

Making a House a Home: The Integration of Sophomores into the Harvard Housing System

Ian Saum
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Abstract

Within the Harvard housing system, university-funded House Committees (HoCos) sponsor events and help foster a sense of community. I conducted interviews with students in Cabot House students to figure out what students seek in a house, and how HoCo can best help integrate sophomores into house life. The interviews point to how students want their house to be a place of comfort, support, and familiarity during their college experience. However, students begin living in the house for their sophomore year, at which point many students already have pre-established communities on campus and are not looking to be engaged with their housing community. Additionally, students find it difficult to branch out beyond their pre-existing communities and take the first step towards engaging with house life. As a HoCo, it is a priority to find ways to effectively integrate incoming sophomores into the house to best enhance their residential experience. This can be done through increased interactions with upperclassmen, outreach, promoting inclusivity, and hosting a diverse series of events to help first-semester sophomores integrate themselves into the housing community.

¹ I am willing to share this paper on www.husrhe.fas.harvard.edu for open access via www.hurshe.fas.edu

HONOR CODE AFFIRMATION

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

Jan Saum

Executive summary / Blueprint for action

Harvard College undergraduates live in unique residential communities in one of twelve residential houses starting in the fall of their sophomore year. Within the Harvard housing system, university-funded House Committees (HoCos) sponsor events and help foster a sense of community. I serve as the co-chair for HoCo for Cabot House. The goal of a HoCo is to create the best house community possible, and Cabot HoCo does this through events like formals, study breaks, stein clubs (weekly special events like karaoke and trivia nights that serve both non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages), wellness programming, and intramural sports. I conducted interviews with students in Cabot House to answer the following questions:

1. What does an ideal house at Harvard look like?
2. What can be done during a student's first semester in the house that can help integrate students into the Cabot community?
3. How can HoCo help get students to buy-into a community?

Overall, I conducted ten interviews, five with members of HoCo, four with students not in HoCo, and one former HoCo member. The interviews pointed to how students wanted their house to be a place of comfort, support, and familiarity during their college experience.

However, there are three main barriers that prevent from student engagement with their house. First, every resident is coming into the house with different levels of existing communities at Harvard. Next, sophomores are already a year into their college experience, and are therefore less likely to adapt their lifestyle to fit their house. Finally, it is difficult for students to take the first step towards buying-in.

My blueprint for action is for HoCo to help integrate sophomores into our residential community beyond our existing programming by creating more inter-class bonding opportunities, increasing outreach with a sophomore engagement committee, more intentionality, addressing barriers, and supporting other groups.

Ultimately, it is the sophomore's responsibility to branch out and make an effort to join the Cabot community if they wish to have it facilitate a meaningful increase in the quality of their life. HoCo events are designed to encourage them to do that.

Introduction

Students of Harvard College experience a college residential system unlike any other in the country. Self-selected groups of between 1-8 students are randomly sorted into one of twelve upperclassmen houses during the spring of their first year during a college-wide tradition called “housing day.”² Over the next three years at the college, students live, eat, socialize, and experience life within their house. Each of the twelve houses provide unique traditions, amenities like art spaces, recreational facilities, dance studios, grills, and more that help shape the culture, personality, and values of the house. However, while each house has its own distinctive identities as communities, one commonality between all houses are “student-led House Committees (HoCos), which are responsible for building community by organizing and sponsoring many House activities.”³ This paper will address my role as the co-chair of the House Committee for Cabot House, and specifically how I can use my role to help integrate sophomores into the house during the fall semester of their sophomore year.

The goal of a HoCo is to create the best house community possible, and Cabot HoCo does this through events like formals, study breaks, stein clubs (weekly special events like karaoke and trivia nights that serve both non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages), wellness programming, and intramural sports. As a co-chair, I oversee all aspects of house life and am expected to provide ideas, communicate with administration, support our sixteen committee members in their programming, and I make it my onus to enhance the housing experiencing for all Cabot students. House Committees are funded by the university and overseen by both the Dean of Students Office and the residential houses. Co-Chair responsibilities are constantly in flux, yet largely consist of doing the unnoticed, thankless work that goes into running social events and hosting programming. However, running a HoCo comes with a plethora of logistical, financial, and systemic obstacles. For the purpose of this paper, I will be primarily addressing how I intend to combat the systemic obstacles of student engagement that is present when running Cabot HoCo.

When students are properly integrated into the housing system, there is the opportunity for a house to have an incredibly positive impact on a student’s college experience. The houses are one of the more unique communities at Harvard. It is a rare opportunity for a diverse group of students from multiple friend groups, class years, and concentrations to come together.

² “Upperclassmen,” Harvard College, accessed May 05, 2019, <https://college.harvard.edu/student-residential-life/residential-life/upperclass>.

³ “Upperclassmen.” Ibid.

However, the housing system is also a unique community because students do not choose to be a part of their assigned house. The randomized nature of the system allows for both the house to act as a microcosm of the wider college, but it also can create resentment and unnecessary stress. The houses are commonly grouped into “Quad” houses and “River” houses, and the Quad houses, largely because of their slightly further distance from campus, are historically viewed as more undesirable for first year students prior to housing day.⁴ Cabot is located in the Quad, and because of the location, many of the freshmen on whose doors we knock on housing day are going to wish that it was somebody else at their door. Yet, while it is true that Cabot is a slightly further walk from the yard than other houses, this is not a fact that should be the soul definition of a house. Cabot is a vibrant, close-knit community with so many amazing things to offer students. Students who choose to buy-into the house community can find a qualitative improvement in their college experience, and as a HoCo co-chair, I am determined to show our new students that we deserve that chance.

This paper will serve as action research towards my second semester serving as co-chair of the Cabot House Committee, when I will be working towards integrating sophomores into house life. The questions guiding my research are as follows:

1. What does an ideal house at Harvard look like?
2. What can be done during a student’s first semester in the house that can help integrate students into the Cabot community?
3. How can HoCo help get students to buy-into a community?

I believe that a student’s first semester in the house is the most critical time frame in which potentially to get students engaged in house life. While there are significant opportunities for different levels of engagement throughout a student’s three years in the housing system, the first semester is the time period that sets the tone for a student’s experience. Cabot’s current HoCo is largely filled with students who immediately bought into the community, primarily through our HoCo sophomore rep program, where we place first-semester sophomores on HoCo to shadow positions and give them an active role upon entering the house. One constraint of this program, however, is the limited number of spots available. With my action research, I hope to find ways

⁴Chris Kuang and Chris Kuang, "Harvard's Most (and Least) Desired Houses: Housing Day 2017," Medium, March 08, 2017, , accessed May 06, 2019, <https://medium.com/harvard-open-data-project/housingday-4b0bd5e33b3e>.

to expand the reach and inclusivity of HoCo and our programming. This research is designed for how Cabot House as a whole, and specifically the Cabot House Committee, can help integrate sophomores into a Harvard residential community, and this paper is beneficial not only for House Committees, but also the broader Harvard residential community in finding ways to foster engagement in the Harvard house system among incoming sophomores.

Literature Review

In my research, I will be looking closely at how on-campus residential communities can best foster community for their students. For Cabot HoCo to create an amazing community, we first need an effective committee filled with leaders who feel great autonomy and take pride in their role. As co-chair, the onus is on me to ensure other student leaders feel engaged. The Susana Contreras Bloomdahl and Joy Navan article “Student Leadership in a Residential College: From Dysfunction to Effective Collaboration” notes that “empowerment and trust are key factors in building effective groups”⁵ specifically within a residential college community. The article states that communities are more cohesive when there is little dysfunction on the leadership levels. Our committee consists of sixteen members, and our effective collaboration within the HoCo is the first step in ensuring our success. Previous literature suggests that ensuring high autonomy, agency, and trust are key factors in promoting a healthy HoCo.

Scholarship on residential communities at universities points to specific aspects that correlate to a student’s sense of community within a space on campus. Joseph B. Berge’s “Students’ Sense of Community in Residence Halls, Social Integration, and First-Year Persistence” names three key factors that promote student engagement within a space: identity, solidarity, and interaction.⁶ Specifically, “students’ needs to feel as if they belong to a specific campus group before feeling committed to the institution as a whole.”⁷ Due to this, the first semester for students living in Cabot is especially critical in getting students excited about the house, and promoting feelings of belonging. Berge states that local level engagement is important for successful socialization into larger system. Applicable to the case of Cabot House,

⁵ Erb, Natalee M., Matthew S. Sinclair, and John M. Braxton. "Fostering a Sense of Community in Residence Halls: A Role for Housing and Residential Professionals in Increasing College Student Persistence." *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2015): 84-108.

⁶ Berger, Joseph B. "Students' Sense of Community in Residence Halls, Social Integration, and First-Year Persistence." *Journal of College Student Development* 38, no. 5 (1997): 441-52.

⁷Berger, *ibid.*

we can expand on this theory by targeting not only individuals but also blocking groups, the small groups of students that are sorted into the house together.

Natalee M. Erb, Matthew S. Sinclair, and John M. Braxton expand on Berge's article in "Fostering a sense of community in residence halls: a role for housing and residential professionals in increasing college student persistence." Taking the concepts of identity, solidarity, and interaction in creating community, Erb et al note that "efforts should be made to offer residents the opportunity to identify with their residence hall." Some ways the article suggests this can be done is through signature events, hall symbols, purpose driven programming and providing space to determine goals and beliefs. All of these are important aspects I will consider during my action research and blueprints for action. Emphasis will be placed on promoting interaction, because "community cannot be built in a vacuum."⁸ Getting students invested in HoCo programming is of the utmost priority. However, current scholarship is focused mainly on traditional college residential housing, whereas Harvard has a unique situation. Our target audience, unlike previous literature, is on first-semester sophomores, many of whom already have communities established on campus and may not be searching for one within their residential community. My action research will focus on how HoCo can help students feel an immediate sense of belonging in the house, with targeted and purposeful programming towards first-semester sophomores. This will be done to promote strong identification with the house and encourage buy-in into the house community. The target audience for this action research is the incoming sophomores Cabot House class of 2022, and I hope to use this paper to help foster a more engaged Cabot community through HoCo programming.

Methods (Including Limitations and Positionality)

To collect data for this paper, I used qualitative methods and interviewed students in Cabot House with varying degrees of involvement, both with HoCo and other house-specific groups. Because measuring a community is nearly impossible to properly quantify, conducting interviews allowed me to hear the stories and experiences of Cabot students with different backgrounds, concentrations, class years, and engagement within the house. The initial interview questions were inspired by qualitative survey responses from a survey sent out to Cabot students

⁸ Erb, Natalee M., Matthew S. Sinclair, and John M. Braxton. "Fostering a Sense of Community in Residence Halls: A Role for Housing and Residential Professionals in Increasing College Student Persistence." *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (2015): 84-108.

via the open house email list by two sophomore students in Cabot working, in tandem with Cabot's sophomore advising tutor, towards revamping the sophomore advising process in Cabot. The survey asked two questions about what could be done to make Cabot feel more like home. Because it was poorly advertised, there were only seven anonymous responses. However, the responses highlighted themes that would appear in my interview guide and influenced what I looked for while coding the interviews. The interviews helped provide context to student experience in Cabot House from varying perspectives.

During my research, I conducted nine interviews. Over the course of eight solo interviews and one two-person group interview, I interviewed ten students living in Cabot who varied across class year and house involvement. Of the ten students I interviewed, three of them were first-term HoCo members, two were second-term HoCo members, one was a former HoCo member, and four were not HoCo members. All of the interviews were conducted in-person, and half of the interviewees were recruited online via a personal message, while the other half were recruited in person while I was in Cabot House.

To analyze the data, I coded the interviews to find key themes and patterns for how a student chooses to engage with a house community, how the students defined their own experience, and what students are looking for in a house community. Looking at the members of HoCo, I looked for how their experiences helped shape their high-engagement with the house, what led them to buy-into the housing system, and important factors leading to Cabot serving as one of their main communities. Similarly, with non-HoCo members, I looked for what communities already existed for them on campus, what they wanted out of a house, and what barriers they face in getting involved with house life. I received consent from all interviewees to record the interviews, and for the sake of confidentiality, I will only be referring to them as students.

Before going into my findings, it is important to note several limitations of my research. First, Cabot HoCo is only one piece of what helps foster Cabot community. While we are a university-funded group, there are several house-funded groups that help create and shape the house. Cabot HoCo positionality in the university gives us the resources to be prolific in programming, but we acknowledge that the diversity of Cabot student-groups is critical to student engagement within the house. There is an art space (Cabot Third Space), theater group (Cabot Theater Board), formal dinner series (Cabot Formal Hall), and cafe (Cabot Cafe) that are

student-run, and these Cabot-specific groups have similar goals and motivations as HoCo. While there is significant overlap between HoCo members and the other student-groups—for example, I am involved in Cabot Formal Hall, Cabot Theater productions, and the art space—these groups are all independent groups serving the Cabot community. Additionally, my research looks specifically at Cabot House, and not at the eleven other undergraduate houses. It is highly likely that the experiences of students vary greatly from house to house.

Another limitation of my research is the potential biases, as my sample might not be representative of the general population of Cabot House. HoCo members are personally invested in the success of a houses community, highly engaged, and sought a community from the housing system. Additionally, the four non-HoCo members I interviewed were all people with whom I was familiar because they are present in the house. There are many students who use their house as strictly a place to sleep, and because of those students disinterest in the house community, I had no access point to conduct interviews. Every student's expectations and wants of the housing system are unique to their overall Harvard experience, so while I was unable to gather a sample of Cabot representative of the general population, I was intentional in gathering students that varied by class year. My sample included three members of the class of 2019, four members of the class of 2020, and three members of the class of 2021 to make the sample more representative of the composition of the house. Additionally, two of the people interviewed are members of athletics teams, and the importance of that is two-fold. First, athletes are incredibly prevalent at Harvard, and second, because athletes likely have strong senses of community provided by their teams, the impact of that may affect their desire to engage in house life. Lastly, there is potential for bias because of my positionality as co-chair of Cabot HoCo. Because of my positionality, I was intentional about choosing a sample that allowed for a variety of perspectives to shape my research. These perspectives will be addressed in the next section of this paper.

Data and Findings

The first step I took in formulating a blueprint for action from my research was to define the goals of Cabot HoCo. Ultimately, Cabot HoCo is hoping to enhance the housing experience of all Cabot House residents. While most students who identify strongly with their house have positive experiences, it is difficult to get some students to “buy-into” the house experience. As

one student⁹ put it, we are “working to provide social events and spaces for people.” While some use the house mainly as a place for sleep, there are many others seeking a place they can call home. As a HoCo, I believe it is our duty not to force our own definition of a house community onto the members of the house, but rather help enhance the housing experience for all who choose to participate. We aim to provide an inclusive, welcoming space for everyone in the house to address the different wants and needs of our residents. Our goal is to find out how we can best enhance the residential experience.

To best achieve our goals as a HoCo, I looked for what values students desired in an “ideal house” and how Cabot fits into that image. Several themes emerged, but the most prominent were that an ideal house is welcoming, open, and inclusive. When speaking about ways Cabot fit into the ideal image of a Harvard house, one student¹⁰ told me “the culture here is a lot more conducive to two people just walking up to each other and actually meeting each and connecting.” The welcoming nature of a house is something people claim to be a major factor in the shaping the housing community. One respondent¹¹ said “I know everyone in the dining hall... even if we're not close friends, like I know everyone's name, and I, you know, say hi, and it's just really nice to like, come back to a place where you really feel at home and feel accepted. And like, I feel like I can be myself. That's ideal to me.” To many people, an ideal house is one where they can feel comfortable and familiar.

Familiarity can go a long way in making an individual feel welcomed, and later engaged with their house. There is comfort in the familiarly because “it's a good feeling when other people know you.”¹² For one resident of Cabot¹³ I spoke with, the small size of houses helped them find community they sought coming into college and missed from their original home. They told me, “ I went to a super small High School. And coming into Harvard, my big concern was like, in a big place, how do I like find my community. And I think the house system is like a really great way to do that.” For those that seek it, the house provides a place to find familiarity and positivity that is not always present in other communities at Harvard. Cabot, specifically, places emphasis on creating a space for students filled with kindness, openness, and inclusion. One student¹⁴ noted that Cabot students “all present this sort of attitude of, of radical openness

⁹ Interview 7

¹⁰ Interview 1

¹¹ Interview 4

¹² Interview 2

¹³ Interview 4

¹⁴ Interview 1

and, and radical loving, and sort of just establish very clearly that this is how Cabot house is going to be.” Cabot is described by many as “a big and open community”¹⁵ that presents an idea of “everyone being everyone else’s friend.”¹⁶ The established culture of Cabot focused on community helps it create an environment for those seeking community to thrive.

The house is able to bring together a diverse group of students that one Cabot resident said “I definitely wouldn’t have met otherwise.”¹⁷ The familiarity of the dining hall that many students indicated was critical to their sense of belonging in the house is not present for freshman, who all eat in the same dining hall, one that serves over four times the amount of students that most house do. The dining hall is an important place not only for eating, but also socializing, and the smaller dining hall creates a more intimate, familiar environment. Another student¹⁸ claimed that “freshman year you make superficial relationships... you never have a reason to branch outside of close friends.” In their first-year, students can close themselves off from forming other relationships if they find comfort in the ones they already have, and additional friendships can seem “superficial.” The smaller size of the houses creates a comfort that leads to more interactions that help students feel a sense of belonging if they choose to expand beyond their close circles of friends. However, it was clear in my research that every student is coming into their house with different levels of existing communities already at Harvard, and, thus, not everyone is seeking a community from their houses. In addition, some students have lifestyles that are not conducive to house life, and find it difficult to take the first step into engaging the community.

For some students, there is little desire to be engaged with the house community as a whole if they are happy with the communities they already have in place. One student¹⁹ I spoke with talked about how they’ve heard people speak about how they “don’t want community pushed on them. They’re like, ‘I don’t want house life pushed on me,’ So.. you know, we can’t infringe on that.” Running a group like HoCo, where we are hoping to serve a community with members who did not ask to be a part of it, has the challenge of providing people with outlets, while not trying to define their experience. One of the main pre-existing communities people have coming into the house are their blockmates. During my interviews, it was clear that

¹⁵ Interview 8

¹⁶ Interview 1

¹⁷ Interview 4

¹⁸ Interview 5

¹⁹ Interview 3

individuals were more likely to get involved if they had blockmates equally eager to get involved. One student²⁰ told me “my block mates were not super involved” and how that changed their dynamic with the house because “I wish that was something I could have changed, because, like, the people you're comfortable with are your blockmates... You choose to block with them so you gravitate towards them.” It was thought that “Freshman year, you kind of just are meeting a lot of people...sophomore year I can find spend a lot of times with my blockmates.” Because blocking groups go into the house together, it is the expectation for incoming sophomores that their blockmates will be the defining aspect of their experience in the house. Students that have strong senses of community from other campus groups are less likely to be engaged. If a sense of community is being adequately met elsewhere, there is little reason for a student to want to become engaged in a house community.

Many of the students I spoke with were surprised by the role the house played in their life and did not expect the active community. One student²¹ said that “as a freshman, I never realized how big house life would be” and another²² said “I didn't even know what it meant to live in a house or to have a community.” The fact that many students who eventually engage with the community are coming in with limited understanding of the positive role house life can play on the Harvard experience shows there is immense potential to reach students through HoCo. However, blockmates can still manage to dictate the experience, even for those who came in seeking a housing community. One student²³, who said they were excited coming in, said “some blockmates were not excited about it (getting housed in the Quad) and so that sort of dampened the experience a little bit.” While it is sad that not everyone is going to be invested in house life, it can be defeating to see others make no effort to “become a part of the community and enjoy themselves.”²⁴ The major drawback of a HoCo is that only people actively trying to get engaged in the community will take part.

Sophomores coming into the house are already a year into their college experience, and are thus less likely to adapt their lifestyle to fit their house, which presents another unique barrier to engaging students for HoCo, because students have different expectations for their communities. One student²⁵ noted that “you can have like, amazing marketing literally targeted

²⁰ Interview 8

²¹ Interview 5

²² Interview 4

²³ Interview 6

²⁴ Interview 7

²⁵ Interview 2

to a group of people. But if they're like, I'm too busy, I have too much homework, I committed to doing something else. Like, you won't get them to do things with you, even if it's like totally perfect for them.” Students with no interest in joining a community, for whatever reason, are incredibly hard to reach. Friends and activities located in different parts of campus provided an active barrier for house engagement. One student²⁶ commented about how HoCo is hindered by the fact that there are “so many people who only come back to like, basically sleep.” This was noted by several students I interviewed. I heard the story of a student²⁷ who had an “adoptive blocking group” they would do problems sets and homework with who lived on the river, and how that created a barrier to engaging in the Cabot community, just because of the limited amount of time they would spend in the house. This led to them saying “Sophomore year it (Cabot) didn't feel like home because I was transitioning from having friends who are not in the quad.” This was a recurring theme for students who were not a part of HoCo.

My two-person interview was with a pair of roommates not involved with HoCo who praised the community they felt freshman year in their small, 13-person entryway, and how they were disappointed by the lack of similar community they felt in their entryway in the house. They attribute the decrease in community felt to being the only sophomore students in their entryway sophomore year. During freshman year they would knock on their neighbors' doors all the time to hang out, a situation that has not been replicated in the house. One²⁸ of them said, “quad people aren't around quite as much just because a lot of people tend to go to the river and like, stick there during the day” and how the students in their entryway “were never in the Quad... they were people who were just like on the river, and didn't really spend that much time in Cabot.” Seeing that sort of apathy among their entryway-mates was incredibly defeating and they “made no friends living in that entryway.”²⁹ Particularly, they³⁰ said it felt as if “they were... a little disinterested in getting to know us.” Students have a much easier time integrating themselves into the house if they are surrounded by the positivity, inclusion, and openness that students looked for in an ideal house. Unfortunately, however, there are many people disinterested in house life because of their lifestyle and the communities already in place on campus, and those student's attitudes can affect the perceptions and experiences of the students

²⁶ Interview 6

²⁷ Interview 8

²⁸ Interview 9, Person 2

²⁹ Interview 9, Person 2

³⁰ Interview 9, Person 1

around them. When the people around an individual, like blockmates and entryway-mates, are disengaged, the student is less likely themselves to take a chance on engaging with the house. Blocking groups provide sub-communities within the larger house, and can be both reasons for engagement and for disengagement in the house community. In many cases, whole blocking groups will embrace the idea of a house community and buy-in together. However, in situations where groups do not buy-in together, this can create a barrier for individuals

If there are no easy-access points for a student to engage, it is difficult to take the first step towards engaging with the house. One group that is hard to reach is introverted people. One student³¹ noted “House life is inherently for extroverts... And so there's not really a whole lot of ways to address introverts.” Without an access point into house life, it can be difficult, feel awkward, and uncomfortable to become engaged. A senior³² I spoke with waited until their last year in the house to finally attend an intramural game, despite indicating the desire to previously want to participate. They had previously unsuccessfully tried to get their blockmates to join them, and eventually decided, after calling their sister, to just give it a try. In their words, “I was like ‘Okay, I don't have anyone to go with.’ So I'm feeling really sad about that... I remember walking to the stadium and like, I knew zero people there and thought it was really awkward at first... I kept telling myself ‘I don't know anyone here like, this is gonna be really awkward. Like, I don't even play sports’.” They indicated how thrilled they have been with their decision to become more involved with IMs this past year, but regret not trying it sooner. However, when there are barriers present, it becomes increasingly easier to put off going to house events, particularly because of how frequent events are put on. One student told me their approach is usually “Oh, I couldn't go to the last one, but I could probably make it to the next one,” and another said “If I had time, that day, I'd go to it. But if it was something that didn't end up working out, I was like, okay, whatever.” For students living in a house, it is easier to not be engaged than to become engaged.

As a HoCo, we are hoping to foster as much engagement as possible, so it is important, before making a blueprint for action, to recognize factors that contribute positively to house engagement. Students who are engaged with the house community credit various things for their involvement, but recurring themes were close relationships with tutors, pre-existing friendships with students in the house, diving into the community with their blockmates, and actively

³¹ Interview 3

³² Interview 8

seeking a community. Tutors, the grad students assigned to serve as residential and academic advisors, specifically helped many students buy-into house life. It was noted they make the house feel “comfortable”³³ and that “everyone probably has at least one tutor they know they can go to.”³⁴

There is little-to-none HoCo can directly do to influence the role tutors play in student’s lives, so they will not be a part of any recommendation in the blueprint for action; however, the positive student reception of tutors shows the impressive job that Cabot’s administrative staff has done towards creating a positive culture in the house.

As far as involvement in HoCo, students were more inclined to get involved if they had friends in other house who had done HoCo, or had made early friendships with upperclassmen involved with house life. One student³⁵ noted, “I was extremely influenced by the people above me who I admired who did house life” while another³⁶ said “Coming in as a Sophomore, I really wanted to be a part of HoCo because my PAF last year was part of HoCo for Lowell.” Students were likely to join HoCo because it was a space they could be in with their friends, and that they would “know a lot of these people coming in had the same kind of passions as they did.”³⁷ Similarly, HoCo allowed one student a platform to be themselves in a unique, positive environment with their roommate. According to the student³⁸ “we were able to be ourselves and have an identity in Cabot House... People were dope, so why not just be ourselves around everyone, not just our friends.” Another student³⁹ said that “I am lucky in that my baseline experience in the house was always going to be good because I came into housing in general being like, well, I really like my block mates and I know, we're going to live together, so it's fine.” Both of these students were not expecting to fully dive into the house community, but were able to do so by having it enhance their already existing communities.

Many students, however, are actively seeking that community, and getting involved with house life was a proactive decision. One student⁴⁰ said “I was kind of like, I’ll do anything (on HoCo). Take me. So I didn't really put a lot of thought into it. And I was like, I'll do whatever.”

³³ Interview 1

³⁴ Interview 8

³⁵ Interview 3

³⁶ Interview 6

³⁷ Interview 6

³⁸ Interview 5

³⁹ Interview 1

⁴⁰ Interview 1

Another⁴¹ said “I did that because I knew that unless I had some kind of outlet to get involved in house life that I really just would have completely disregarded any activity. As what normally happens is.. you're like, ‘Oh, I could go do that or I could do something else’ and then you do something else.” For them, getting involved in the house took effort and intention. Most students with whom I spoke “wanted to give Cabot the shot that it possibly could have”⁴² and believed in the idea that “Cabot House is really what you make it.”⁴³ With this in mind, in the next section I will outline several steps Cabot HoCo can take to facilitate greater buy-in among sophomores entering the House.

Blueprint for Action

First, I believe it is important to create more inter-class bonding opportunities. Students cite pre-existing relationships with upperclassmen in the house as an important factor in getting involved, with one student saying “I think what helped me the most was having a couple people that I knew when I came.”⁴⁴ As a HoCo, we can do our best to create more opportunities for the sophomore class to become engaged. I propose that this is done by creating a Sophomore Engagement Committee as a sub-branch of HoCo for first-semester sophomores. One student⁴⁵ suggested “a nice thing that people are likely to come out for that's like, gonna have tutors or like upperclassmen that you get to meet but is specifically advertised to the sophomores would definitely be good.” This committee would allow sophomores to plan events with the purpose of drawing their class year, while also drawing on upperclassmen and tutors.

Most members of Cabot’s current HoCo began in Cabot’s Sophomore HoCo-Rep program, a program that allows first-semester sophomores to shadow a HoCo position. However, the program has severe limitations. This part year, there were thirteen applications for seven spots, and the spots just went to individuals who were already immediately engaged and familiar names to the committee. Those who were not selected as a sophomore rep this past year have been largely disengaged with the house, likely deterred by their rejection into joining an allegedly inclusive community.

⁴¹ Interview 3

⁴² Interview 3

⁴³ Interview 9, Person 1

⁴⁴ Interview 7

⁴⁵ Interview 7

This leads me to the second plan of action, which is that I believe it is important for HoCo to focus on outreach and intentionality. The engagement committee would not only give more sophomores autonomy, but it would hope to attract blocking groups and combat the fear of not knowing anyone at an event. As co-chair, I am determined to make the experience of joining HoCo inclusive and dismantle the illusion that you need to be an insider. By creating a Sophomore Engagement Committee, we will provide a space for all students potentially interested in engaging in house life during their first semester. The Engagement Committee will be given a budget to host events targeted at the sophomore class. The Engagement Committee will give more students a specific role and autonomy and feel like they are a valued part of the community immediately. Diving into the community with blockmates was a common theme for engaging with house life, and this initiative hopes to address that desire and provide more opportunities for engagement. However, beyond this, continue emphasizing to upperclassmen that it is never too late to come to things. One student⁴⁶ believed that “if I was gonna love house life, I had to like dive in and really try it,” yet this does not have to be the case for everyone. I believe it is not my job to tell people what their experience should be, but to communicate what HoCo is offering, and that it is all for the house, and that if it’s not what they’re looking for, we are always open to hearing their thoughts.

However, in order to make HoCo more accessible, this presents my third step: address entry barriers and promote inclusivity. A main barrier of entry is knowing people, so it is hopeful that a sophomore engagement committee with our sophomore rep program could help facilitate more interactions in the house to address that barrier. However, other barriers include time, money, and dietary restrictions. One student told me about a bad experience they had at an event because of an allergy and how it detracted from the experience because “even though that’s not all it’s about, I still want to eat the food.”⁴⁷ They went on to say that “Food lingers... but that kind of accessibility... maybe making Steins happen in such a way that people under 21 don't feel like the event isn't for them. And like stuff like that, I think really makes a difference.... Those people will just stop coming.” Ensuring that everyone is provided a comfortable space at our events is a big step in the right direction towards a more inclusive HoCo. This can be done by having creating steins that do not just place the sole attention on the alcohol through events like trivia, karaoke, board game, paint nights, and other themed Steins that help maintain an

⁴⁶ Interview 4

⁴⁷ Interview 2

inclusive HoCo. Additionally, hosting events like study breaks at different times so that it can appeal to different schedules can also promote inclusivity. Currently, study breaks and steins are offered at the same time every time they occur. Additionally, I believe that subsidizing Ubers/Lyfts for Cabot students for intramural sports can reduce the burdens of time and resources while increasing engagement. Intramural Athletics are noted as a great way to identify with a house and develop house pride, yet the commute to the river for games is an active barrier in participation.

Lastly, I believe it is incredibly important for HoCo to actively support and collaborate with other Cabot student-groups. The diverse opportunities in the house help Cabot “foster community across all different types of people.”⁴⁸ While things like study breaks and stein are great to hang out with friends, Cabot students found them ineffective at integrating people into the house. Rather, they are ways to foster the community for people who have already bought-in. Non-HoCo-Cabot-specific events like our formal hall series and spring musical are better at engaging students across blocking groups and class years, and because HoCo is a university-funded entity, we have the capacity to support these groups and create a wide-array of events that can cater to individual preferences. Specifically, HoCo should continue our collaboration with Cabot Theater Board (a Cabot Student Group that puts on events throughout the year in our House Theater) and support them financially in hosting large events like Karaoke. Additionally, HoCo can partner with other Cabot groups like our art studio to have paint nights and our Cafe by hosting events like trivia nights in their space, and facilitate with the groups around Cabot to keep a steady flow of events. This can be done by instating an intra house calendar that all the groups could access via a Google Calendar. It is in nobody’s best interest to have multiple events simultaneously, so the more collaborative the groups in Cabot are, the more effectively we can engage students with varying interests throughout the house.

The diversity of events, groups, and options are a strength of Cabot’s community. One student⁴⁹ noted, “Certain styles attract different people.... You will see the same group of friends go to trivia, and they won’t go to karaoke, but a different groups of friends will go to karaoke,” while one another⁵⁰ said “I think HoCo does a great job of trying to appeal to a lot of different

⁴⁸ Interview 5

⁴⁹ Interview 2

⁵⁰ Interview 3

people.” The diversity of Cabot programming allows students to find their niche and search for community while remaining true to their interests and preferences.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper is just the beginning in understanding the dynamics of a Harvard house. Further research would benefit by expanding beyond Cabot and looking at other residential houses. However, I believe this paper helps understand the present culture of Cabot, and how HoCo should best approach the integration of sophomores into the Harvard housing system.

In this paper, I addressed how to define an ideal Harvard house and searched for ways that HoCo can help first-semester sophomores integrate themselves into the community. Targeted at helping Cabot HoCo engage students, this paper presented several key findings. Regarding barriers of involvement in house life, it was noted that every resident is coming into the house with different levels of existing communities and that affects their engagement, how students coming into the house are already integrated into the wider Harvard community and that hinders their willingness to adapt their lifestyles to fit the housing community, and how it is difficult to take the first step towards buying in without the social support of friends. Regarding the factors that lead to high levels of engagement, things like close relationships with tutors, pre-existing relationships with upperclassmen in the house, diving into the community with their blockmates, and the ability to find their niche as critical in getting students engaged.

Ultimately, as I move into my second-semester of serving as co-chair of Cabot HoCo, a semester that will be defined by the integration of sophomore students into the house, I am hopeful. I am hopeful because Cabot is a house beaming with pride, heart, and people who care. Whether or not they are involved with HoCo, every person I interviewed deeply cared about the house and wanted to see it succeed. One student⁵¹ said “I’ve had a good time mostly because of the people,” and that sentiment echoes throughout the house. It is clear that “we know what Cabot’s about,”⁵² and we need to project those values that define what Cabot is. HoCo will do this through our regular programming, more inter-class bonding opportunities, increased outreach, intentionality, addressing barriers, and supporting other groups.

⁵¹ Interview 2

⁵² Interview 5

In the end, it is the sophomore's responsibility to branch out and make an effort to join the Cabot community if they wish to have it facilitate a meaningful increase in the quality of their life. HoCo events are designed to encourage them to do that. Yet, no matter how much time and money goes into planning an event, it is the people there that will define the experience. A third of Cabot residents graduate every year, and the remaining students must carry on the culture that makes this house such a positive, supportive space for so many people. Cabot is constantly evolving and growing, and the community is going to be defined not by HoCo, or the tutors, or any other group, but by how the residents live, interact, and shape their residential experience together.

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