



**April 23, 2016
HLS Student Government**

POLICY PROPOSAL

**Implement a Mandatory Semesterly Survey
to Inform and Accelerating Reform Initiatives**

- 1. Problem Statement: Surveys Needed, but Implemented Inconsistently**
- 2. Policy Proposal: A Better Way: Implementing a Mandatory Semesterly Survey**

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I. **Problem-Statement: Surveys Needed, but Implemented Inconsistently**

In any given year at Harvard Law School, numerous reform initiatives arise and circulate throughout the student body. In just the past few years, initiatives regarding gender empowerment, racial diversity and inclusion, financial aid, public interest employment and mental health have flourished.

These reformers -- as well as the administrators they are trying to persuade -- all have a similar interest early in each initiative's lifespan: ***gathering survey data from the student body regarding the issue***. Unfortunately, right now, each initiative or administrative office tasked with responding to each initiative has to gather survey data on their own. These surveys are often poorly designed and have such low participation rates so as to skew the data with response bias. A typical survey sent out to the student body may only receive between 75 and 200 responses, or between five and ten percent of the total population. Even more, students suffer from survey fatigue, further skewing data that is gathered. Reform initiatives waste energy pressuring administrators to take data on certain issues, as exemplified by a recent letter to Dean Minow regarding mental health sent from various campus reformers:

An Open Letter to Dean Minow on Mental Health: HLS Needs Survey Data

April 4, 2017

We support the immediate and annual implementation of optional anonymous mental health surveys at Harvard Law School.

We have no recent data on the student body at Harvard Law, but we do know that scheduling counseling appointments can take weeks. To help our community, we must first know where we stand. In addition, to evaluate the effects of policy changes, we need surveys each year.

A 2014 study at Yale Law School found that 70% of students reported experiencing mental health challenges and Harvard Law school needs the same data on our own community.

It is not just student reformers who are interested in survey data: administrators are, too. Administrators have a difficult time discerning whether a student complaint is particular to that student or endemic to a wider section of the student body. Indeed,

better survey data could not only help spur reform initiatives, but also help ground reform initiatives in the reality of student sentiment.

Surveys can be extremely useful for improving the campus in large and small ways. For example, in Fall of 2016, Student Government issued a survey of student preferences for printers. The survey attracted relatively strong response rates, and results were representative of each of the class years. The data was used to determine that the ground floor of WCC was the area most in need of an additional printer. But even this successful survey required efforts to boost response rates.

II. A Better Way: Implementing a Mandatory Semesterly Survey

In response to this shared need, we propose the following:

1. Implement a school-administered survey to every student every semester

A school-wide survey administered every semester to every student could help resolve this shared challenge. Such a survey could:

- have both quantitative questions, as well as opportunities for anonymized narratives.
- be divided into separate sections to address specific issues
- provide anonymized identity data (race, gender, etc.) to identify whether certain issue interests, desires for perform, or perspectives on the community are correlated with certain identity groups

2. Make the survey mandatory

The key value add to such a survey would be that the school could make survey participation mandatory. Such a mandatory survey would drastically improve student sentiment data and thus drastically improve feedback to school administrators and reform initiative leaders. This could be achieved by, say, tying survey completion to receiving updated grades or registering for classes.

3. Publicize the data

Such a rich dataset that would result from a multi-issue semesterly student survey should be open to the entire community. It would not only be useful to administrators, but also to Student Government, affinity groups, faculty and

student reformers. The anonymized narratives (those that students indicated they were willing to publicize) would especially help make students who had similar experiences feel less alone and more empowered to act.

4. Empower Harvard Law School Student Government to determine a significant segment of questions asked on the survey

The key to ensuring such a survey is useful in informing and accelerating reform initiatives will be to have a large segment of the questions asked on each semester's survey be within control of the Harvard Law School Student Government. Student Government could set up a process by which the questions are proposed and finalized each semester. That way, different reform initiatives would have a route to move from anecdotal sentiment to multiple narratives and hard data from a wider segment of the student body regarding their issue area.

It is in the interest of reformers, student government and school administration to have community reform initiatives and issue discussions be grounded in multiple narratives and real data displaying student sentiment. A patchwork of ad hoc surveys plagued by low participation and response bias is not enough. A mandatory semesterly survey would make great strides in informing and accelerating the amelioration of community problems.