly influence a student's admission decision and their

overall satisfaction rates. Subsequently, the authors conclude that “reputational pull” and “facilities pull” may be at play, persuading both students and faculty to choose the specific institution over others due a “differentiat[ed] brand” (Price et al., 2013).

The academic and social climate of a higher education institution also heavily influences a student’s perception of that which is around them and the changes they would be willing to accept within their environment. After analyzing hundreds of survey responses, interview transcripts, and the Collegiate Learning Assessment results, Arun and Roksa, in “Academically Adrift,” arrive at this exact finding. Specifically, the authors argue that colleges and universities have removed rigorous academic engagement from their institutions, replacing such elements with social aspects that students come to appreciate and enjoy. Armstrong and Hamilton, in “Paying for the Party,” build upon this finding by defining the “party pathway,” deliberate academic and social structures set up by colleges and universities to lure students who can afford to pay the institution’s high tuition prices into the community. Institutional decisions in this vein, such as increased investments to student-life centers and athletic programs, shape student experiences on campus and, as a result, naturally push students to prefer some programs or policies over others.

Spehar et al., in “The Preferences Towards Sports of Students in Institutions of Higher Education,” find that, in Croatia, male students prefer “adrenalin” sports such as international football and table tennis and that they avoid “feminine” sports which have an “esthetic component.” Female students, on the other hand, prefer dance, ice-skating, and roller-skating, all of which require less physical contact with an opponent. Moreover, while the authors acknowledge that further research is needed, they do pointedly conclude that student needs, dispositions, and interests directly influence their preferences, indicating that this paper’s methodology should call take these elements into consideration (Spehar et al., 2008).

In regard to technology availability, an analysis by Pechenkina and Aeschliman finds that students narrowly use technology tools within higher education settings, only fully utilizing their functionality when it is either integral to their learning, when they are familiar with the particular tool, when the tool is deemed useful, or if the tool is not deemed a waste of time. In this way, even if colleges or universities make the integration of technology within their classrooms or campuses an institutional priority, students will only adopt the tool if they are convinced of its positive benefits in the first place (Pechenkina and Aeschliman, 2017).

All in all, while each of the former examples may seem disjointed, there is one common finding across all of them: students prefer those activities and policies which they *perceive* to be beneficial to them. The nuance here is very important. It is not that students prefer that which *is* more beneficial to them; rather, even before fully engaging with a specific activity or policy, students formulate value judgements as to how much positive impact they will draw from the activity or policy. Consequently, these perceptions influence their preferences, both in financially good times and bad. Therefore, this paper expects to find similar results, insofar as Harvard College students should prefer those programs that they believe to be more beneficial to their student life on campus, no matter if the institution is financially stable or facing difficult circumstances.

It is also important to consider the context of the studies cited within this section. Particularly, students were asked their general preferences, not their preferences when the higher education institution is under a financial burden and is actively attempting to curtail its spending. This paper deviates from the measurement of general student preferences and, rather, asks students to choose specific programs and policies at Harvard College while forgoing others. In this way, this paper is a novel contribution to the literature, and the results are expected to be of utmost importance in the coming decades as the financial trend across institutions becomes more unsustainable and the cost of education gap continues to naturally increase.

This paper also asks students to comment on alternative university policy and program structures which may provide students with more autonomy to influence their own experiences and situations and reduce the cost of education gap at the same time. While innovative higher education structures are unexplored within the literature—especially as they relate to student preferences—I expect students to again prefer those Harvard College policies and programs which they perceive to be directly beneficial to their own lives, even at a time of massive structural upheaval across the institution.

To recap, in relation to previous student preferences research, this paper contributes to higher education literature in three ways: (1) it extends previous studies related to students preferences of academic, facility, and social offerings to the Harvard College context, (2) it redefines the context in which preferences are made to more accurately understand how students will react if the university needs to reduce its spending or the cost of education gap, and (3) it highlights and gauges student preferences of innovative structural solutions that both reduce the

cost of education gap and increase student voice and participation within the higher education system.

Methodology

This study utilizes both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to gauge student preferences. The decision to use two data collection methods is purposeful. It allows for accurate measurements of student preferences through the survey and an in-depth analysis for why respondents answered the way that they did through the interview. Moreover, the need to ask complex questions related to innovative shifts in university structure necessitates an interview. This ensures that respondents both accurately understand the question and that their answers are on-topic and appropriate to the subject at hand. As such, after distributing the survey to Lowell House, an undergraduate house at Harvard of approximately 500 students, 63 unique individuals responded and accurately completed the survey. From this sample, 10 individuals were interviewed, allowing them to both offer additional insights into their own answers and opine on the questions related to shifts in Harvard College's structure.

After analyzing the previous literature's methodology and speaking with peer-experts experienced in quantitative and qualitative social science methods, this study outlined the survey questions included within Appendix A. The survey is divided into four sections: (1) the research consent form, (2) individual program preference measurements, (3) program elimination preferences, and (4) basic background information. The first section ensures the respondent is aware of their rights and all the ways the survey data will and will not be used. The second section walks respondents through individual Harvard College programs and policies and measures student preferences on a standard five-point Likert scale, where (1) equals "I fully disagree" and (5) equals "I fully agree." The third section asks students to choose between two programs or policies that serve similar purposes on campus. The fourth section collects basic respondent demographic information that is relevant to student preferences. This includes their name (which is anonymized using a unique Student ID number), email, gender, race, class year, and undergraduate house or dorm. I decided not to ask about socioeconomic or financial aid status, given that the information is sensitive, and, from past experience, students are less likely to respond to the survey when such questions are asked. Within this section, I also asked if the respondent would be willing to sit down for a fifteen minute in-person interview in Lowell Dining Hall over the course of the following week.

Important to note within section (2) is that respondents are asked their general preferences, not their preferences under altered financial conditions. As such, responses within this section serve as a baseline, allowing preference comparisons to be made across both sections (2) and (3) and the entire sample of respondents. The questions within section (2) are also purposefully ordered. The aforementioned student preference studies utilized similar question structures, as they accurately measure student preferences across a widespread set of programs and policies. Furthermore, within section (3) students are given a binary choice, where they must decide to either eliminate the first or second program or policy. Again, this design is purposeful as it forces respondents to simulate potential real-life choices that administrators may make, rather than deciding to cut all or no programs across the institution. The programs and policies are also meaningfully matched together, forcing respondents to weigh the benefits and disadvantages of each program or policy.

The structure of the interview generally follows the questions outlined in Appendix B. The fifteen minute conversation begins with a recap of the interviewee's survey answers. If any of the Likert scores significantly deviate from the mean, I asked follow-up question probing why the interviewee did or did not find the specific program or policy to be beneficial to their student life. Moreover, I allowed the interviewee to speak freely in regard to the specific program or policy. In this vein, while the interviewee knew their answers would be used over the course of this study, I reminded them that they should feel no obligation to respond positively or critically since the interview was not recorded. After a few minutes discussing the interviewee's preferences and comparison choices, the interview shifted topics and I began a discussion regarding the proposed innovative shifts in the university's structure.

At the start of this phase of the interview, I gave each interviewee the same context. This included information related to the university's endowment, the cost of education gap, and previous quotes from President Bacow related to the need to plan and prepare for future financial crises. While this helped the interviewees to understand why the research was relevant and timely, it did not guarantee that all the interviewees approached the questions with the same information and experiences. As such, if interviewees had additional questions at any time, I attempted to answer them in the most unbiased manner possible.

At this point, I introduced each structural shift to the interviewee and I then proceeded to have a casual conversation with them about their merits and implications. The questions listed in Appendix B served as a guide. While I was not bound to their exact wording and order, I did

ensure to ask about the same general themes and points of inquiry within my questions. As the interviewees spoke, I ensured to take note of comments and arguments that were relevant. Furthermore, after going through the set of questions, I ensured to ask the interviewee if there was anything else they would like to talk about that related to this topic. This allowed interviewees to clarify anything they had said, particularly important given the casual nature of the interview.

Given this methodology's context and design, numerous limitations exist that may bias the overall results. First, the survey and interview sample are non-random. Many of the respondents are personal friends or acquaintances of the researcher. While this does not necessarily imply selection-bias, it may have artificially excluded specific voices and experiences from the sample population, meaning that the results cannot generalize to the entire Harvard College population. Second, since the decision was made to not ask students about their socioeconomic and financial aid status, there is no way to know if the sample is or is not biased as it relates to this one demographic characteristics. If students from socially-advantaged positions answered the survey at significantly higher rates, then this study's results would, again, not be generalizable to Harvard College's diverse student population. Third, and potentially most limiting, the survey and interview design may not be theoretically sound given how difficult it is to measure preferences. Typical economic literature conducts such measurements using a standard unit, usually dollars or normalized units of happiness. This methodology is unable to do that given the novelty of the topic and the time and space constraints of a term paper. As such, if the internal validity of this study is significantly flawed, then the results of the paper may need to be reinterpreted.

Findings

Two distinct findings related to student preferences emerge from an analysis of this study's survey and interviews. First, as previously expected, during difficult financial times, students prefer those programs and policies that they believe to directly affect them. Second, although students are critical of and wish improvements were made to existing Harvard programs and policies, they are hesitant to cut all funding without a due cause. In this light, given the size of the endowment and Harvard University's institutional strength, students do not find dire financial circumstances to be a due cause to cut funding to Harvard College programs and policies. The following two sub-sections individually expand on each finding.

Direct Preferences

Survey and interview results indicate that Harvard College students overwhelmingly prefer those programs which they believe to both directly benefit themselves and are in their own control. Using a five-point Likert scale, where (1) equals “I fully disagree” and (5) equals “I fully agree,” and the first section of questions listed in Appendix A, students indicated their preference for the following programs and policies, with the mean Likert score rounded up to the nearest half-value appearing within the parentheses:

the House Intramural program (2), the House HoCo program (2.5), the Freshman Advising Program (1.5), the Concentration Advising Program (2), the Undergraduate Council (2.5), the College Events Board (3.5), grants to student organizations (4), grants for personal research and/or travel (4), unlimited swipes to the Harvard dining hall (4.5), and \$130 of Board Plus a year (4).

An analysis of the scores confirms the initial finding: programs and policies, such as BoardPlus or research and/or travel grants, which both directly benefit students and that they completely control are highly preferred relative to programs and policies such as the House HoCo program or the Freshman or Concentration Advising programs, which may or may not directly benefit students and that they may have no control over.

A breakdown of the Likert scores by gender, class year, and race does not indicate significantly different results, except in the case of first-year students responding to the two questions related to Harvard advising programs. In this instance, both average Likert scores are near ‘3’, indicating that first-years have “No Preference.” Nonetheless, given first-year’s inexperience with the advising programs on campus, this result is expected. However, it is surprising to see that preferences do not otherwise significantly shift across class year, gender, and race categories. While further research would need to confirm this finding, this may indicate that student perceptions and preferences are deeply entrenched due to common-held beliefs, reinforcing Arun and Roksa (2010) and Armstrong and Hamilton’s (2015) previous studies related to institutional decisions and social climates within colleges and universities.

The second section of questions listed in Appendix A, indicate a similar finding as previously stated. Since students had to make a binary decision between two related Harvard

College programs or policies—such as House Intramural programs and House HoCo programs—they generally followed their previous preferences and noted that funding should be cut to the program they believed to be less beneficial to their student life on campus. Students indicated that they preferred for funding to be cut to the following programs and policies, with the response percentage breakdown within the parentheses: cut funding to

House Intramural programs (85%) over House Hoco programs (15%)

Freshman Advising programs (75%) over Concentration Advising programs (25%)

Harvard Meal Plans (i.e. limited swipes) (70%) over Board Plus programs (30%)

Undergraduate Council programs (60%) over College Events Board programs (40%)

Student Organizations (55%) over Personal Travel / Research Grant programs (45%)

Analyzing this breakdown of student preferences leads to two surprising insights. First, student program and policy preferences during financially dire times are related to their Likert score preferences during financially “normal” times. This indicates that the shifted financial context does not affect students in the same way that it affects administrators—students continue to prefer what they preferred before, while administrators are required to reprioritize institutional offerings relative to what they believe to be most beneficial and financially sustainable. Second, the level of student consensus in terms of what programs and policies should be cut during financially dire times is striking. While Likert score differences between several of the comparison categories are between 0.5 and 1.0, the respective percent differences range between 10-70%. There may be two reasons for this disparity: (1) student preferences in regard to these binary programs and policies are much more complex than this study’s methodology is able to tease out, or (2) common-held beliefs across the institution bias students to choose one program or policy over the other due to a perceived lack of direct benefit.

Student Hesitancy and Need for a Due Cause

Over the course of ten interviews, I asked students why they indicated the preferences that they did on their surveys and what their thoughts were on a distinct set of three innovative institutional changes on campus that would both increase their autonomy and decrease the cost of education gap (outlined in Appendix B). Before administering the first interview, I anticipated

students to understand the need to make institutional changes during financially difficult times and, as a result, the belief that administrators should make the changes they believed to be necessary to sustain the university. However, after summing up all of my conversations, I found a very different average student response. Rather than being understanding and accepting, students were critical of existing Harvard programs and policies and were hesitant to opt into structural shifts without a persuasive and pressing due cause.

Each of the three structural changes elicited similar responses from the interviewees. At first, most students were taken aback by the suggestions. Comments ranged from “the idea is obviously impractical, but I’ll go along with it” to “Harvard would never give up control of its administrative functions” to “this would be a tough sell to the rest of the student body, just given how complacent we are with our lives here at Harvard.” Nevertheless, after pushing the interviewees to entertain the thought, I continued to ask them about the potential impact and implication that the proposals would have on student life on campus.

In general, answers to this segment of questions were muted or critical. In regard to the Dean of Students Office (DSO) proposal, one interviewee exclaimed that “the DSO doesn’t understand its own constituents, the students.” Another interviewee, a student leader on campus, cited many of the negative interactions he has had with the DSO, stating that “they are slow to act and, when they do, it is just to implement one useless policy after another.” The dining hall proposal solicited similar responses. Interviewees argued that HUDS already “does a bad job at ensuring a variety of food options, especially for vegetarians and vegans.” The interviewee continued by saying that any potential changes would further “entrench the problem, allowing [HUDS] to cut back on options in the name of financial difficulty.” Moreover, two students independently noted that the dining hall reduction proposal would adversely impact student life, “hurting House Life on campus given the lack of a communal space” and forcing students “to unnecessarily spend money in Harvard Square.” In regard to the academic teaching proposal, one student argued that “Harvard should just learn to hire better professors,” while another student proposed their own alternative solution in the form of “teaching Harvard teachers how to teach.” In many ways, this final proposal was seen as the most absurd by the interviewees, insofar as the idea of having peers as your lecturers seemed “unfair” and “contrary to the mission of Harvard.”

While the interviewees were given the time and space to express their thoughts, there was a need to ask the ultimate question after each proposal was thoroughly discussed: should Harvard move forward with such structural shift during financially difficult times? Time after time, this

question what neither met with a decisive “yes” or “no.” Rather, interviewees overwhelmingly argued that there would be no need to do this “given that Harvard would find a way out of their financial difficulty” and because “the university had the endowment to ensure it was sustainable.” This last point, related to the university endowment, was the most striking. After receiving the comment in my first interview, I decided to further probe all future interviewees who brought up the same point, with the hypothesis that student proposal viewpoints may be driven in part by their own viewpoints in regard to Harvard University’s endowment.

After nine additional interviews, where the topic of the university endowment inevitably appeared, these questions paid off. Interviewees continued to express their belief that “Harvard is financially sound” given the forty billion dollars “stored within its reserves.” They also noted that their years at Harvard “were safe,” due to the endowment’s recent ten percent return, and, as such, potential financial difficulties were “years away.” Moreover, one interviewee incessantly insisted that “it’s great that Harvard is planning for the future,” but that administrators should also continue to “fix the programs and policies in place now,” so as to improve student life on campus in the short-term. In this way, students looked to the university’s institutional strength and wherewithal to avoid deciding whether such structural changes should be made to improve the university’s financial position.

Nevertheless, after engaging in such discussion with the interviewees, I asked them for a “yes” or “no” answer as to whether each proposal should be implemented. As expected, the interviewees resoundingly voted in the negative, noting that, while these programs should not be implemented, others, like the ones mentioned in Bacow’s installation speech, “may have a chance at becoming permanent changes across the university.” Notably, the proposals mentioned by Bacow do not pertain to undergraduate students, further pointing to the finding that students prefer those programs and policies that directly affect their lives on campus.

Discussion and Future Research

While designing this study, I did not expect it to be more than a paper related to student preferences during dire financial times. However, given the complex nature of this topic, it also became a study of how student perceptions related to the university’s endowment affect their perceptions of the very programs and policies that may need to be changed. This goes to show

that these topics are intertwined and that student perceptions of their institution's directly affect their own perceptions of the environment around them.

For Harvard administrators, the results of this study should be carefully considered. Across the undergraduate body, there exists information asymmetries as to what the university endowment can and cannot do for the institution. Flawed student perceptions and beliefs push students to continue to ask for program and policy improvements, even if the financial system is unable to undertake such burden. If administrators hope to pivot the university's structure onto a more financially sustainable route, including closing the cost of education gap, then it may require simultaneous education of the student body as to what it will take.

Future areas for research stem from both this need of further student education and this study's methodological limitations. Specifically, understanding the most effective ways to shift student preferences within higher education, rather than just measuring them, is a potential area for exploration. Additionally, designing methods to accurately measure student preferences within hypothetical situations—such as financially difficult times when they don't exist at the time of the survey or interview—is a worthy problem to solve. Finally, replicating parts of this study on other student populations, either at one of the Harvard graduate schools or at an entirely different institution, is important before any widespread shifts occur across the higher education landscape.

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Appendix A

Background and Characteristics: Name, Email, Gender, Race, Class Year, House or Dorm

Preferences (answers on five-point Likert scale):

The House Intramural program is beneficial to your student life on campus.

The House HoCo program is beneficial to your student life on campus.

The Freshman Advising program is beneficial to your student life on campus.

The Concentration Advising program is beneficial to your student life on campus.

The Undergraduate Council is beneficial to your student life on campus.

The College Events Board is beneficial to your student life on campus.

Grants to student organizations are beneficial to your student life on campus.

Grants for personal research and/or travel are beneficial to your student life on campus.

Unlimited swipes to the Harvard dining halls are beneficial to your student life on campus.

\$130 of BoardPlus a year is beneficial to your student life on campus.

Comparisons (binary choice):

During times of dire financial need, should Harvard College cut funding to the House Intramural program and/or the House HoCo program?

During times of dire financial need, should Harvard College cut funding to the Freshman Advising program and/or the Concentration Advising program?

During times of dire financial need, should Harvard College cut funding to the Undergraduate Council and/or the College Events Board program?

During times of dire financial need, should Harvard College cut funding for grants to student organizations and/or grants for personal travel or research?

During times of dire financial need, should Harvard College cut funding to the Harvard Meal Plan (in the form of limited swipes per week) and/or the student BoardPlus program?

Appendix B

Innovative Structural Shifts:

What are your thoughts regarding the Deans of Students Office (DSO)? How does the DSO impact your student life on campus? What DSO programs are you personally aware of? What DSO programs have you personally benefited from? Do you know of anyone who works in the DSO?

Give your general feedback and comments on the following proposed change: remove all current supporting employees out of the DSO, except the head of the DSO, and replace them with student workers with similar job descriptions as the employee that they replaced.

What effect, if any, would this have on your student life on campus? What this be a net positive or negative change for the campus? What effect, if any, would this have on the CEG? Would this change increase or decrease the ability of students to affect their own environment and experiences on campus?

What are your thoughts regarding the 13 dining halls on campus? How have the dining halls impacted your student life on campus? What HUDS programs are you personally aware of beyond the daily meal service? What HUDS programs have you personally benefited from? Do you personally know of anyone who works in a dining hall on campus?

Give your general feedback and comments on the following proposed change: reduce the number of non-Annenberg dining halls on campus from 13 to roughly half at 6. Each neighborhood would be equally affected, and dining hall hours would be extended by one hour to allow for the need to cater to most students at each one.

What effect, if any, would this have on your student life on campus? What this be a net positive or negative change for the campus? What effect, if any, would this have on the CEG? Would this change increase or decrease the ability of students to mix and interact with each other on campus?

What are your thoughts regarding the quality of academic teaching at Harvard College? How have professors and/or lecturers impacted your student life on campus? Are you aware of the distinction between “professors” and “lecturers” at Harvard? What professors and/or lecturers do you personally know on campus?

Give your general feedback and comments on the following proposed change: allow qualified and capable undergraduate and graduate students to replace “Lecturers” and “Senior Lecturers” as primary teaching staff for all Harvard College classes. In essence, the “professor” would now be one of your peers on campus.

What effect, if any, would this have on your student life on campus? What this be a net positive or negative change for the campus? What effect, if any, would this have on the CEG? Would this change increase or decrease the level of academic instruction in courses that were previously taught by “Lecturers” and “Senior Lecturers” on campus?