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HEADLINE: STUDENT LIFE AT HARVARD LAGS PEER SCHOOLS, POLL FINDS

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Student satisfaction at Harvard College ranks near the bottom of a group of 31 elite private colleges, according to an analysis of survey results that finds that Harvard students are disenchanted with the faculty and social life on campus.

An internal Harvard memo, obtained by the Globe, provides numerical data that appear to substantiate some long-held stereotypes of Harvard: that undergraduate students often feel neglected by professors, and that they don't have as much fun as peers on many other campuses.

The group of 31 colleges, known as the Consortium on Financing Higher Education, or COFHE, includes all eight Ivy League schools, other top research universities like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford, and small colleges like Amherst and Wellesley.

"Harvard students are less satisfied with their undergraduate educations than the students at almost all of the other COFHE schools," according to the memo, dated October 2004 and marked "confidential." "Harvard student satisfaction compares even less favorably to satisfaction at our closest peer institutions."

The 21-page memo, from staff researchers at Harvard to academic deans, documents student dissatisfaction with faculty availability, quality of instruction, quality of advising, and student life factors such as sense of community and social life on campus.

The raw data used in the memo come from surveys of graduating seniors in 2002, but are the most recent comparison available and are still consulted by Harvard administrators. On a five-point scale, Harvard students' overall satisfaction comes out to 3.95, compared to an average of 4.16 for the other 30 COFHE schools. Although the difference appears small, Harvard officials say they take the "satisfaction gap" very seriously.

Only four schools scored lower than Harvard, but the schools were not named. (COFHE data are supposed to be confidential.) The memo also notes that Harvard's "satisfaction gap" has existed since at least 1994.

"I think we have to concede that we are letting our students down," said Lawrence Buell, an English professor and former dean of undergraduate education. "Our standard is that Harvard shoots to be the very best. If it shoots to be the very best in terms of research productivity and the stature of its faculty, why should it not shoot to be the very best in

terms of the quality of the education that it delivers?"

Harvard officials refused to comment on the survey, but noted that they are already working to address the issues underscored by the data. They also said their internal numbers have improved since 2002. President Lawrence H. Summers has also spoken repeatedly about the need for students to have more opportunity to get to know their professors.

In a report released last April as part of an ongoing review of Harvard's curriculum, the need for more interaction between students and faculty was mentioned repeatedly.

"Harvard College should be known not only as an institution in which students can sit in lecture halls to learn from faculty who make original contributions to knowledge, but also as a place where they may encounter, and challenge, these scholars directly in seminar and small class settings," the report said.

But right now, students can go through four years on campus with limited contact with professors. They often take large lecture classes, divided into sections headed by graduate student "teaching fellows." Small classes are frequently taught by temporary instructors instead of regular, tenure-track professors. And in many cases, advisers are not professors, either, but graduate students, administrators, or full-time advisers.

"I've definitely had great professors, but most of the time you have to chase them down and show initiative if you want to get to know them," said Kathy Lee, a junior majoring in psychology. "I've had a lot of trouble getting to know enough faculty to get the recommendations I need for medical school."

On the five-point scale, Harvard students gave an average score of 2.92 on faculty availability, compared to an average 3.39 for the other COFHE schools. Harvard students gave a 3.16 for quality of instruction, compared to a 3.31 for the other schools, and a 2.54 for quality of advising in their major, compared to 2.86 for the other schools.

Students gave Harvard a 2.62 for social life on campus, compared to a 2.89 for the other schools, and a 2.53 for sense of community, compared to 2.8.

Harvard Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences William C. Kirby recently said that Harvard's ratio of students to tenured and tenure-track faculty is 11-to-1, compared to an 8-1 ratio at Princeton University. Harvard has already boosted the number of faculty by 10 percent in the last five years, from 610 to 672 professors, in part to improve the student-faculty ratio. Kirby's plan now is to expand the faculty to 750 by 2010, and possibly to 800 after that.

In the meantime, Harvard is trying to offer more intimate classroom settings. For example, four years ago it offered only about 30 small seminar classes for freshmen. This year there are 115, most taught by senior faculty, according to Dean of the College Benedict H. Gross.

Students' experiences also vary widely from department to department. Some of the most popular -- and thus overburdened -- majors, such as economics or government, have fairly low ratings on internal student surveys, while small majors like classics and philosophy get better ratings.

On the social front, students complain that Harvard lacks places where students can socialize and has so many rules that it is difficult to hold a party on-campus, where almost all undergraduates live.

The Harvard administration has also been working hard in the last few years to improve social life. The school has been experimenting with popular "pub nights" on some Fridays, and has allowed campus parties to stay open an hour later, until 2 a.m. They have tried other novelty programs from dodge ball tournaments to speed dating, and doubled the amount of athletic equipment in the main gym used by undergraduates.

Many students are pessimistic that the curriculum review is going to change what some call "a culture of mutual avoidance," where students and faculty often don't make an effort to meet. Professors and students alike also say there's a hurried and stressful atmosphere on campus that can get in the way of building mentor relationships. After all, Harvard has been trying to improve teaching and advising for years, long before the current administration.

Matt Glazer, president of the student government, said it's hard to have much confidence in the administration's commitment to fixing the problems.

"When the system that has dismal advising is giving recommendations on how to make advising better, the question is why aren't they doing that right now?" Glazer said.