

**Increasing Member Engagement, Enhancing Membership, and Building an Inclusive
Environment for the Harvard Vietnamese Association**

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My name is Truong Nguyen, and I affirm my awareness of the standards of the Harvard College

Honor Code

Abstract

Cultural and identity-based organizations in higher education, such as the Harvard Vietnamese Association (HVA), often have the mission to foster community and provide space to celebrate a specific culture and heritage. However, due to the highly demanded focus for academics in higher education, there are often low member engagement in social organizations like HVA. This action research project is set to investigate the reason behind HVA's low member commitment and how to increase its member engagement. Interviews were conducted on fifteen Harvard students ranging from the most active members to non active members of HVA. From the interviews, some reasons for low member engagement in HVA were found to be time commitment, different priorities, small size of HVA, amongst other reasons. Suggestions for how to increase member participations, potential events, and how to make HVA more inclusive were collected. A blueprint of actions for increasing member engagement within HVA was produced that put emphasis on outreach focusing on first-years, increasing social media presence, and expansion of type of events while keeping the already existing chill vibe of the organization.

Keywords: Higher education, cultural organization, identity-based, Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American

Introduction

The mission of the Harvard Vietnamese Association (HVA) is to promote awareness of Vietnamese and Vietnamese-American culture, history, and community on campus and within the Greater Boston area. One part of the mission that HVA wants to emphasize is establishing a sense of belonging among self-identified Vietnamese/Vietnamese-American students and creating a safe space and community for students with shared interests for Vietnam and Vietnamese culture to come together. However, compared to the Vietnamese Student Association at a similar peer institution like Yale (Yale ViSA), HVA is much smaller in terms of active members and is therefore limited in the scope of cultural events and activities we can host for our students and community at Harvard. This lack of large events that are often attractive to students could have caused HVA to have less active members, ultimately resulted in a feedback loop. Through this project, I have investigated these differences further between Yale ViSA and HVA to better understand the reason behind HVA's low member participation. Is it because of admissions and the different kinds of students Yale and Harvard admit or the different kinds of students who chose to attend one institution over the other? Or is it because of how HVA is portrayed to the student body?

I focused my project on improving the Vietnamese/Vietnamese-American community on campus through HVA because of how meaningful my Vietnamese identity meant to me. The action research question is: How can an identity-based organization like HVA increase the number of active members and enhance its member engagement? I suspect three possible reasons for the low member participation in HVA that have to do with visibility and appealing. In terms of visibility, low membership in HVA could be explained due to HVA's low visibility which caused students to not know about the existence of HVA. This is perhaps the result of our low

social media presence compared to other organizations on campus. Secondly, HVA could lack resources that are appealing to potential members which caused them to not join HVA or wanting to be engaged. Another reason for this is potential and even current members of HVA could have already found other communities or groups on campus that offered what they want already so they do not need HVA anymore. Therefore, I interviewed to figure out what members and students need to reshape HVA to be more appealing to those specific needs. I envisioned the deliverable of the project is some form of a comprehensive guide, interactive website, and/or social media campaign to provide resources and supports for students within HVA in a way that will foster inclusivity and care from HVA to appeal to the majority of the student population who might be interested in getting involved with HVA.

Literature Review

Across works of literature in sociology, there is a common consensus on the pivotal role of the identity-based organization to provide safe spaces for marginalized students (Yi & Todd, 2020) with similar experiences and interests to connect and form a community during college often serves as “home base” for many students (Bowman & Park, 2014, p. 684; Museus, 2008, p. 579). These findings show a big positive impact ethnic-organization similar to HVA can have on college and university institutions and their student body. In particular, research focus on Asian-American also shows ethnic-organization in college also provides opportunities for its members to better understand their identities and further engage in conversations about race and help push for greater social change (Museus, 2008). This finding informs a possible hypothesis for my research that perhaps students who chose to not be involved with HVA were because they feel disconnected from their Vietnamese identity. On the other hand, it could also mean HVA does not provide sufficient opportunities for members to explore their identities and engage in

social change which is an important factor when one considers to join an identity-based organization. Furthermore, Museus's (2008)'s study on members of Asian American and Black organizations in college showed these organizations often create sources for "cultural familiarity, vehicles for cultural expression and advocacy, and venues for cultural validation" among its members (Museus, 2008, p. 576). It is important to highlight culture and identities within an identity-based organization. This might also suggest inactive members of HVA do not feel the need to seek out these sources mentioned by Museus (2008) or it could also mean HVA lacks these sources relating to culture for students.

Southeast Asian students such as Vietnamese students are often underrepresented at higher education institutions as compared to East Asian students (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). The underrepresentation of Southeast Asian students often creates a need for these students to join an ethnic organization that will provide them with a sense of belonging (Li, 2018; Maramba & Palmer, 2014; Maramba & Musues, 2011; Nguyen, 2017). This finding could suggest that perhaps not many students seek to increase their sense of belonging due to many reasons which result in them not getting involved with HVA. Nguyen's (2017)'s work reveals the importance of a sense of belonging and relatedness within the Vietnamese Student Association (VSA) for member retention and participation (Nguyen, 2017). In Nguyen's (2017) research, members who could not relate to the majority of the current members within the organization will often leave the organization. This suggests the importance of creating an inclusive space that everyone can feel welcome to HVA in order to increase the organization's member participation in the research. Nguyen (2017) also discusses acculturation within the Vietnamese diaspora and the different engagement within VSA as a result of the diverse experiences of being Vietnamese and Vietnamese American. This is a major focus on the research to investigate the diverse

pre-college and during-college experience of Vietnamese students and how they affect their willingness to be involved with HVA. Finally, besides the emphasis on culture and sense of belonging, there could be other possible ways to appeal to students to join HVA such as through mentorship (Maramba & Palmer, 2014). Through the action research project, more values similar to mentorship could potentially be found and be used to reshape HVA to offer more diverse resources and cater to the needs of more students for them to be more involved with HVA.

Methods

Before embarking on data collecting through the interview, I met with a few members of the Executive Board of HVA to get their input on the project in ways that won't reveal too much about what I was trying to do because I had to interview and included them as part of my data. Next, I interviewed Harvard College students who identified themselves as Vietnamese/Vietnamese American to gain a better understanding of what HVA should focus on to appeal to the targeted population of our general members.

I aimed to capture experiences and perspectives from a wide range of levels of engagement with HVA. Therefore, I interviewed an equal number of Executive Board members who are considered as the most active in HVA, active regular non E-Board members, and inactive/non-HVA members. The different types of interviewees and their respective level of engagement and active status are laid out in Table 1. I also included perspectives of both domestic and international students within my interview sample. To find interviews for the research, I conducted a search using the HVA Facebook group chat where the students who joined are those who wish to stay involved with HVA. For nonmembers, I used the College Facebook database and searched for common Vietnamese last names such as "Nguyen" and "Tran" and reached out to as many students as I can for the interview. I suspect the differences

between different student's values and what they seek in their college experience (IV) will influence their decision to join and their level of involvement with HVA (DV).

There are two main goals for the interview. The first goal is to investigate the diverse pre-college and during-college experience of Vietnamese students and how they affect their willingness to be involved with HVA. This is done through asking questions that allow interviewee to reflect on their identity as Vietnamese/Vietnamese American and the role of identity placed throughout their life during childhood to now. For instance, one question asked in this first part of the interview was "how would you say your Vietnamese identity shaped or influenced your experiences growing up (i.e at home, school, work, etc.)" (Appendix 1). By allowing interviewees, who are current members or potential members of HVA, to share their stories and experiences, it could create a sense of belonging and that they are being recognized and heard by the organization which in term could help with getting members engaged better in the future as well. These information gathered from personal stories and experiences helped better capture the nuances within the demographic of HVA members that goes beyond being Vietnamese or Vietnamese American. The second goal of the interview is to investigate interests in HVA and potential activities, programming HVA could offer. This goal is achieved through asking questions that allow interviewees to provide feedback and opinions about HVA in general. For instance, some of the questions that were asked include "What do you most appreciate about HVA activities?" and "What kind of events or programming would you be interested in attending that you would like to see in HVA in the future?". Furthermore, these questions also allowed interviewees to reflect on potential barriers that prevent active engagement and give suggestions on how HVA can build a more inclusive environment for all members.

After collecting qualitative data from the interviewees, I analyzed the data from the interviews qualitatively to see what type of values correlate to which level of engagement one have with HVA. Through better understanding what potential and current HVA members hope for their undergraduate experience, I then shaped the deliverable in ways that will meet those needs and wants from the students and make HVA seem more appealing and inclusive for all.

Results

Findings: Reasons for Low Participation

Time commitment. The first reason that was mentioned by many of the interviewees for a possible barrier to participation in HVA was time commitment. When asked to reflect about their academic and social experiences at Harvard thus far, some interviews express the challenging nature of the academic life at Harvard despite the numerous available support systems available for the students. In particular, one first-year interviewee said that the academic at Harvard is challenging but in a positive way. However, they found themselves “drowning in work all the time” and having to “learn for [themselves]” when taking classes. Due to having a lot of things going on with academic and other potential extracurricular, some interviewee said they were “overwhelmed” and could miss out on the chance to engage in HVA because they were “busy with school works”. Furthermore, another interviewee, a current sophomore, also said that they did not “have time to be involved” but still deeply appreciate the existence of HVA as a space and what it could offer to the community at Harvard. Overall, not having enough time to be involved with HVA is one of the challenges that will need to be overcome to help increase member engagement in the future

Friends. Another common trend among the interviewees when they talk about why someone or even himself joins HVA is because of their friends inviting them to join. One current

senior interviewee who was not actively involved in HVA said that students often join certain organizations because their “friends drag them along” to join. Hence, it is difficult for students to join HVA if they don’t already have someone they know who is in HVA already. This effect is worsened when HVA is already so small and has very low membership and member engagement already so it makes it very hard to get new members to join. However, this led to very great suggestions from many interviewees to shift the focus of recruitments on first-years or pre-frosh (incoming freshmen) since they will most likely not join HVA simply because their friends are already in it.

Priorities. Similar to the reason for time commitment, many interviewees discussed their priorities in college through interview questions that show students often place their academic priorities over social ones. For instance, one interviewee who is a current sophomore at the time of the interview talked about how hard it is to “prioritize academics for social”. When asked about what the interviewees want to get the most out of their college experience, many talked about how important education is to them. Many interviewees discussed their Vietnamese identity and how it influenced their view on education and attaining a college degree. For instance, one interviewee whose parents and themselves are immigrants to the U.S. talked about how “education is the only thing that can open doors and provide opportunities” which explain why education and academics are often prioritized over social life at Harvard. This ultimately caused less students to seek involvement with HVA, a social organization, due to their focus on academic pursuits.

Efforts and Size. Surprisingly, the small size of HVA which creates a tight knit community within the organization could also become a potential barrier that prevent other students from getting involved with HVA. For instance, one interviewee who is a current senior

mentioned that the small size of HVA could affect visibility and having less people in the organization overall make it “difficult if you do not already know someone in the organization already”. When the group is so small and everyone within the organization is very close to each other already, other members outside from that “inner circle”, as stated by one interviewee, found it harder to fit in. Hence, some interviewees feel this “additional efforts” needed in order to really be involved and engage with HVA mostly due to the small size of the organization.

Vietnamese american. There are often two main groups of students that HVA try to appeal to, students who are in touch with their Vietnamese culture (i.e. international Vietnamese students) and students who are less in touch with their Vietnamese heritage (i.e. Vietnamese American students). As of currently, HVA is portrayed and caters more toward the Vietnamese-American students experience and this leads to us not being inclusive for the other population of potential HVA members. The majority of the interviewees are Vietnamese American with exception for two interviewees who are international students from Vietnam. Furthermore, there are more Vietnamese American students at Harvard, compared to Vietnamese international students. However, HVA should still be more inclusive and appealing to these international students as well. One interviewee who was not an international student but still felt that HVA is often “perceived as a space for Vietnamese American students” which makes it difficult for international students or students who are not identified as being Vietnamese American to get involved.

Findings: Increase Engagement & Membership

At the end of the interview, interviewees were asked a series of questions that allow them to give suggestions on how to make HVA more inclusive and survey their potential idea of events and activities that would interest them:

”What do you most appreciate about HVA activities? What kind of events or programming would you be interested in attending that you would like to see in HVA in the future? How do you think HVA can be a more inclusive space and appeal to more students?”

After analyzing the responses from fifteen interviewees, three major main areas of focus of outreach, food & culture, and chill vibe were found that HVA can focus on going forward to create a more inclusive space for all members and therefore increase member engagement within the organization.

Outreach. To increase member engagement within HVA, the first thing that must be done is to increase the number of active members in HVA. Many interviewees offered suggestions to focus recruitment efforts on pre-frosh and first year students. Engaging first year students early on and keeping them engaged will produce long term and more enthusiastic members for the organization in the long term. For instance, one interviewee who is a current senior suggested “perhaps thinking about first years” in terms of outreach and recruitment. Many interviewees also expressed pleas for the First Year Retreat that HVA hosts every year. Furthermore, the majority of active and board members of HVA who are most active and have high engagement with the organization joined HVA during the freshman year. Therefore, targeting first year in recruiting will be crucial to ensure more engagement within HVA in future years. Another interviewee expressed satisfaction with HVA’s social media presence and encouraged HVA to use social media more to communicate with other students to show off the amazing community of HVA to potential members. Finally, one interviewee said that “not many people know about HVA so doing more events more broadly, in collaboration with other orgs.” To push for outreach, HVA could potentially collaborate with other organizations on campus to

reach more students. Collaborating with other organizations who share similar values and missions with HVA can show solidarity and help increase the organization's visibility to reach a wider audience.

Foods & culture. One major common trend across many interviewees's responses has to do with food and Vietnamese culture. Many current members of HVA said that one of the best parts about HVA was the ability to "eat together, get food together." during many of the social events we have throughout the school year. Another interviewee also mentioned the importance of having "cultural events" within HVA and how "part of Viet culture is food and go get food where bonding happens" is crucial to the organization for everyone to get to know each other. Another first-year board member of HVA also expressed similar feelings and said that "food ties people together." One senior active member of HVA shared what they love about the HVA community is that they "don't have to explain [their] culture and why [they] like certain foods." Having that shared interest and respect for Vietnamese cuisine and culture is crucial to building community within HVA. This is definitely an element of HVA that should be preserved or expanded on to create a more inclusive and safe space for students with interests in Vietnam and its culture to come together.

Lowkey & chill vibe. Similar to aspects of food and culture, many interviewees also express satisfaction for the current chill vibe of HVA. HVA is a small organization and we operate more as a casual "family" or group of friends rather than being a formal organization compared to other bigger organizations on campus. One interviewee who have been to some HVA events said that they are pleased with the "wide range of activities with retreat and fun social events" that HVA hosted and what nice is that "there's no pressure to be present at these events." Furthermore, another interviewee also mentioned they would prefer and like it when

HVA does not have any “mentally raining events.” Therefore, it is important to keep this aspect in mind to maintain the informal atmosphere of HVA.

Wider range of events. Finally, many interviewees express the need for HVA to expand on the kinds of events we offer. Currently, HVA mostly focuses on holding casual social events for members to bond with each other. For example, HVA hosts many game nights, movie nights, and Vietnamese food outings to celebrate Tet (Vietnamese New Year) and other holidays. When asked for potential events that would interest them, many interviewees provide various suggestions for future events. The two major suggestions were for HVA to “push for more political involvement” events and bigger scale cultural events that involve the larger community beyond HVA. For instance, one interviewee suggested for HVA to host “fashion shows” and “cross-cultural night” that will allow the greater Harvard community to come together to celebrate Vietnamese culture and heritage. Similarly, one interview suggested that HVA should be “doing more events with the general Harvard population” and broadly having “more events that highlight other aspects of being Vietnamese.” Finally, another sophomore interviewee also expressed interest in having more political events such as speaker events about issues in Vietnam such as the “autracity agent orange.” Ultimately, expanding events beyond casual social gatherings can help appeal to more members of HVA and therefore increase the member engagement of the organization.

Discussion

Blueprint for Actions

Based on the four major findings of suggestions from the interviews and the reasons for low member engagement within HVA, a blueprint of actions were put together to address these

points. The blueprint of actions contain recommendations in terms of strategies for outreach and potential future events that can help increase member engagement within HVA.

In terms of outreach to first year students and getting these students involved early on with HVA, we can provide more support and resources that are helpful to these students.

Continue to target first year students and offer as much support and resources as possible so they can see what HVA can provide to them and in turn they will be more likely to join and be involved with HVA. This can be done through providing the first year with a guide with tips and advice that cater for the Vietnamese experience at Harvard. The guide provides advice on which classes to take, best place to get Viet foods in Boston amongst other tips on how to navigate Harvard as a Vietnamese student. This guide will serve as a welcome and gift from HVA to the first years with the hope that it can help them throughout their first year and will make them more likely to join HVA to gain more support similar to the guide. Moreover, to increase media presence of HVA, there could be more videos created in the future that can showcase and highlight the community within HVA to potentially prospective students and the public. One example of this is the Welcome video that was created during Visitas 2021 as a way to welcome the Class of 2025 to Harvard. This allows students to be excited about the community of HVA and will encourage them to join and stay engaged over the years with HVA. Similarly, HVA should increase social media activities and presence to reach more students. For instance, HVA could do more takeovers, using instagram bingo cards, donation and dares to be more interactive on social media and engage current and future members and the community online. Finally, HVA can participate in more collaborative events and activities such as the Pan Asian Visitas Panel during Visitas 2021 to reach more students.

In terms of hosting events, HVA should put focus on keeping and expanding events that involve food and Vietnamese culture. HVA can engage members to bring back the Fashion Show that we used to have in the past to engage members in larger scale events that involve the community at Harvard participating in as well. Other food related events such as food making workshops and pho night fundraisers should also be hosted at least once a semester to allow the community to come together to learn more about Vietnamese cuisine and culture. Finally, all interviewees agreed that HVA should continue to keep the chill and low key vibe of the organization where people can come and go as they want. Making events like casual game nights, food socialism, and study breaks very low stress and more casual for members to participate in. Finally, HVA should aim to expand the types of events by having at least one speaker event (political, civic engagement, etc.) and one pre-professional event that connects members to professionals or career-related events each semester.

Going Forward: Next Steps

To ensure these findings and recommendations make the most impact on HVA, I will be sharing the results and findings with other board Members of HVA and working on next steps and setting priorities moving forward in preparation for future school years. For immediate actions, HVA will continue recruiting and welcoming first year students to secure active members for next semester. HVA members will work on revamping The Guide 2025 and plan for Summer Pairing Sibling Family to keep first years and members engaged during summer. Since I will be stepping down as co-president for HVA, I will be assisting in the transitioning of HVA leadership and set goals and plans for next semester to assist the new co-presidents with their initiatives and vision for HVA. The HVA Executive Board can start planning for large scale events like the Pho night fundraiser and Fashion show during the summer. Another potential idea

is to incorporate the interview talk into a one-on-one chat with HVA members to gain more inputs and really get to know everyone to better serve everyone in HVA.

Limitations & Extensions

There are a few limitations to the research and the research design that should be acknowledged in order to improve future action research. The research only included a small sample size of students at Harvard of only 15 students so there are other perspectives not included in the final result. Furthermore, only two of the interviewees were Vietnamese international students so international students' perspectives are not well represented within the final result. Future research can include more international students perspectives. Furthermore, future research can include a larger sample size to capture more perspectives within HVA. The interviews were conducted online through Zoom which could make it less personal compared to in person interviews. Future research can be conducted using in person interviews to produce better results.

Conclusion

The action research was aimed at finding the reasons behind HVA's low member participation and how to increase member engagement within HVA. In the end, the result from fifteen interviews showed two major areas of focus to increase member engagement through outreach and through maintaining and improving certain aspects of HVA events. The ultimate goal of the blueprint of actions is to make sure HVA can cater its appearances and events to member's needs and for them to be able to gain the most out of their involvement with HVA. This will then encourage more people to join HVA and stay engaged throughout the years.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

In order to avoid biases in data collection, I will mask my research topic to the interviewees by framing the purpose of the study to be about the general experiences of self-identified Vietnamese/Vietnamese American Harvard college students.

Appendix 1. Interview Questions:

1. Tell me more about yourself. How would you say your Vietnamese identity shaped or influenced your experiences growing up (i.e at home, school, work, etc.)
2. How has your Vietnamese identity influenced your values, how you view/live your life and the goals you have for yourself?
 - a. Did being Vietnamese affect the career goal you have for yourself?
 - b. Did your Vietnamese identity play a role in deciding where you want to go to school?
3. What do you most want to get out of your college experience? What do you want to focus most on during your college years?
4. How would you describe your experiences at Harvard in general? How satisfied are you as of right now, on a scale from 1 to 10? Elaborate on the rating
 - a. Please elaborate on your academic experiences at Harvard (favorite classes, etc..)
 - b. Please elaborate on your social experiences at Harvard (extracurriculars, etc..)
5. Where is your safe space or home on campus? How so and why? How did you learn about and get involved in these groups/communities/organizations in the first place?
6. How has your Vietnamese identity influenced your academic experience at Harvard? Or your social experience?

7. How can your experiences at Harvard be improved upon? Is there anything you wish existed or Harvard can provide to students like you to help improve your experiences? Whether any student orgs can help support you in your experience.
- How can your academic experience be improved?
 - How can your social experience be improved?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share or talk about or any questions I should ask that would help me better understand your experiences at Harvard?

If Interviewee is not familiar with HVA: Do you know anything about the HVA, or how familiar you are with the events, resources, and programming that HVA hosts? What prevents you from knowing about or going to HVA events and what kind of events or programming would you be interested in attending that you would like to see in HVA in the future? Finally, how do you think HVA can be a more inclusive space and appeal to more students?

If Interviewee know about HVA: What do you most appreciate about HVA activities? What are some potential barriers that could have prevented you from knowing about HVA events or attending events hosted by HVA? What kind of events or programming would you be interested in attending that you would like to see in HVA in the future? How do you think HVA can be a more inclusive space and appeal to more students?

Table 1

Type of Interviewee	Active status	Level of engagement within HVA
Executive Board Members (5)	Most active	High engagement
Members (5)	Active	Moderate to high engagement
Non-Members (5)	Not active	Low to no engagement