



Harvard Athletics

A Study of Harvard Athletics' Organizational Culture & Structure

May 2020

welcome to brighter

Executive Summary

Study Background

The Department of Harvard Athletics (DHA), the largest Division I sports program in the Ivy League, was formally established in 1926.

With the Department's centennial anniversary approaching in 2026, Harvard seeks to understand how it can build on this century of success and continue to set the standard for collegiate athletics programs in the future—particularly at a moment in higher education when the role of athletics is the subject of much discussion and review.

This study was commissioned by the Faculty of Arts & Sciences (FAS) to learn about the culture of athletics at Harvard and the structure of DHA.

Using various data collection techniques, including interviews, surveys, and on campus observations, a team of researchers from Mercer gathered feedback from Harvard intercollegiate student-athletes, coaches, staff, faculty, administrators, alumni, and fans between September 2019 and May 2020.

Results were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods.

Findings & Recommendations

Six key findings emerged from this study:

1. Intercollege athletics is a formative and demanding experience for the majority of Harvard student-athletes.
2. DHA staff and coaches are deeply committed to their student-athletes, the mission of DHA, and the mission of Harvard College.
3. Faculty and administrators want to ensure that student-athletes are having an enriching, healthy, transformational educational experience at Harvard.
4. Alumni, fans, and supporters want to ensure that athletics continues to be a vibrant and integral part of the Harvard experience.
5. The changing world of collegiate athletics is causing many stakeholders to wonder what the future of athletics will look like, both at Harvard and across the nation.
6. Stakeholders share a collective desire to enhance the student-athlete experience, build stronger bridges between athletics and academics, and create a more integrated health and wellness experience for all students at Harvard.

Based on these findings, Mercer recommends that Harvard should renew its vision for collegiate athletics, establish strong bonds between DHA and the College, promote a culture of wellness and belonging for all students, and find creative solutions to meet the most pressing needs of current student-athletes, coaches, and staff.

Contents

1

Study Background & Research Methods

2

Key Findings

3

Recommendations

4

Appendix

Study Background & Research Methods

1

Study Background

Overview of Research Project

This study was commissioned by the Faculty of Arts & Sciences (FAS) to learn about the culture of athletics at Harvard and the structure of DHA. Specifically, this study explored what it is like to be a student-athlete at Harvard, what it is like to work at Harvard as a DHA coach or staff member, how the Department functions from an operational perspective, and the relationship among DHA, Harvard College, FAS, and other parts of the University.

Using various data collection techniques, including interviews, surveys, and on campus observations, a team of researchers from Mercer gathered feedback from students, coaches, staff, faculty, administrators, alumni, and fans from September 2019 through May 2020. Results were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods, and a series of findings emerged. These findings highlight the unique history and culture of athletics at Harvard, the strengths of DHA as well as the challenges it faces, and the aspirations that various stakeholders have.

Harvard is planning to use study results and findings to help leaders, coaches, and staff prepare for the future of college athletics and shape the next decade of strategic planning for DHA.

Study Governance & Staffing

Edgerley Family Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Sciences Claudine Gay commissioned this study in the fall of 2019 with the guidance and support of an advisory committee consisting of:

- Athletics Director Robert L. Scalise
- Special Advisor to the President John P. Reardon
- Danoff Dean of Harvard College Rakesh Khurana
- FAS Dean for Administration and Finance Leslie Kirwan
- FAS Dean for Development Armin Afsahi

Patrick Hyland, an organizational psychologist, and Karen Hutcheson, a human capital consultant specializing in higher education, were Mercer's lead researchers on the study.

Briefings on preliminary findings were presented to the FAS Faculty Standing Committee on Athletics, head coaches and program managers, and the Harvard Varsity Club Board.

Background on Harvard's Department of Athletics

Department Overview

Harvard's Department of Athletics (DHA) was formally established in 1926. It supports intercollegiate competition, club sports, and intramural sports, collectively engaging over 50% of Harvard's undergraduate student body and many graduate students in a meaningful way. It also provides facilities for recreation and the furthering of health and wellness across Harvard's campus.

Harvard is a founding member of the Ivy League and its varsity sports program is founded on the Ivy League principles. Like its Ivy League peers, Harvard seeks to compete at the highest athletic level within the League without offering athletic scholarships.

Harvard's Athletic Director reports to the Dean of the Faculty of Arts & Sciences. The Faculty Standing Committee on Athletics provides faculty oversight, with a particular focus on the experience of undergraduate student-athletes.

Key Department Statistics

- Largest Division I sports program in the Ivy League
- 42 combined men's and women's varsity programs
- 1,078 varsity athletes
- Approximately 20% of Harvard undergraduates participate in varsity sports
- 63 club sports, 35 House, and 16 First Year leagues / events
- Four fitness centers; over 525,000 annual visits
- 88 administrators, mental / physical training staff, and interns
- 103 coaches and assistant coaches
- Annual budget of \$49M

Mission of Harvard Athletics

The mission of the Department of Athletics is education through athletics and building community and pride in Harvard. Athletic participation helps Harvard students grow, learn, and enjoy themselves while they use and develop their personal, physical, and intellectual skills.

Harvard values the lessons that have long been taught by athletic participation: the pursuit of excellence through personal development and teamwork, ethical and responsible behavior on the field and off, adherence to the spirit of rules as well as to their letter, leadership and strength of character, and sportsmanship – respect for one’s opponents, acceptance of victory with humility, and acknowledgement of defeat with grace. In teaching these lessons to its students, Harvard instills habits which will lead students to better and healthier lives.

While winning is not an end in itself, Harvard believes that the efforts by our intercollegiate athletes to be their best will lead them to succeed throughout their lives. Athletics at Harvard builds community through the engagement of students, faculty, staff, and alumni, and creates a portal through which neighboring communities can enjoy the Harvard experience.

Research Methods

Research Methods

A mixed method, community-based, participatory research approach was used to design and conduct this study. Working in collaboration with Harvard, the Mercer research team developed five broad research questions:

1. What is it like to be a student-athlete at Harvard?
2. What is it like to be a DHA staff member, administrator, or coach at Harvard?
3. How effective and efficient is DHA's current structure?
4. What is the nature of the relationship among DHA, Harvard College, and FAS?
5. What should the future of athletics at Harvard look like?

To explore these research questions, the research team designed and conducted a series of interviews and surveys with six critical stakeholder groups: current intercollegiate student-athletes; DHA staff, administrators, and head coaches; FAS faculty members; Harvard College and FAS deans and academic administrators; and alumni, parents, and supporters of Harvard Athletics. In total, three survey instruments and three interview protocols were developed and deployed.

Participants	Method
Current Harvard Intercollegiate Student-Athletes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 57 item anonymous survey • Administered November 20, 2019, through December 23, 2019 • 77% response rate (827 respondents)
DHA Staff, Administrators, and Head Coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 59 item anonymous survey • Administered December 9, 2019, through January 13, 2020 • 62% response rate (118 respondents) • Conducted interviews with 31 head coaches and four DHA Administrators
FAS Faculty Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted interviews with nine faculty members
Harvard College & FAS Deans and Academic Administrators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted interviews with eight faculty members
Alumni	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted interviews with 15 former intercollegiate student-athletes
Harvard Fans, Parents, Alumni, and Supporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five item anonymous pulse survey • Administered January 21, 2020, through March 2, 2020 • 115 respondents

Instrument Design

Student-Athlete Experience Survey

To evaluate the student-athlete experience at Harvard, the research team designed a customized survey instrument based on stakeholder feedback and academic literature.

Stakeholder feedback was gathered during a series of meetings and interviews with faculty, administrators, and coaches in September and October 2019. Through these discussions, the research team developed an initial set of topics to explore. The research team then met with more than 50 members of the Student-Athletes Advisor Committee (SAAC) in early October 2019 to learn about their experiences as student-athletes and to gather additional feedback about pertinent topics to include in this study.

Following these meetings, the research team reviewed the academic literature and identified relevant theory and research to inform survey instrument design. The NCAA's "Mind, Body, and Spirit: Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness" (Brown, Hainline, Kroshus, & Wilfert, 2014), a comprehensive guide to understanding the psychological experience of student-athletes, provided foundational insights for this study. New research exploring the quality of relationships between coaches and athletes (e.g., Rezanian & Gurney, 2014; Roxas & Ridinger, 2016), professors and students (e.g., Wilson, Ryan, & Pugh, 2010; O'Meara, Knudsen, & Jones, 2013), and students and peers (e.g., Strayhorn, 2018) generated a number of research questions and ideas. And a growing body of positive psychology literature on happiness and subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Seligman, 2011), resilience (Gerson & Fernandez, 2013), and academic performance (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006) yielded a series of concepts to explore.

Based on stakeholder feedback and the academic literature, the research team identified 10 areas of measurement.

- My Coaches
- My Team Experience
- My Professors
- My Classroom Experience
- My Residential Experience
- My Social Experience
- My Physical Health
- My Emotional Health
- My Resilience
- My Personal Experience at Harvard

Instrument Design

DHA Staff Experience Survey

To evaluate the DHA staff experience at Harvard, the research team used a similar process to design a customized survey instrument based on stakeholder feedback and academic literature.

Stakeholder feedback was gathered during a series of interviews with faculty and administrators in September and October 2019. Through these discussions, the research team developed an initial set of topics to explore. The research team then met with head coaches in early October 2019 to talk about this project and to gather additional feedback about pertinent topics to include in this study.

Following these meetings, the research team reviewed relevant theory and research and identified various bodies of literature to help guide the survey design process. The employee engagement literature (e.g., Kahn, 1990; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006; Saks & Gruman, 2014) provided the foundation for content development. The research team also included items informed by new research on job design (e.g., Ton, 2014), meaningfulness at work (e.g., Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, & Kerridge, 2018), and workplace wellness (e.g., Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Stevens, 2012). Finally, the team effectiveness literature (e.g., Kozlowski & Bell, 2003) and the organizational effectiveness literature (e.g., Cameron & Quinn, 2006) provided a number of critical concepts to explore.

Based on stakeholder feedback and the academic literature, the research team identified eight areas of measurement.

- My Job
- My Career
- My Manager
- My Sense of Community
- Our Effectiveness
- Athletics & Academics
- Harvard College
- My Engagement

Instrument Design

Harvard Athletics Community Pulse Survey

Harvard Athletics has a broad base of interested supporters and enthusiasts, including former student-athletes, alumni, parents, and fans. To gather feedback from these various stakeholders, the research team developed a brief survey consisting of four closed-ended items and one open-ended question.

The closed-ended items asked respondents to indicate their association with Harvard Athletics, evaluate the importance of eight principles of Ivy League athletics, and assess the extent to which they feel proud of Harvard Athletics and excited about its future.

The open-ended question asked respondents to share their thoughts and ideas about what Harvard Athletics should focus on over the next decade.

Stakeholder Interview Protocols & Process

Additional feedback was gathered through a series of in-depth interviews with head coaches, DHA administrators, alumni, faculty, and FAS & College leaders and administrators. For each stakeholder group, interview protocols were developed in collaboration with the advisory committee. While these protocols varied, they all included questions about five main topics: the culture of athletics at Harvard; the student-athlete experience; the relationship between athletics and academics at Harvard; the organizational strengths and weaknesses of DHA; and recommendations for the future of athletics at Harvard.

Interviews were conducted over the course of nine months—from September 2019 to May 2020—by five members of Mercer’s research team. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format: while researchers used the protocol as a discussion guide, they also included or excluded questions to pursue novel topics, gather unique insights, or discover unanticipated information from interviewees. Interviews lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour. Some were conducted in person; others were conducted by phone.

A total of 67 interviews were conducted. This included 35 head coaches and DHA administrators, 15 alumni, nine faculty members, and eight FAS & College leaders and administrators. Interview participants were selected with guidance from the advisory committee.

Data Analysis

Statistical Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using a mixed method approach that involved inductive and deductive techniques and included multiple researchers. This approach allowed for both data and investigator triangulation.

Survey data were analyzed using various quantitative and qualitative methods by four members of the research team. After data were cleaned and quality checked, descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations) were calculated for all survey items and dimensions.

- Reliability analysis was conducted for all proposed dimensions (i.e., the 10 areas of measurement on the student-athlete experience survey and the eight areas of measurement on the DHA staff experience survey). All 18 dimensions had an internal consistency of .70 or higher.
- Correlational analysis was conducted across all items and dimensions on the student-athlete experience survey and the DHA staff survey. Two key driver analyses, one using student-athlete data and another using DHA staff data, were conducted.
- A structural equation model was tested using student-athlete data.
- Finally, the research team used both natural language processing and traditional content coding techniques to review and code written survey comments.

Qualitative Analysis & Data Integration

Concurrent with the analysis of survey data, four other members of the research team conducted a thematic analysis of interview data from head coaches, DHA administrators, former student-athletes, faculty members, and FAS & College leaders and administrators. Researchers worked independently on a subset of interviews and followed established thematic analysis steps (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). These included conducting an initial review of data to get familiar with interview content, generating an initial coding structure, searching for themes, refining and expanding the coding structure when necessary, and sorting and coding comments accordingly.

Findings from all eight data sources (three surveys and five sets of stakeholder interviews) were combined and analyzed by the research team. Consistent with the principles of community-based participatory research, preliminary findings were reviewed and discussed with various stakeholders at multiple points between September 2019 and May 2020. This helped the research team gain valuable insights about data findings from members of the Harvard community over the course of the study.

How Survey Results are Displayed in this Report

To facilitate data interpretation, percent favorable, neutral, and unfavorable results were calculated for all survey items using a standard data transformation process commonly used in the field of survey research. The majority of items on the Student-Athlete Experience survey and the DHA Staff Experience survey included a six point Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Respondents also had the option of selecting Don't Know/Not Applicable or skipping items.

For each item using this scale, percent favorable results were calculated by combining the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with an item. Percent neutral results were calculated based on the percentage of respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed with an item. Percent unfavorable results were calculated by combining the percentage of respondents who strongly disagreed or disagreed with an item. Any blank responses or Don't Know/Not Applicable responses were excluded from these calculations.

	Percent Favorable		Percent Neutral	Percent Unfavorable		
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know / Not Applicable
My Community Experience						
21. I enjoy living in my residential house (or dorm for first year students)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
22. I feel a strong sense of belonging and community in my residential house/dorm	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

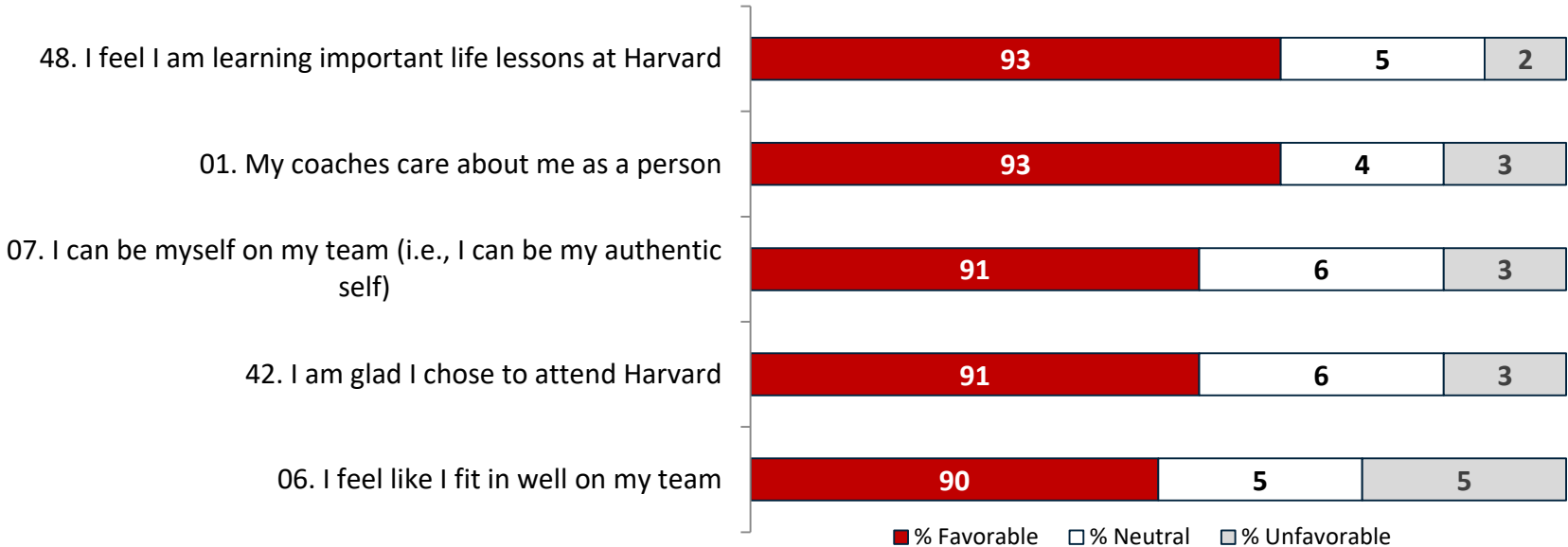
Key Findings

2

Athletics is a formative experience for student-athletes

For most current student-athletes, athletics is an essential part of their experience at Harvard. “Being a part of a team has improved everything about the college experience,” said one student-athlete. Survey results highlight the most favorable aspects of the student-athlete experience. Out of the 50 diagnostic items on the Student-Athlete Experience survey, five items (below) had favorable scores of 90% or higher. These results show that the majority of student-athletes feel they are learning important life lessons at Harvard, have established strong relationships with their coaches and their teammates, and feel happy about their decision to attend Harvard.

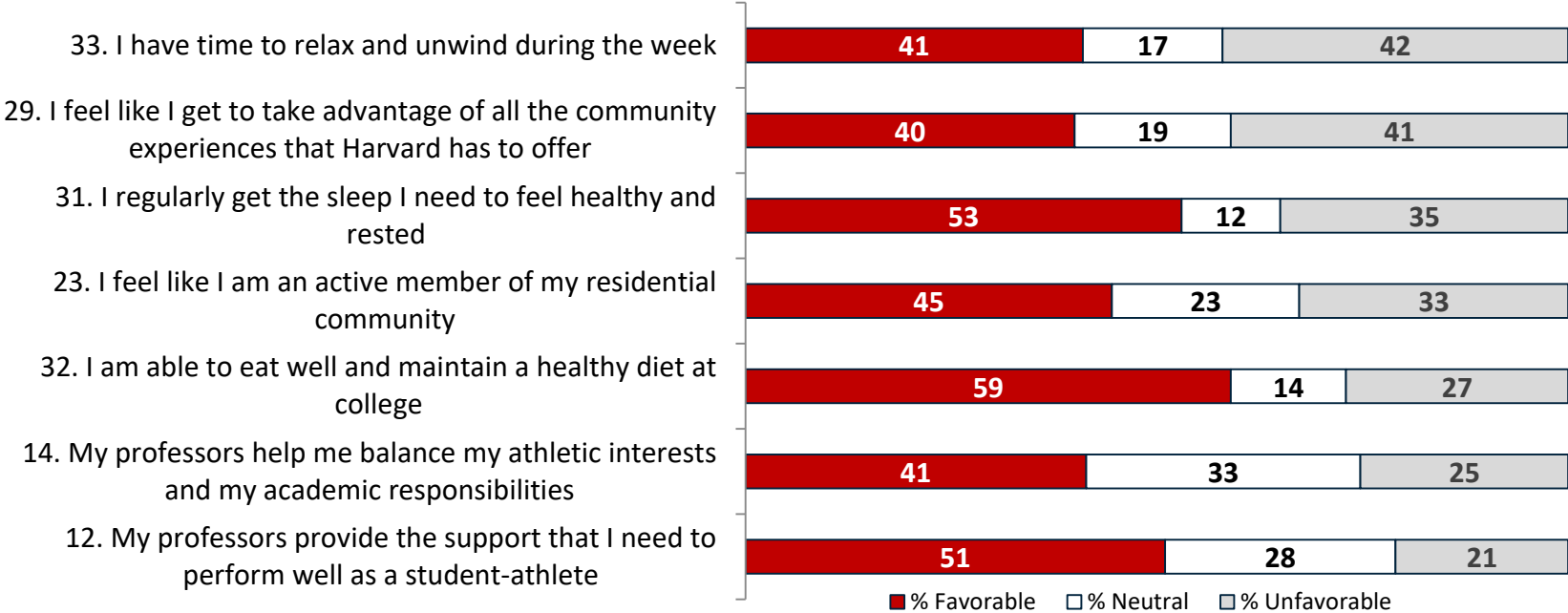
Written comments provide more insight into what student-athletes value about their athletic experience. Of the 827 student-athletes who completed the survey, 540 (65%) said that they valued the sense of community, camaraderie, and friendship that their team provides. Student-athletes also said they value the level of support they receive at Harvard, the stress relief and healthy distraction that their sport provides, the opportunity to pursue excellence on the field and in the classroom, the life lessons they learn from participating in college athletics, and the joy of competition. As one student-athlete stated: “Being a student-athlete has...taught me many important life lessons, like how to be accountable, follow a more normal/consistent schedule, how to be a good teammate, and how to deal with adversity and failure.”



It is also demanding and time-intensive

While the majority of Harvard student-athletes value their athletic experience, survey results indicate they face some challenges. Based on the seven diagnostic items with elevated levels of disagreement (20% or higher; see below), student-athletes are struggling with three fundamental issues: finding free time to relax, unwind, and take advantage of community experiences; getting the sleep they need to feel rested and the nutrition they need to maintain a healthy diet; and balancing their academic and athletic commitments.

Student-athletes expressed similar concerns in their written comments. When asked to identify the challenges they face as student-athletes at Harvard, the vast majority (524 out of 827 respondents) wrote about how difficult it is to balance academics, athletics, and social lives. Some said they have learned to manage, but others described the challenge as overwhelming. “Being a student-athlete is by no means easy and oftentimes I find myself mentally and physically exhausted. It can also be tough to balance schoolwork with practices and to balance a social life outside of the team and meet new people,” said one student-athlete.

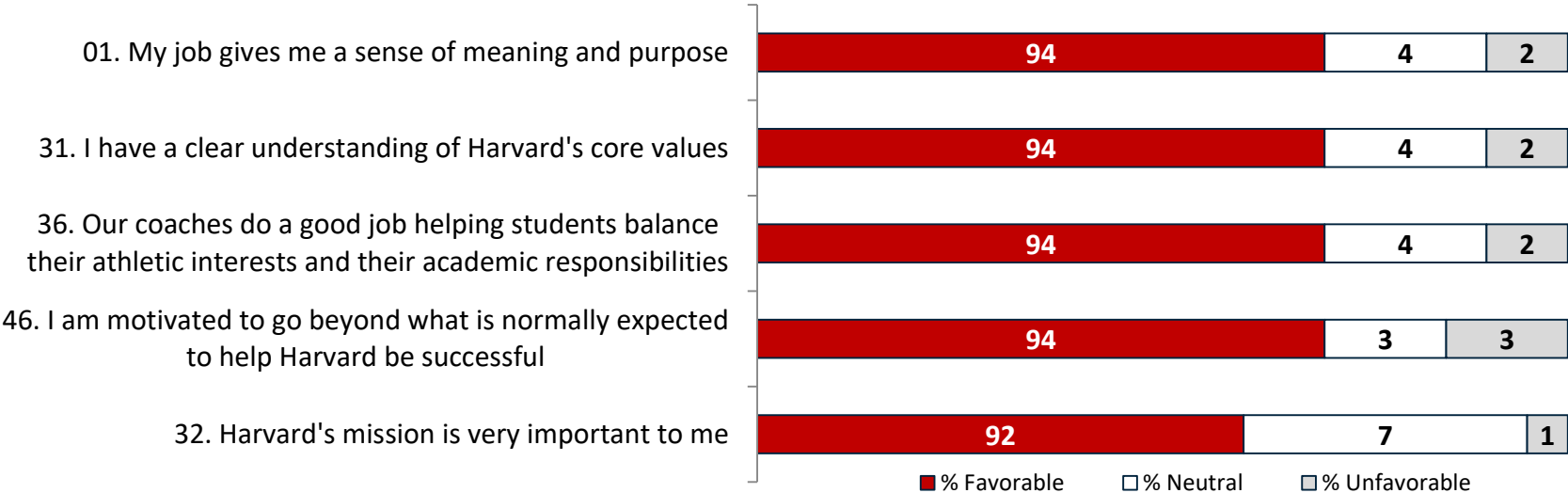


DHA staff & coaches are engaged and committed

Survey results indicate that DHA staff members are highly engaged and deeply committed to the mission of Harvard Athletics and the mission of Harvard College. The five most favorably rated items on the DHA Staff Experience Survey (see below) show that the majority of staff members find a sense of meaning in their work, care deeply about Harvard’s mission, think that coaches are helping student-athletes balance athletics and academics, and are willing to go above and beyond to help Harvard succeed.

When asked what they like best about working at Harvard, respondents said they enjoy helping student-athletes grow and develop, working with their colleagues, and pursuing DHA’s mission of education through athletics. As one coach stated, “I love this department. I love this University.” Another staff member said, “The Athletics Department has a clear mission that I resonate strongly with. I think all my work colleagues also support and believe in our mission.”

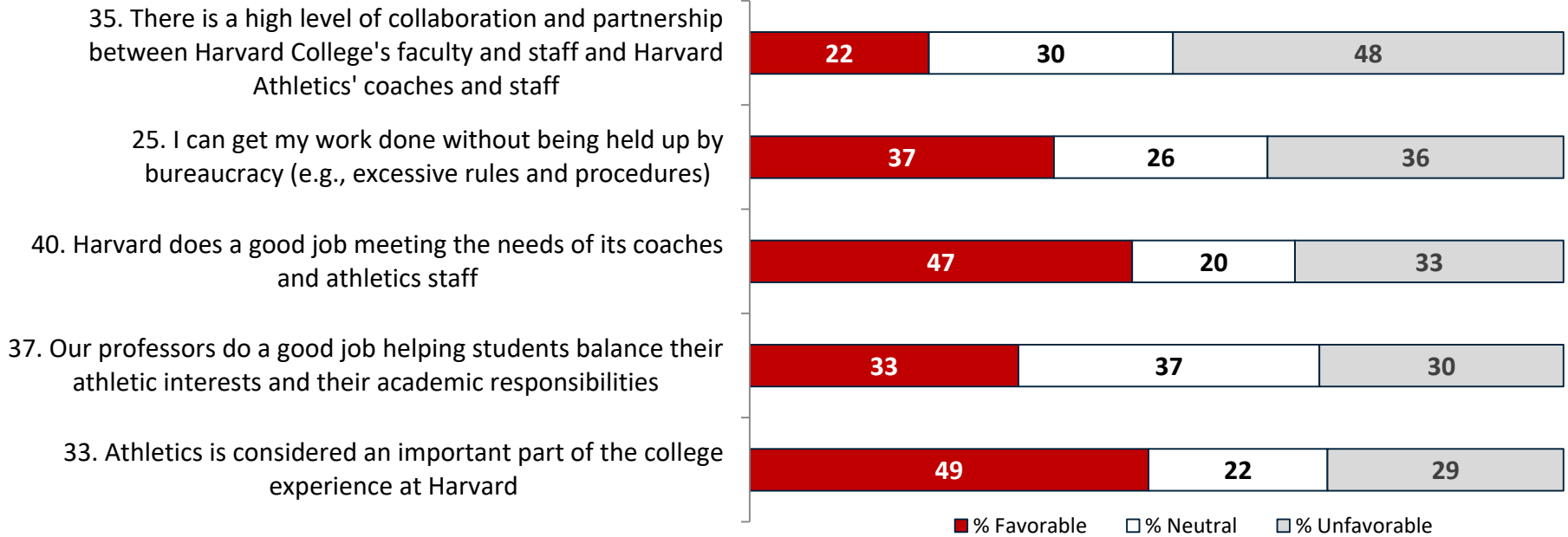
The majority of DHA staff members are mission driven and deeply committed to their profession. In fact, 75% of survey respondents said they consider their current job at Harvard to be a personal vocation or calling.



But they feel disconnected from FAS and the College

Based on both survey data and interview feedback, many DHA staff members think there is a gap between athletics and academics at Harvard. As one staff member said, “I do feel like there is a disconnect between the academic side of Harvard and Athletics. I wish there was a way to bring that connection closer.” In fact, when DHA staff and coaches were asked what they would focus on if they were in charge of Harvard Athletics, the most common recommendation—from 36% of respondents—was to bridge the gap between athletics and academics.

The five most unfavorable items (see below) on the DHA staff experience survey show that coaches and staff have concerns about cross-department teamwork, bureaucracy, and support. As one staff member noted, “Sometimes things become so siloed that each area of the University and Department seems to work in [its] own world.”

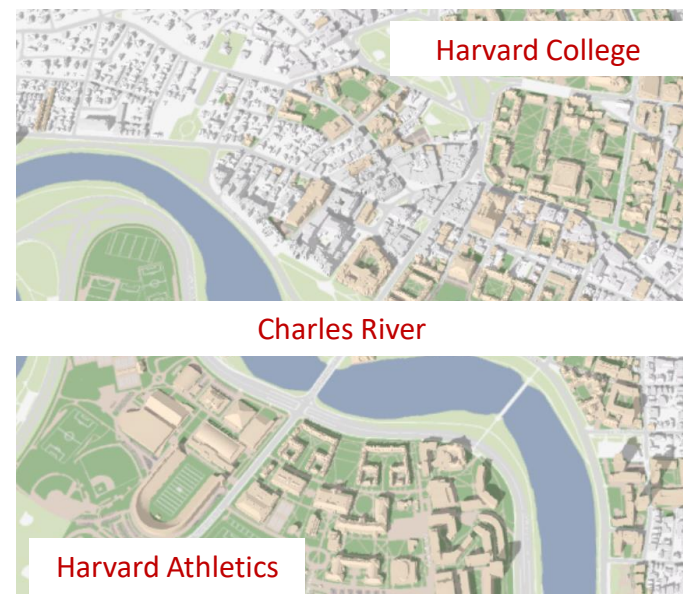


Faculty & Administrators want more collaboration

The deep commitment that DHA staff and coaches have for their job is both evident to and appreciated by Harvard faculty and academic leadership. During interviews, coaches and staff were praised for their dedication, their enthusiasm, and the impact they have on student-athletes. One administrator said that the most formative aspects of the student-athlete experience should be identified and incorporated into the student experience for all Harvard students: “What the coaches are doing with our kids is really exceptional and extraordinary. How is that not more part of the college experience for all students? What they accomplish with each student over the course of four years is amazing. Why is that not more a part of how we think about Harvard?”

Based on feedback from multiple stakeholders, two factors prevent DHA, FAS, and the College from collaborating on a more regular basis. First, the Charles River was identified as both a physical and a psychological barrier that divides the campus. As one staff member said, “The fact that we have a river that divides Athletics and the College is a challenge. We don’t really communicate with each other well.”

Second, there is a perception that priorities may not be fully aligned across FAS, the College, and DHA. Faculty and administrators want to make sure student-athletes are able to make authentic choices about their learning opportunities and their overall experience at Harvard. Some faculty and administrators expressed concern that athletics can overshadow academics. “The classroom has to be the centerpiece for all students,” said one faculty member.



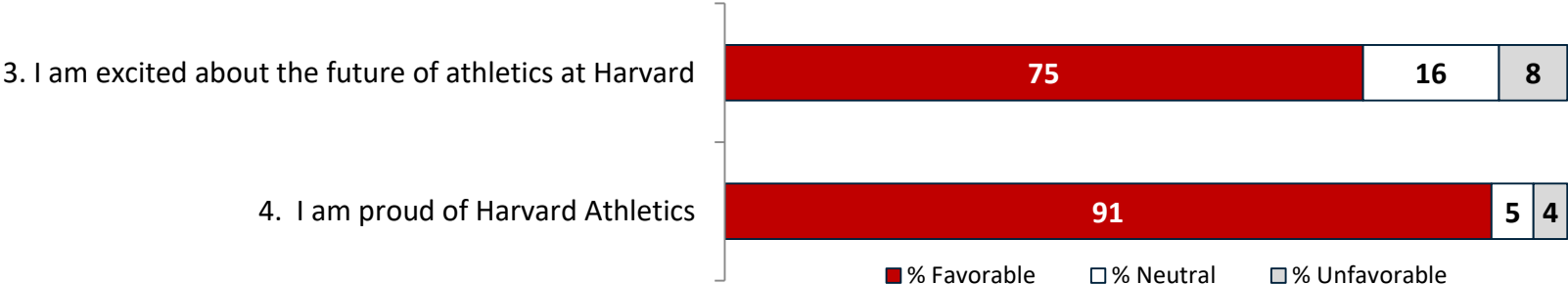
Another faculty member said, “Students do their best learning outside the classroom. Labs and studying abroad are important. One of the groups I’m concerned about is student-athletes. They often do not get to participate in either.”

Despite concerns, faculty and administrators expressed a strong interest in finding ways to better integrate athletics and academics at Harvard.

Alumni & fans see athletics as integral to the Harvard experience

For many alumni, participating in athletics was a critical part of their Harvard experience. When former student-athletes were asked to identify what they valued the most about their athletic experience at Harvard, they talked about the life lessons they learned, the strong bonds and deep friendships they formed with teammates and coaches, and the structure and discipline that athletics provided. As one former-student athlete said, “One of the other great things about Harvard athletics is that as an athlete, you fail a lot. You learn tenacity and perseverance. You get up and do it again.” Another said, “I came in as a mediocre athlete at best, so learning to contribute, lead, deal with setbacks and failures, taught me how to motivate myself and others. So much of what I do as a CEO now stems from what I learned at Harvard as a student or as a coach.”

For many alumni, parents, supporters, and fans, Harvard Athletics is a source of tradition, pride, community, and hope. Based on results from the Harvard Athletics Community survey, 91% of participants are proud of Harvard Athletics and 75% are excited about the future of athletics at Harvard.



New questions reveal opportunities for renewal

Throughout this study, stakeholders expressed a strong belief in the developmental power of sport. As one coach stated, “[The] Athletic Department truly believes in education through athletics. It’s something I genuinely believe in. I get to help and mentor student-athletes not only in their sport but also in life.” A faculty member echoed this view: “I think athletics plays an important role at Harvard. It provides students with the opportunity to develop leadership and interpersonal skills. It is an important part of the Harvard experience. My student-athletes go on to become tremendous leaders.”

When stakeholders were asked to envision the future of athletics at Harvard, three main themes emerged. First, given recent legislative acts (i.e., California’s Fair Pay to Play Act) and NCAA policy changes (e.g., name, image, and likeness rules and regulations), some stakeholders perceive that intercollegiate athletics is at a crossroads. As one administrator said, “To stay competitive in today’s athletic environment, to be competitive on a bigger stage—that is difficult. So I think there are shifting perspectives in Athletics. I think it’s creating tensions.” For many stakeholders, these tensions are raising questions and concerns about what the future of collegiate athletics will look like, both at Harvard and in the nation.

Second, many stakeholders realize that by better integrating Harvard’s approach to athletics with its approach to academics, the College could provide an exceptional learning environment and experience for its student-athletes. As one administrator said, “If you can combine what you learn here [through athletics] with what you learn there [in the classroom], you can have a life changing four years.” Another administrator said: “Our mission is about education through athletics. The College’s is developing citizen leaders. There is a strong intersection between our mission and the College’s mission.”

Third, strong interest in enhancing health and wellness programs for all Harvard students was a shared aspiration. As one faculty member asked: “How can we help ensure all of our students are healthier, happier, sleeping better, taking better care of themselves?”

Each stakeholder group is eager to help bring these visions to fruition. As one study participant said, “I think there is a new way for Harvard Athletics. We need to take the best of our history and contemporize it. We are trying to adapt our structures to meet the needs of today. How can we contemporize without losing the good?”

Recommendations

3

Recommendations Overview

Summary of Strengths & Opportunities

Based on results from this study, there is much to celebrate about Harvard Athletics.

Beyond the competitive success Harvard has achieved on the field over the past century, the University has created an athletic program that has helped shape the college experience of decades of Harvard students. The majority of current student-athletes are having a personally meaningful, deeply formative experience, and value the opportunity to pursue both their athletic and academic goals at Harvard. DHA has a highly motivated team of coaches, assistant coaches, and staff who are dedicated to their student-athletes, the core principles of the department, and the mission of Harvard. A loyal community of alumni and fans care deeply about Harvard Athletics. And faculty, administrators, and College and FAS leaders care deeply about providing a transformational learning experience to current and future student-athletes.

There is also widespread interest in change. Throughout this study, stakeholders expressed a strong desire to improve the student-athlete experience and refine the way the College delivers education through athletics.

Four Critical Questions to Address

As DHA, College, and FAS leaders start to envision the next century of athletics at Harvard, there are four critical questions to explore and address:

1. How can Harvard continue to set the standard for amateurism and collegiate athletics in the 21st century?
2. How can Harvard foster a close and collaborative relationship between athletics and academics?
3. How can Harvard build a healthy, integrated community experience for all undergraduate students?
4. How can Harvard bring stakeholders together to identify and address their most pressing immediate needs?

To answer these questions, Mercer recommends that Harvard should renew its vision for collegiate athletics, establish stronger bonds between DHA and the College, promote a culture of wellness and belonging for all students, and find creative solutions to current challenges that student-athletes, faculty, coaches, and staff encounter.

First Recommendation:

Renew Harvard's Vision of Athletics for the Future

How can Harvard continue to set the standard for amateurism and collegiate athletics in the 21st century?

Harvard has a long history of setting precedents, articulating values, and establishing standards for intercollegiate athletics. Harvard participated in America's first intercollegiate athletic event in 1852, established the nation's first athletic association in 1874, and created one of the first committees to regulate college sports in 1882. In 1954, Harvard helped found the Ivy League and define its principles, which state that athletics must be "kept in harmony with the educational purposes of the institutions" and "academics and the personal growth of the students are of paramount importance."

Today, DHA continues to emphasize the importance of these principles by helping students grow and develop their character and capabilities through athletics. New and emerging legislative acts and NCAA policy changes present a new context in which these commitments must be interpreted and reaffirmed.

With the transition to new Athletics leadership, this is an opportune time for Harvard to gather stakeholders and engage in a series of group discussions about renewing Ivy League principles for a new generation. These discussions could start within the Harvard community—including coaches, DHA staff, current and former students, faculty, administrators, and FAS and College leaders—and inform further discussions with Ivy League colleagues.

Actions to Consider

1. Conduct a town hall with the Harvard community to share findings from this study and establish a common understanding of the current approach to athletics at Harvard.
2. Conduct virtual focus groups with interested community members and solicit feedback about the vision, mission, and values that should guide Harvard Athletics for the upcoming decade.
3. Share study results with Ivy League colleagues and determine which trends and findings are unique to Harvard and which are common across all eight schools. Consider discussing and identifying league-wide solutions to common challenges and areas of concern.

Second Recommendation:

Strengthen Bonds between DHA, the College, and FAS

How can Harvard bridge the cultural and structural gap between athletics and academics?

Harvard's world-class faculty members seek to provide their students with a transformational learning experience. Its world-class coaches seek to do the same. But findings from this study suggest these two groups rarely work together to coordinate their efforts to support an integrated student-athlete experience. According to many research participants, this is a missed opportunity that diminishes the educational possibilities of Harvard student-athletes.

Research participants recommended identifying ways to increase collaboration among DHA, the College, and FAS. Athletic staff members, administrators, and faculty deans expressed interest in working together more closely to provide student-athletes with more comprehensive and cohesive academic, social, and athletic support. They also expressed a desire to identify points of athletic and academic misalignment and seek out new solutions.

Harvard should consider tasking a cross-departmental group—consisting of coaches, faculty members, and staff—to identify concrete ways to provide more comprehensive and cohesive academic, social, and athletic support for student-athletes and define implementation plans for upcoming academic years, ideally with initial pilot efforts in 2021. The Faculty Standing Committee on Athletics could serve as the right vehicle for initiating this work.

Actions to Consider

1. Identify opportunities for supporting academic integration between faculty and DHA.
2. Review and expand formal and informal social activities—like *Faculty, Food, and Fellowship*, *Back to School Week*, faculty advising, and classroom and team visits—that bring DHA, FAS, and College faculty, administrators, and coaches together.
3. Build a close working relationship between coaches, assistant coaches, and faculty deans to ensure that student-athletes are building strong and healthy relationships with their teammates, classmates, and housemates. Consider using Gittel's Relational Coordination Model (2012) as a framework for ensuring ongoing alignment, communication, and coordination.

Third Recommendation:

Create a Culture of Wellness & Belonging for all Students

How can Harvard build a healthy, integrated community experience for all undergraduate students?

Community is a critical part of the learning experience at Harvard. During interviews, faculty, administrators, and coaches all emphasized how important it is for student-athletes to learn outside the classroom and off the practice field. Through various programs and organizations, Harvard seeks to create an inclusive, supportive, and healthy environment for all students.

During interviews, stakeholders wondered if students are having this desired experience. Some faculty and administrators said they worry about the extent to which student-athletes feel integrated into campus life. Others wondered about the physical fitness of students who are not participating in athletics or recreational activities. Many coaches, faculty, and staff expressed the need to prioritize support for the wellbeing of the student population as a whole. As one faculty member said, “We should focus on improving the overall health and wellness of the entire student population—this is where we should focus more attention.”

The College should consider exploring what kinds of experiences students are having at Harvard. Based on findings, Harvard could then engage in corresponding community building efforts that enhance students’ physical, mental, and social wellbeing.

Actions to Consider

1. Gather feedback from current students about topics included in the student-athlete experience survey, including their subjective wellbeing, physical and emotional health, social experience, and classroom experience at Harvard.
2. Identify opportunities for collaboration between DHA, Harvard’s Center for Wellness and Health Promotion, and Harvard’s Counseling and Mental Health Services. Evaluate the extent to which students are utilizing recreational, wellness, and support services. Review underutilized services and expand and/or promote effective ones.
3. Review recent models of community health, like the [Blue Zones Project](#), and methods of community development, like [Asset Based Community Development](#), to identify potential developmental opportunities for the Harvard community.

Fourth Recommendation:

Find Solutions to Current Athletics-specific Concerns

How can Harvard address the most pressing concerns of current student-athletes and DHA staff members?

Based on this study, student-athletes face three common challenges at Harvard: managing time pressures because of competing athletic, academic, and social interests; maintaining their physical and mental health; and feeling integrated into and supported by the broader Harvard community. Survey and interview data indicate that DHA employees face similar challenges. Staff and coaches said that because of their workload and limited staff, maintaining work-life balance is difficult. And many indicated they do not feel accepted and supported by the broader academic community.

Harvard Athletics has a history of turning survey results into meaningful action. The Crimson Mind and Body Performance Program, a recently established mental health support service, was created based on survey feedback and follow up discussions with student-athletes. Using results from this current study, DHA has an opportunity to work with student-athletes, staff members, and coaches to identify immediate actions that could enhance the here-and-now experience of student-athletes and employees.

Small changes can lead to big results in organizations (Weick, 1984). DHA should consider using various organizational interventions—and leveraging the breadth and depth of organizational expertise at Harvard College and Harvard Business School—to help its community members create an environment of continuous learning and improvement.

Actions to Consider

1. Conduct a positive deviance analysis (Sternin & Choo, 2000) to determine why some student-athletes rarely experience conflicts between their academic and athletic commitments. Based on findings, share learnings, insights, and best practices across teams.
2. Conduct a work-out session (Ulrich, Kerr, & Ashkenas, 2002) with DHA staff and coaches to identify tasks and processes that waste time and increase workload. Streamline or eliminate unnecessary tasks that add little value.
3. Explore opportunities to establish better work/life balance for coaches and DHA staff through more efficient work processes and greater collaboration within DHA as well as the College and FAS.
4. Evaluate the student-athlete experience and the employee experience on a regular basis to monitor organizational progress and identify emerging issues.

Conclusion

As Harvard Athletics approaches its centennial, there is widespread interest in enhancing the student-athlete experience, bridging the gap between academics and athletics, and reimagining the role of athletics at Harvard. While a number of competing commitments and concerns emerged across stakeholder groups, so did a set of core values, shared goals, and collective aspirations.

Using these values, goals, and aspirations as the foundation for community dialogue and collaboration, Harvard has the opportunity to clarify its vision of education through athletics and define DHA's mission and mandate for its next century. This will require strong support and shared leadership from directors and deans in DHA, FAS, and the College. Considering the amount of courage and commitment Harvard leadership has displayed by commissioning this organizational review, there is good reason to believe that the findings from this study will lead to meaningful and lasting change.

It is worth noting that current Athletics Director Bob Scalise, who will be retiring at the end of the academic semester, received widespread praise for his leadership over the last 19 years. His firm belief in the educational power of athletics has helped shape the program over the last two decades. As one coach stated, "Bob has done a great job emphasizing what our mission is. I think we have a tremendous department."

It is also worth noting that there is widespread excitement about the arrival of Erin McDermott, Harvard's next Athletics Director, who will start her new role on July 1, 2020. In a [recent article](#) in the Harvard Gazette, McDermott said, "The Ivy League is a model for Division I, and Harvard already has a natural platform to be a model for other institutions. More than ever, we need to have a voice that brings in excellence in every way, and I look forward to having that strong voice."

This aspiration for Harvard Athletics—to serve as a strong voice in a rapidly changing world of collegiate athletics—should serve DHA well as it prepares for its next century of leadership and success.

Appendix

4

Appendix Contents

1

Harvard Student-Athlete Experience Survey Results

2

DHA Staff Experience Survey Results

3

Harvard Athletics Community Pulse Survey Results

4

References

Harvard Student-Athlete Experience Survey

Timing	Wednesday, November 20, 2019, to Monday, December 23, 2019
Method	Web-based, customized, anonymous survey
Instrument	51 closed ended diagnostic items, 4 open-ends, 2 demographic items
Participants	Administered to all current Harvard intercollegiate student-athletes
Response Rate	77% (827 out of 1078)

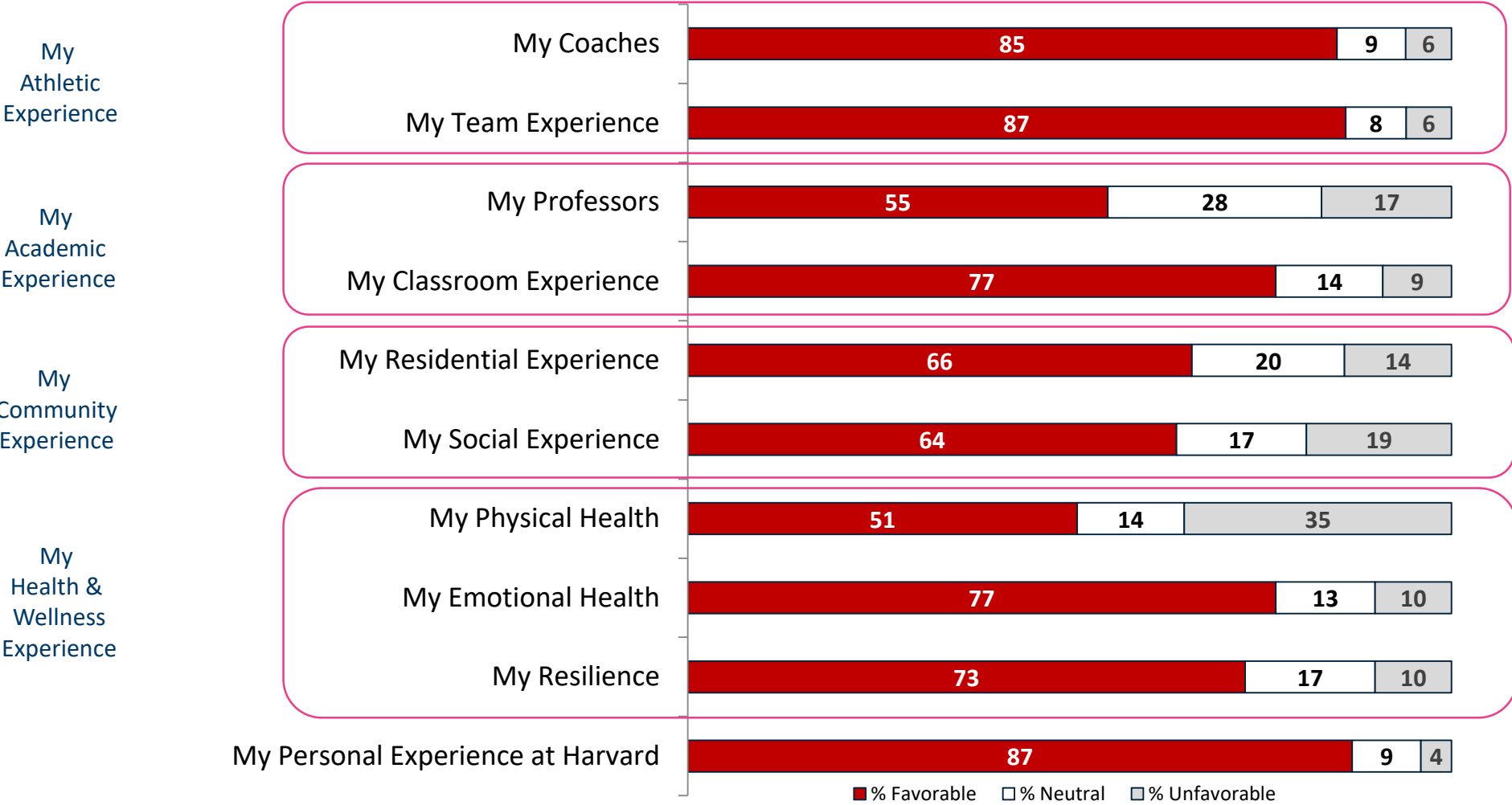
Survey questions were administered only to intercollegiate student-athletes. Equivalent data have not been collected from non-athlete Harvard students. All survey questions have been provided to Harvard to enable further research applications.

Areas of Measurement & Reliabilities

Areas of Measurement (Survey Dimensions)	Number of Items	α
My Coaches	4	.876
My Team Experience	6	.860
My Professors	4	.863
My Classroom Experience	6	.862
My Residential Experience	5	.810
My Social Experience	5	.793
My Physical Health	3	.710
My Emotional Health	3	.860
My Resilience	3	.807
My Personal Experience at Harvard	10	.904

Survey item 40 and survey item 53 were not included in any of the 10 dimensions

Dimension Level Results

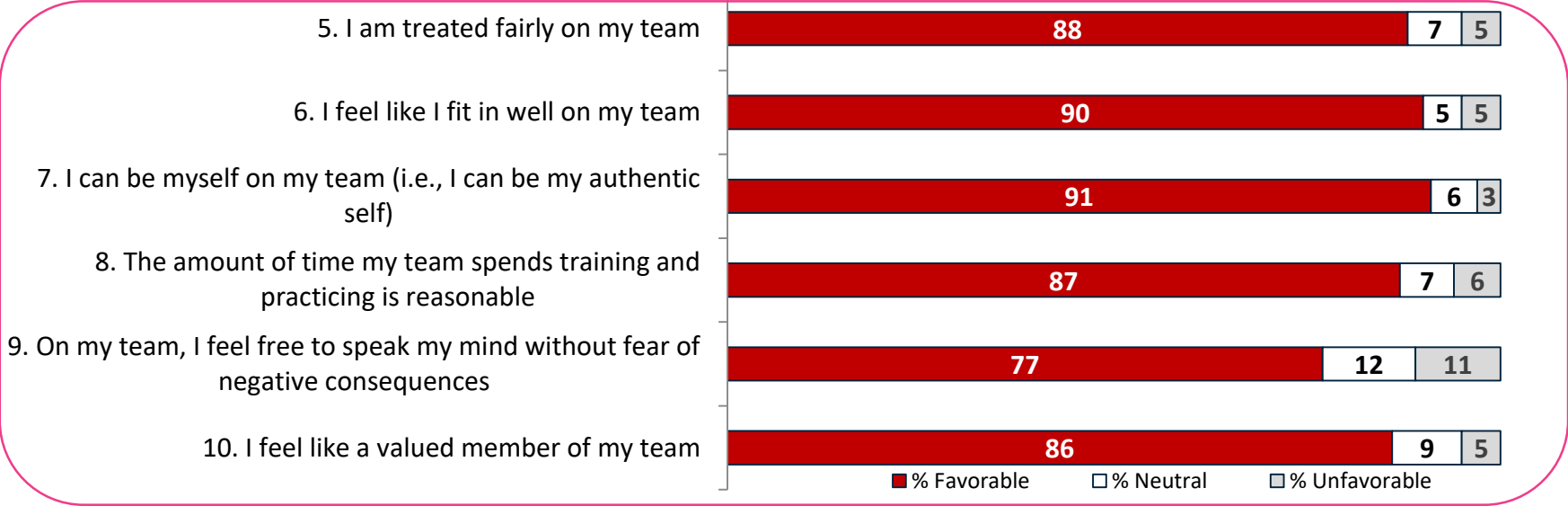


My Athletic Experience

My Coaches

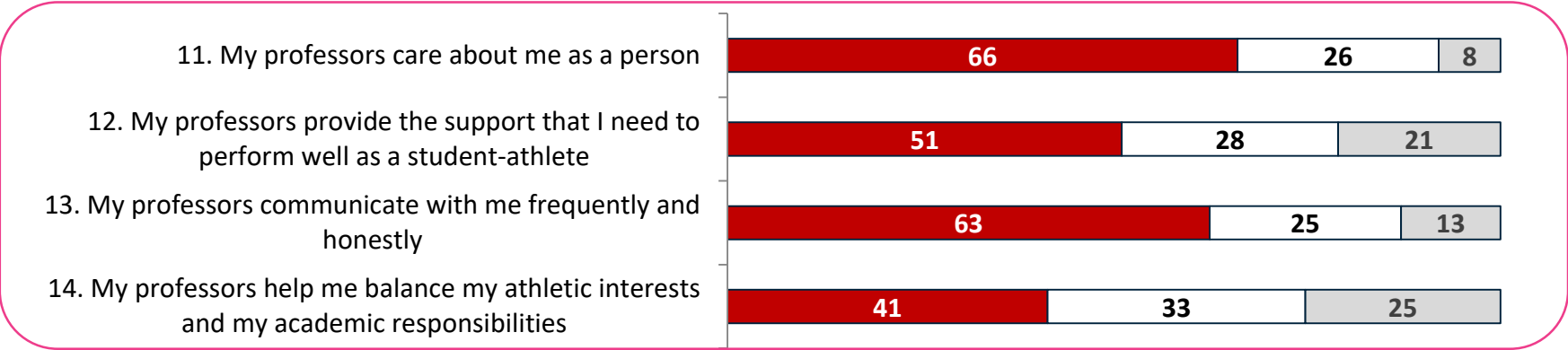


My Team Experience

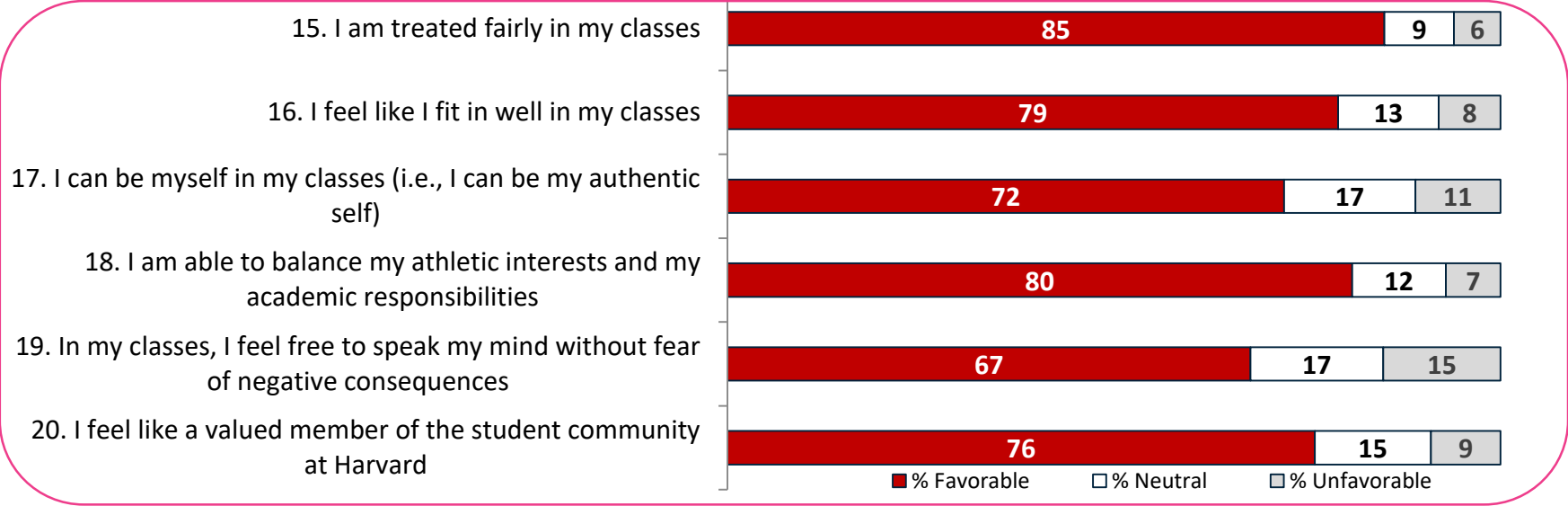


My Academic Experience

My Professors

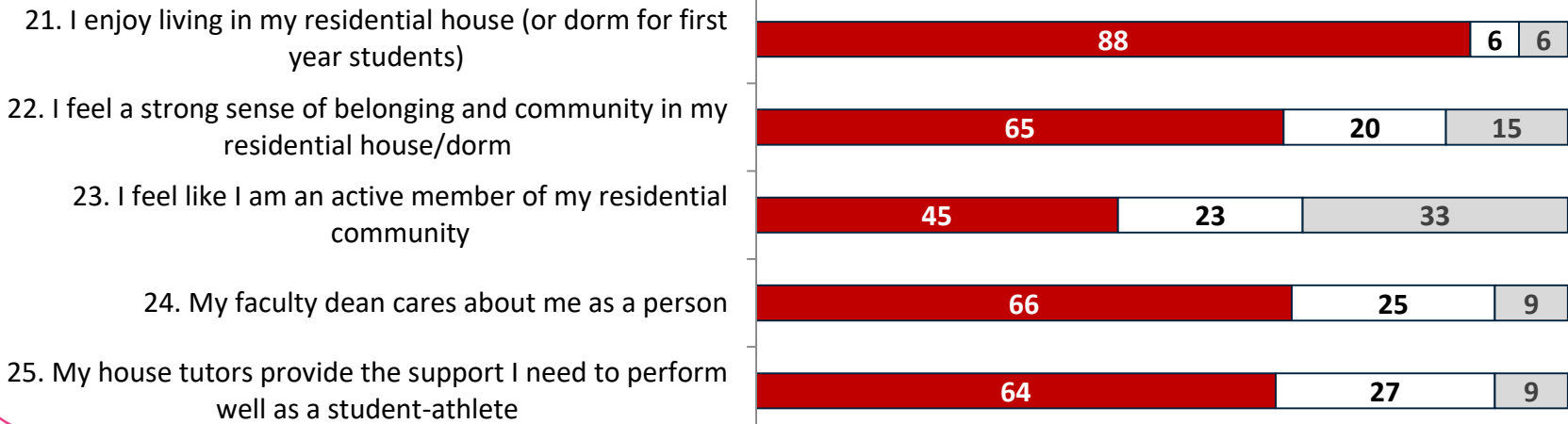


My Classroom Experience

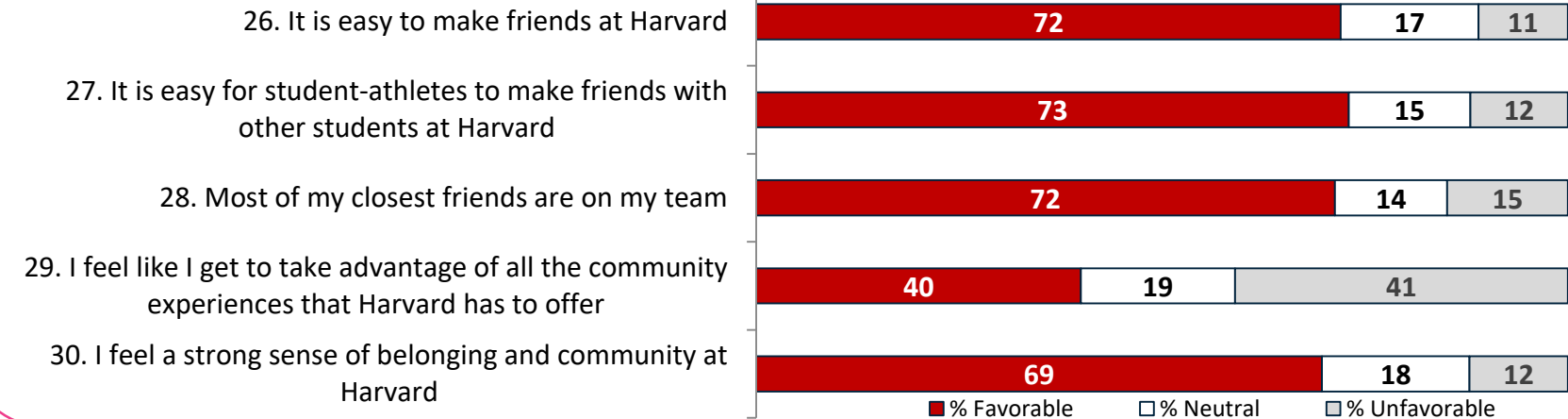


My Community Experience

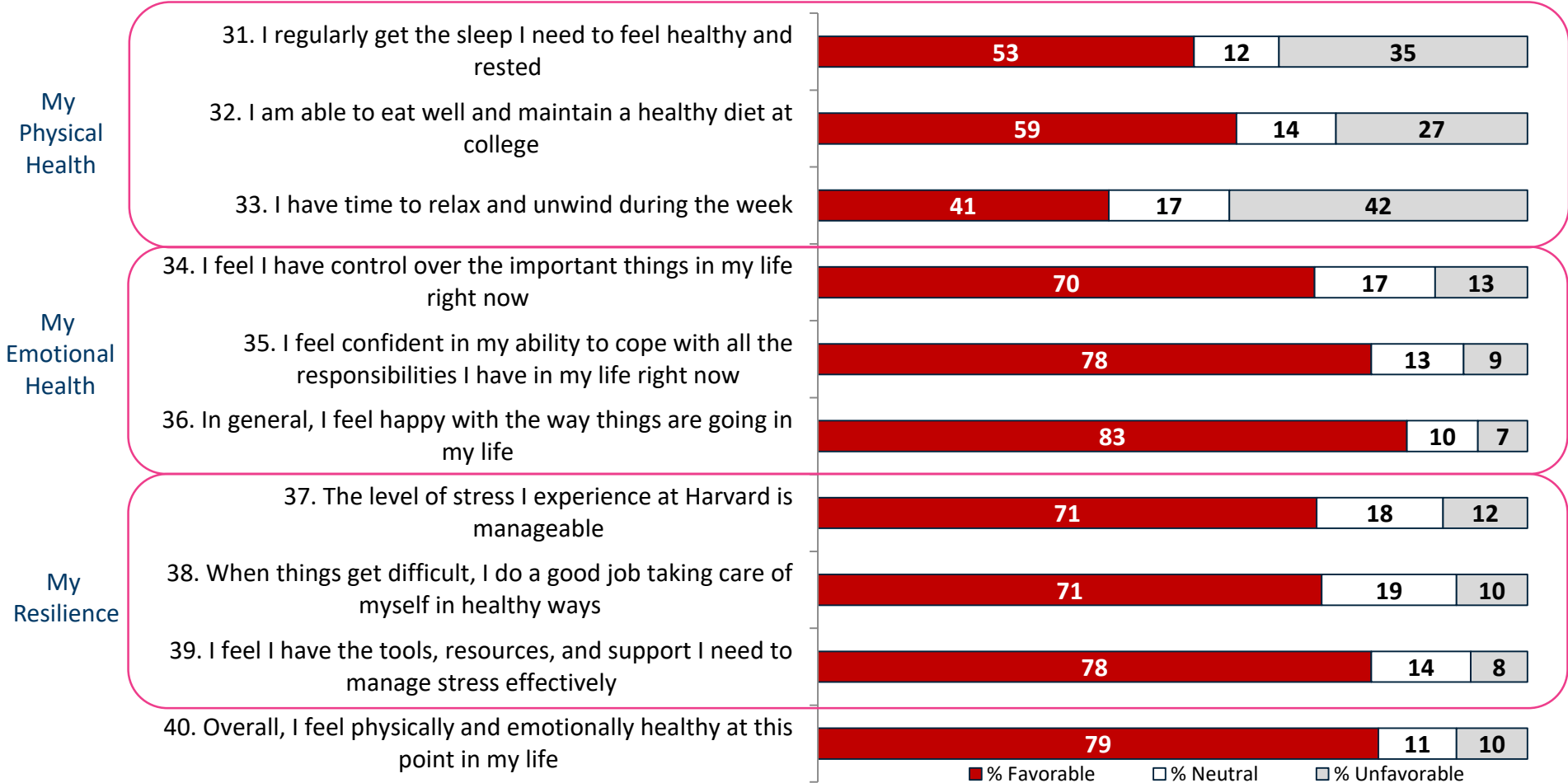
My Residential Experience



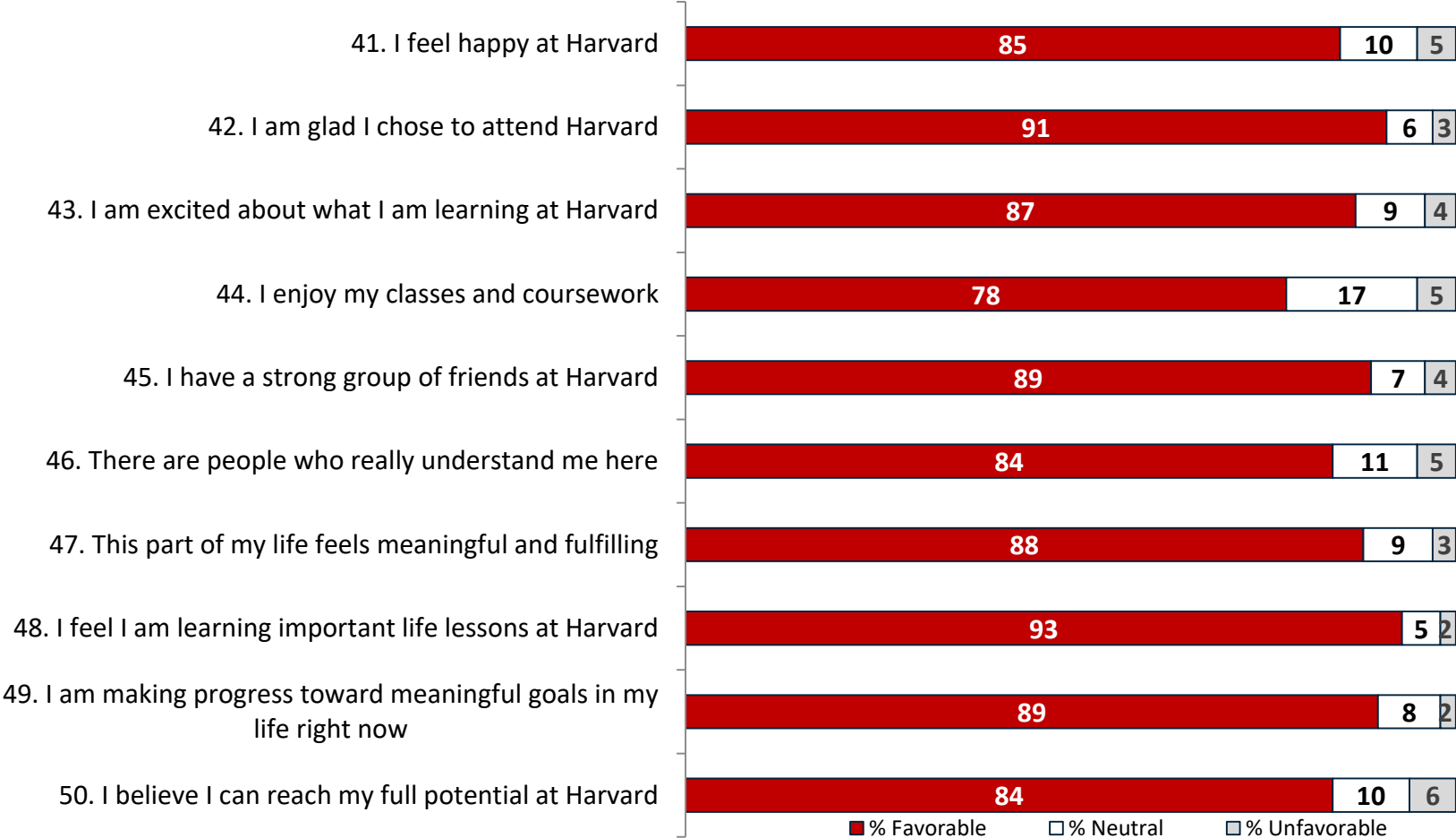
My Social Experience



My Health & Wellness

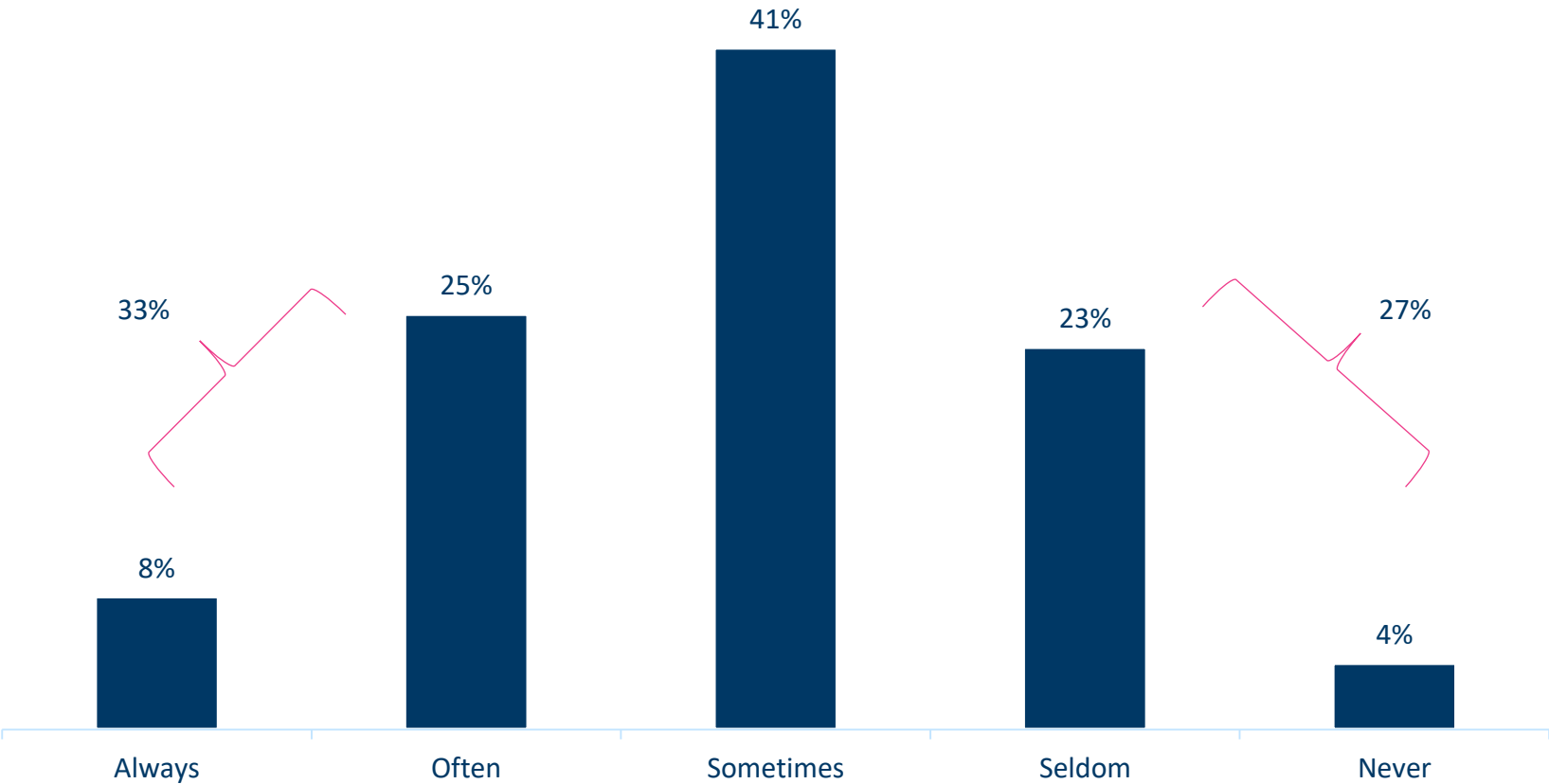


My Personal Experience at Harvard



Time Pressures

53. Do you ever experience tension or conflict between your athletic interests and your academic interests?



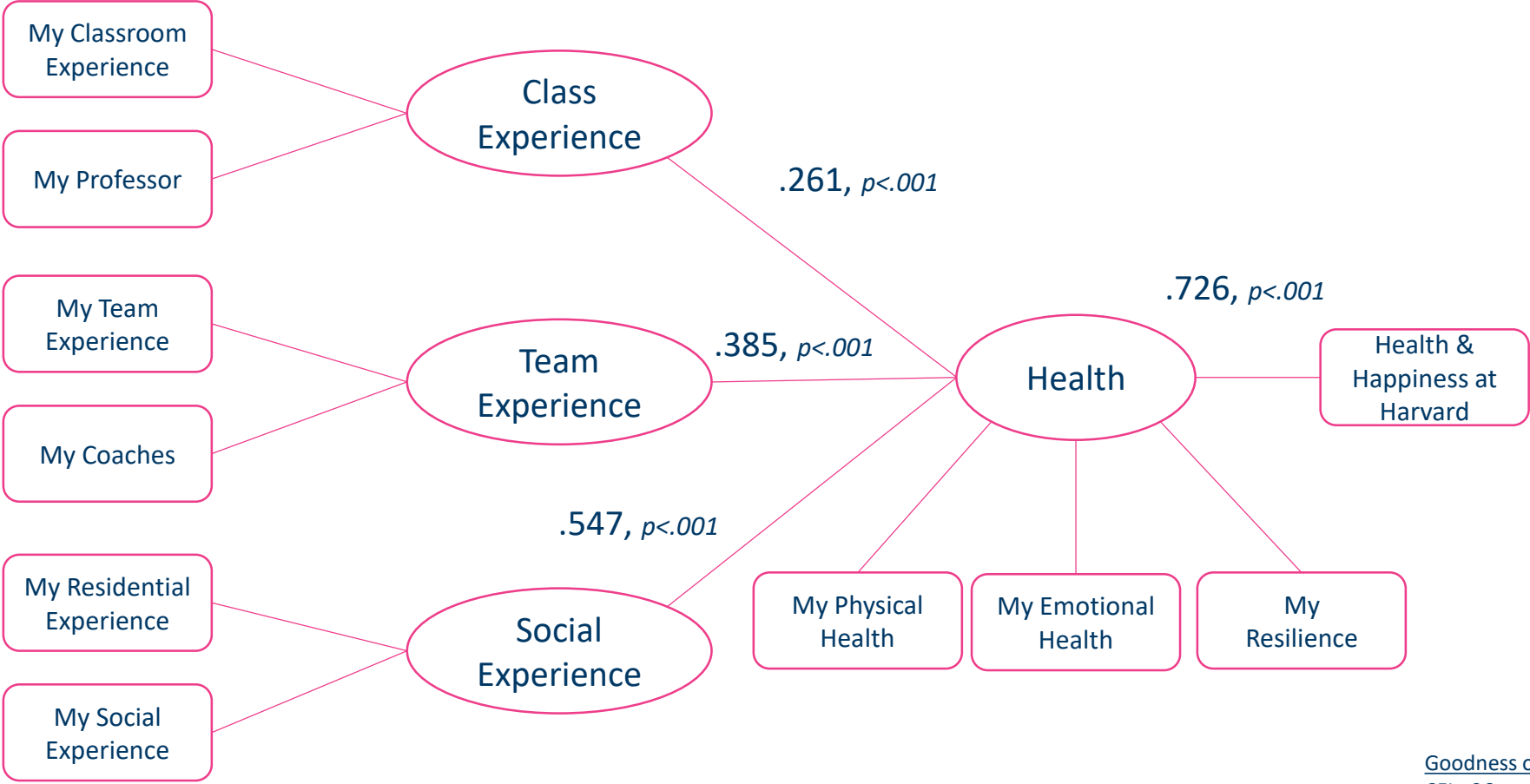
Item Level Key Drivers of Health & Happiness at Harvard



For statistical analysis, a Health & Happiness at Harvard index was created and used as an outcome variable. This index consisted of five items and yielded a reliability coefficient of .814. The items that comprise this index are:

- 40. Overall, I feel physically and emotionally healthy at this point in my life
- 41. I feel happy at Harvard
- 43. I am excited about what I am learning at Harvard
- 48. I feel I am learning important life lessons at Harvard
- 50. I believe I can reach my full potential at Harvard

Structural Equation Model



For statistical analysis, a Health & Happiness at Harvard index was created and used as an outcome variable. This index consisted of five items (q40, q41, q43, q48, q50) and yielded a reliability coefficient of .814.

Goodness of Fit
CFI: .96
TLI: .94
RMSEA: .08
SRMR: .04

Comment Themes

What do you like best about being a student-athlete at Harvard?	Number of Comments
Team/Community/Camaraderie/Friends	540
Support/Well-Being/Resources	60
Stress Reliever/Distraction/Outlet	58
Academic & Athletic Integration	57
Learning from Sport/Life Lessons	56
Competition/Mastery/Challenge/Training	53
Structure/Time Discipline	47
Sport Itself/Joy of the Game	45
Education/Career Goals/Network	42
Tradition/History/Representing Harvard	36

What challenges do you face as a student-athlete at Harvard?	Number of Comments
Workload/Time to Study/Time Management/Free Time/Finding Balance	524
Treatment from Professors/Administration/Others	130
Lack of Sleep	80
Eating Properly/Diet/Access to Food	62
Stereotype of Athletes	59
Scheduling Classes	50
More Resources/Accommodations	28
Stress/Pressure/Mental Health	17
Coaches	14
Frequent Exhaustion	12

Harvard Athletics Staff Experience Survey

Timing	Monday, December 9, 2019, to Monday, January 13, 2020
Method	Web-based, customized, anonymous survey
Instrument	50 closed ended diagnostic items, 3 open-ends, 6 demographic items
Participants	Administered to all Harvard Athletics staff members
Response Rate	62% (118 out of 191)

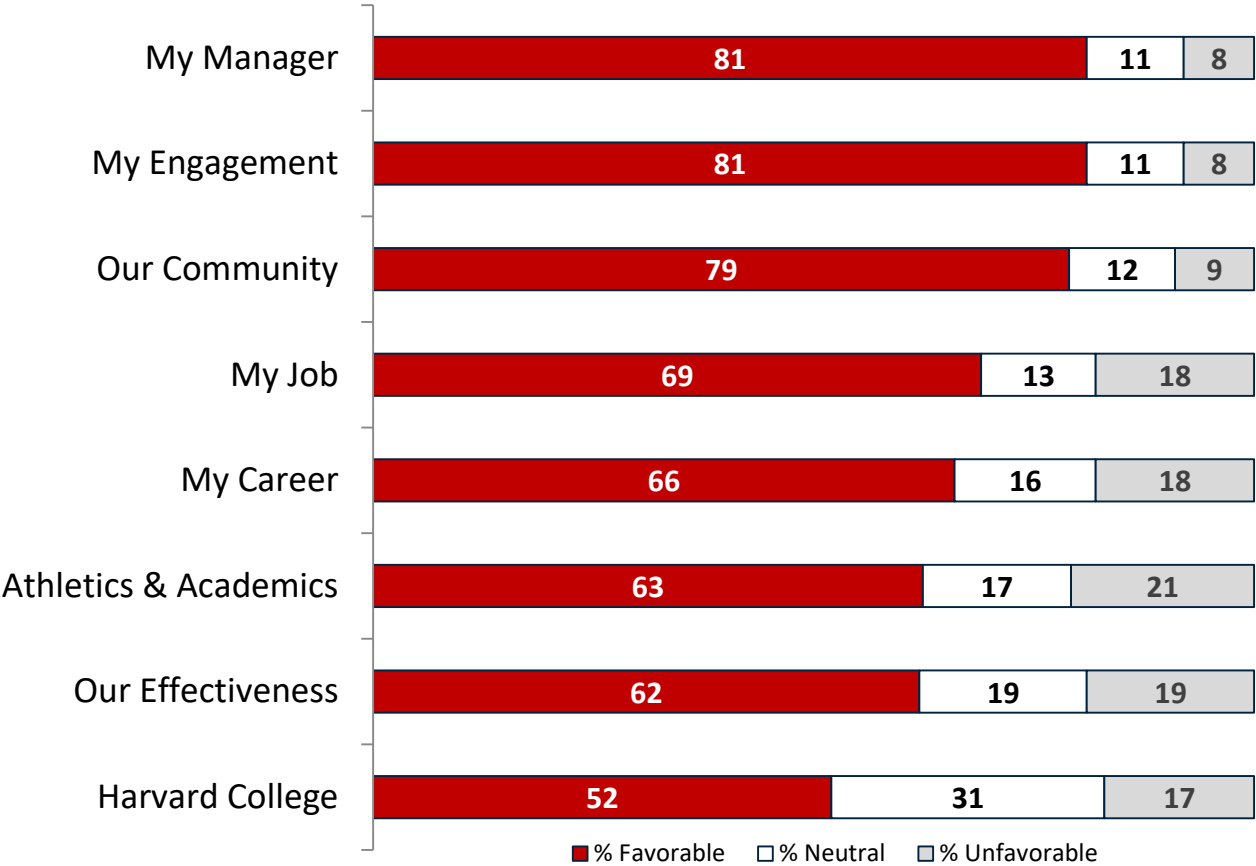
Response Count by Job Type

Job Type Selected	Response Count	Head Count	Percentage
Left Blank	2	n/a	n/a
Coach	33	34	97%
Assistant Coach	30	69	43%
Exempt Staff	36	43	84%
Non-exempt Staff	9	26	35%
Intern	8	19	42%
Total	118	191	62%

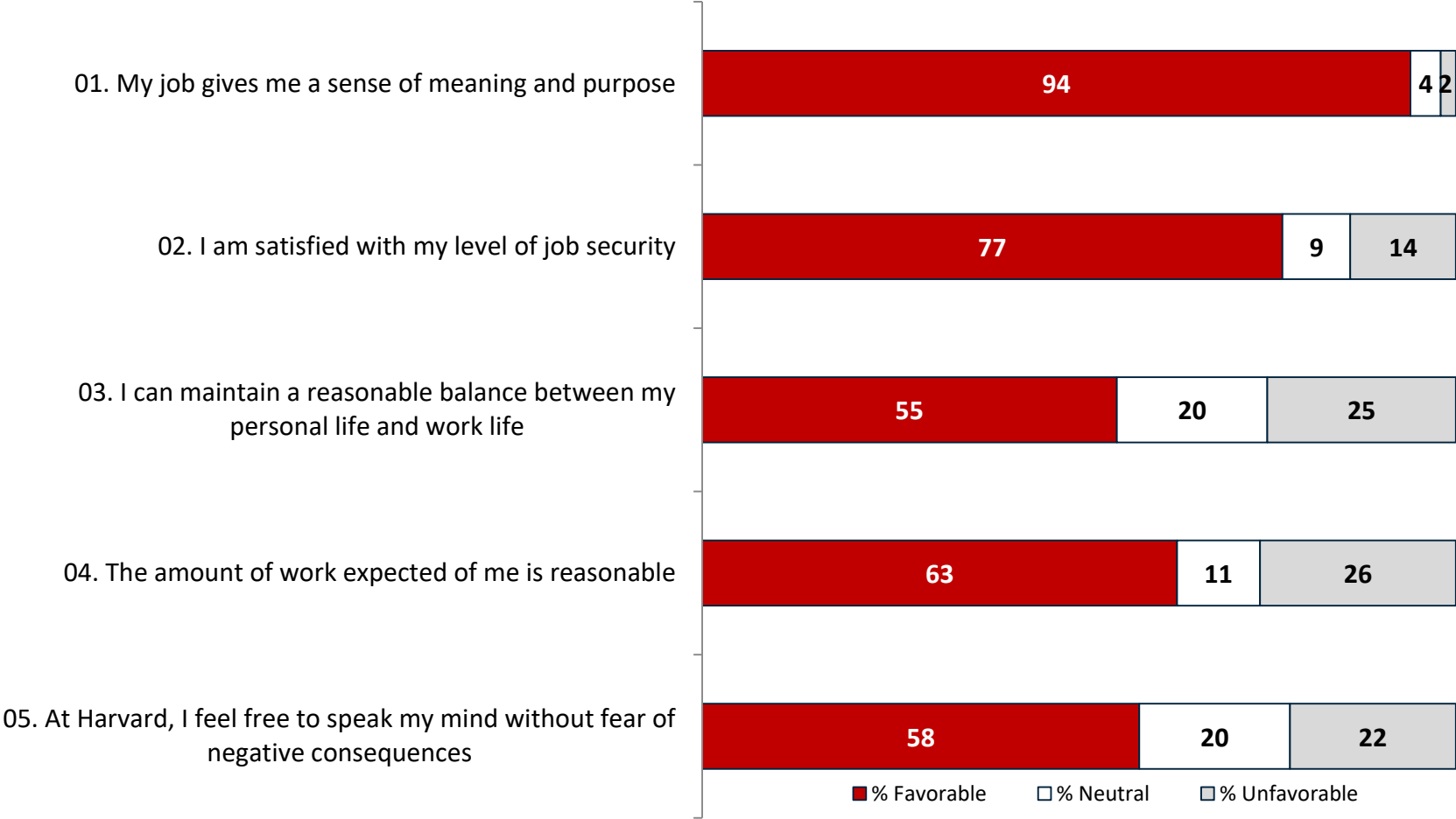
Areas of Measurement & Reliabilities

Areas of Measurement (Survey Dimensions)	Number of Items	α
My Job	5	.730
My Career	5	.848
My Manager	5	.902
My Sense of Community	5	.833
Our Effectiveness	10	.867
Athletics & Academics	10	.835
Harvard College	5	.910
My Engagement	5	.864

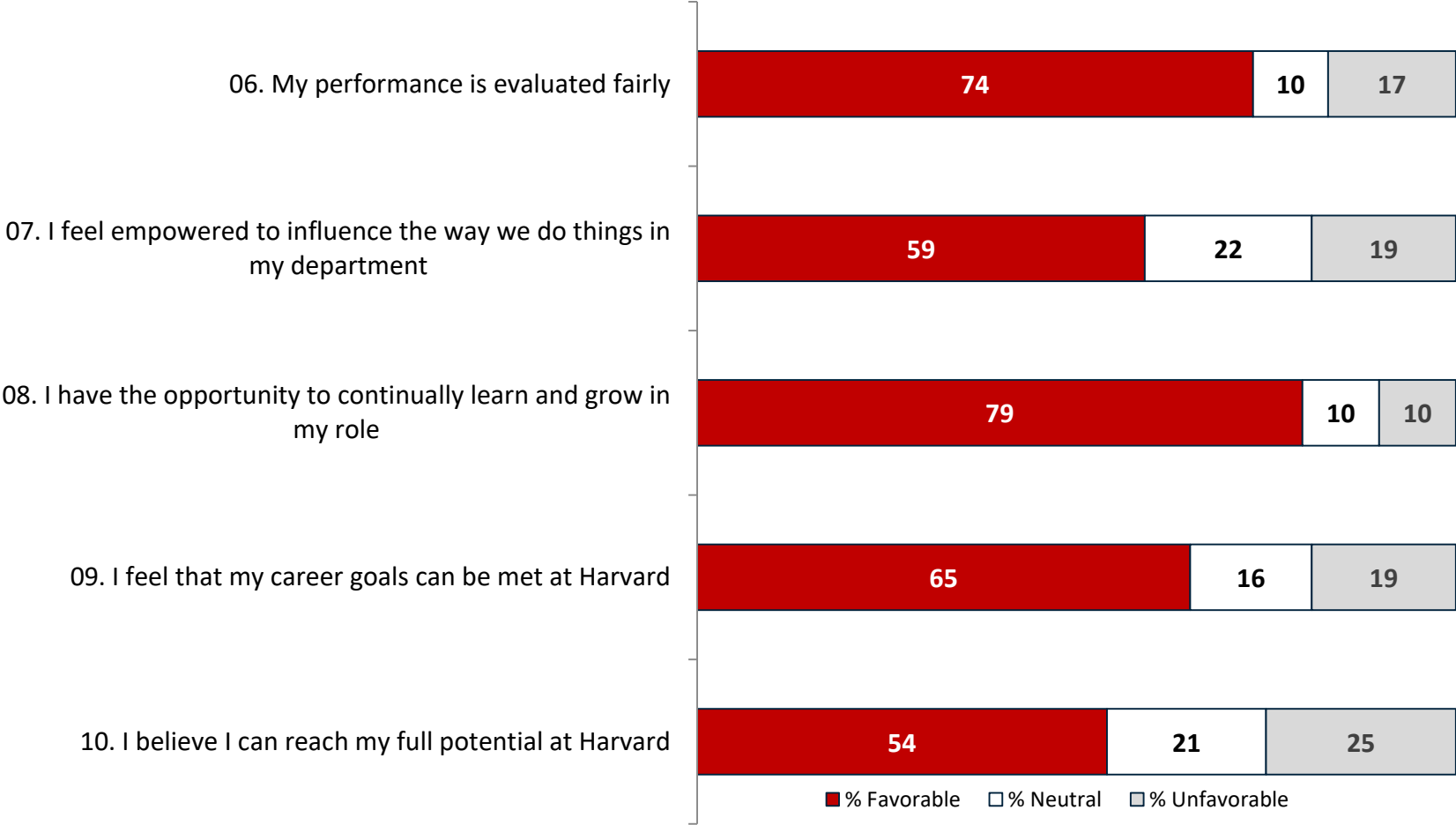
Dimension Level Results



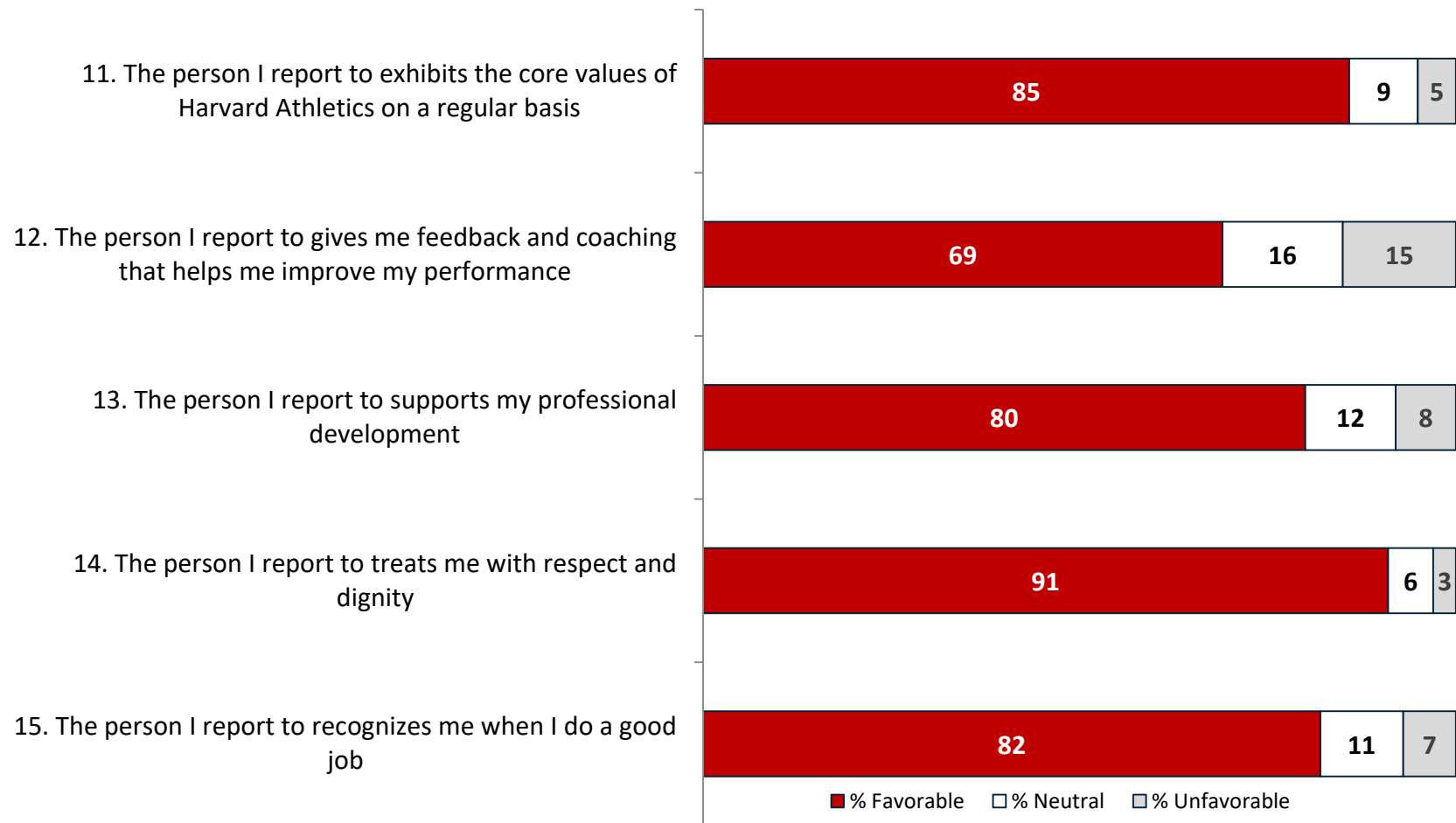
My Job



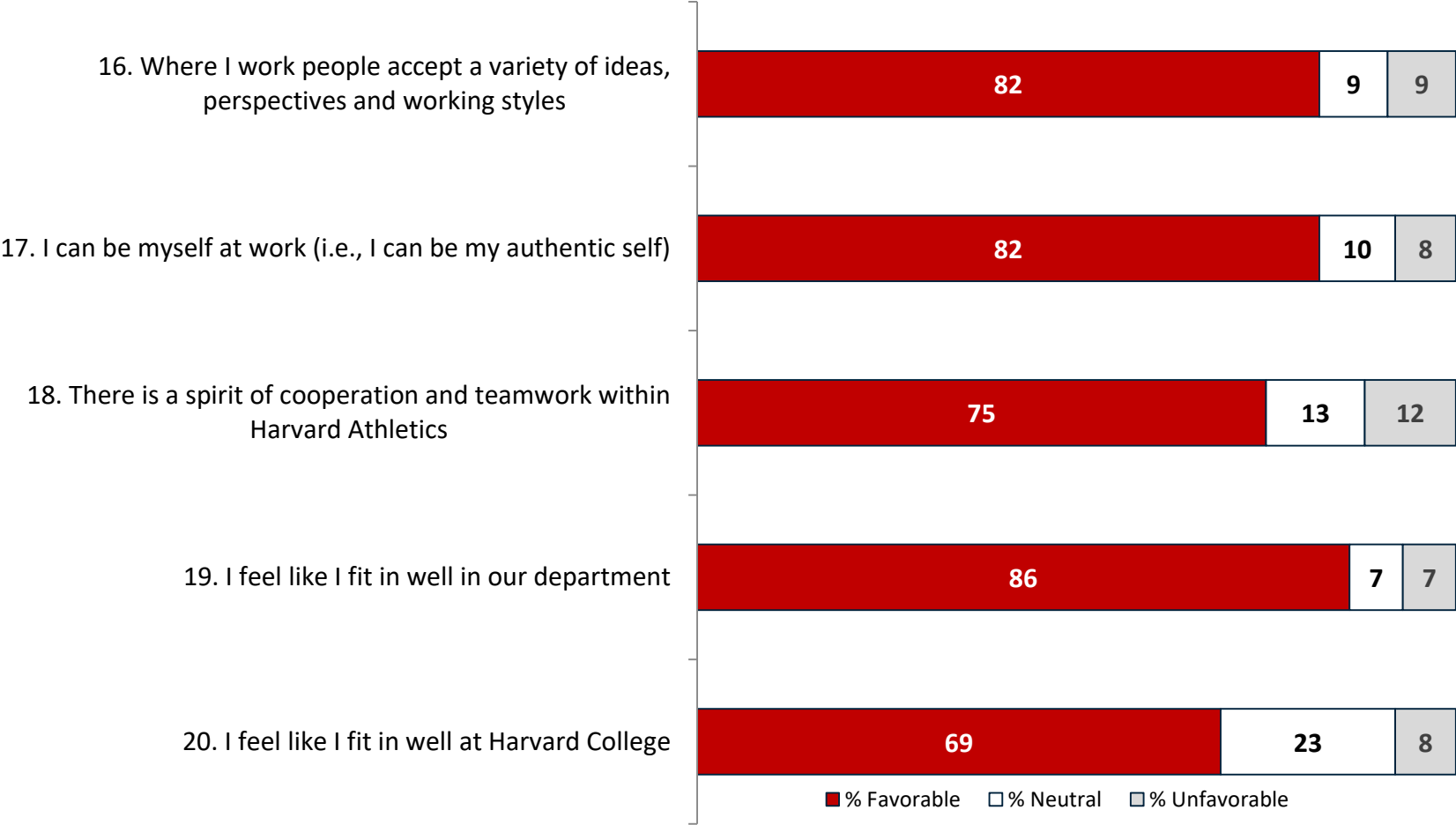
My Career



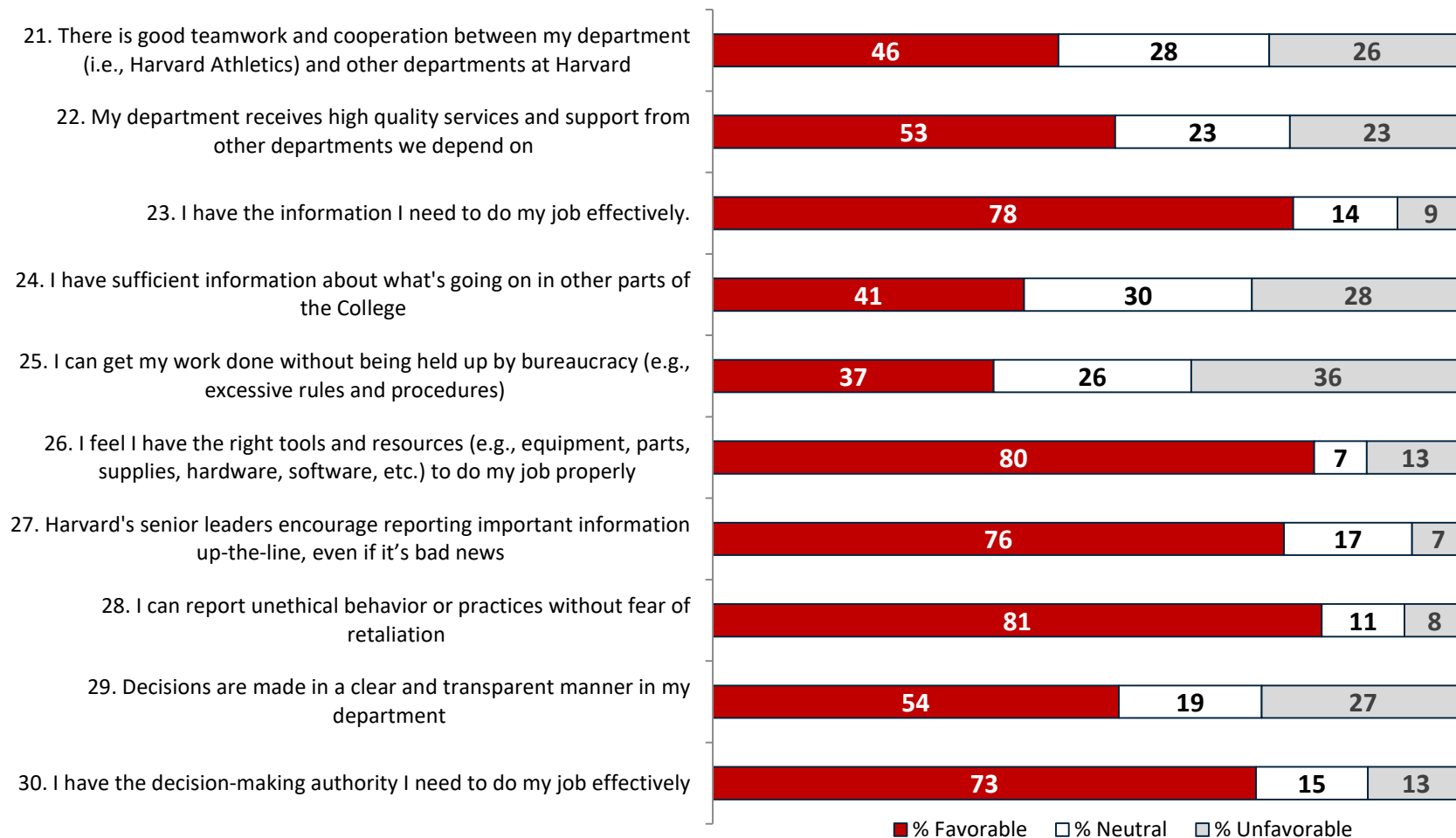
My Manager



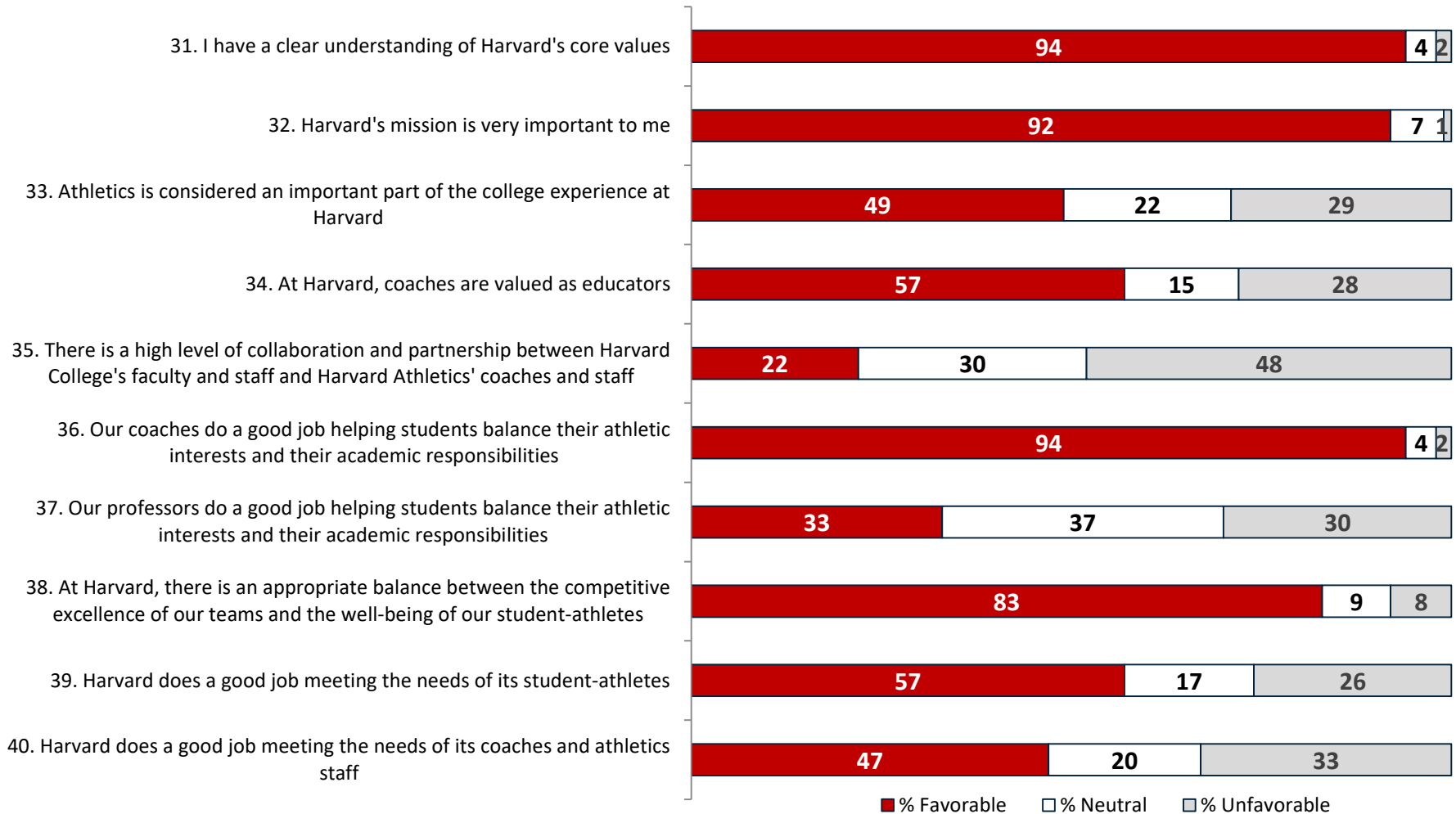
My Sense of Community



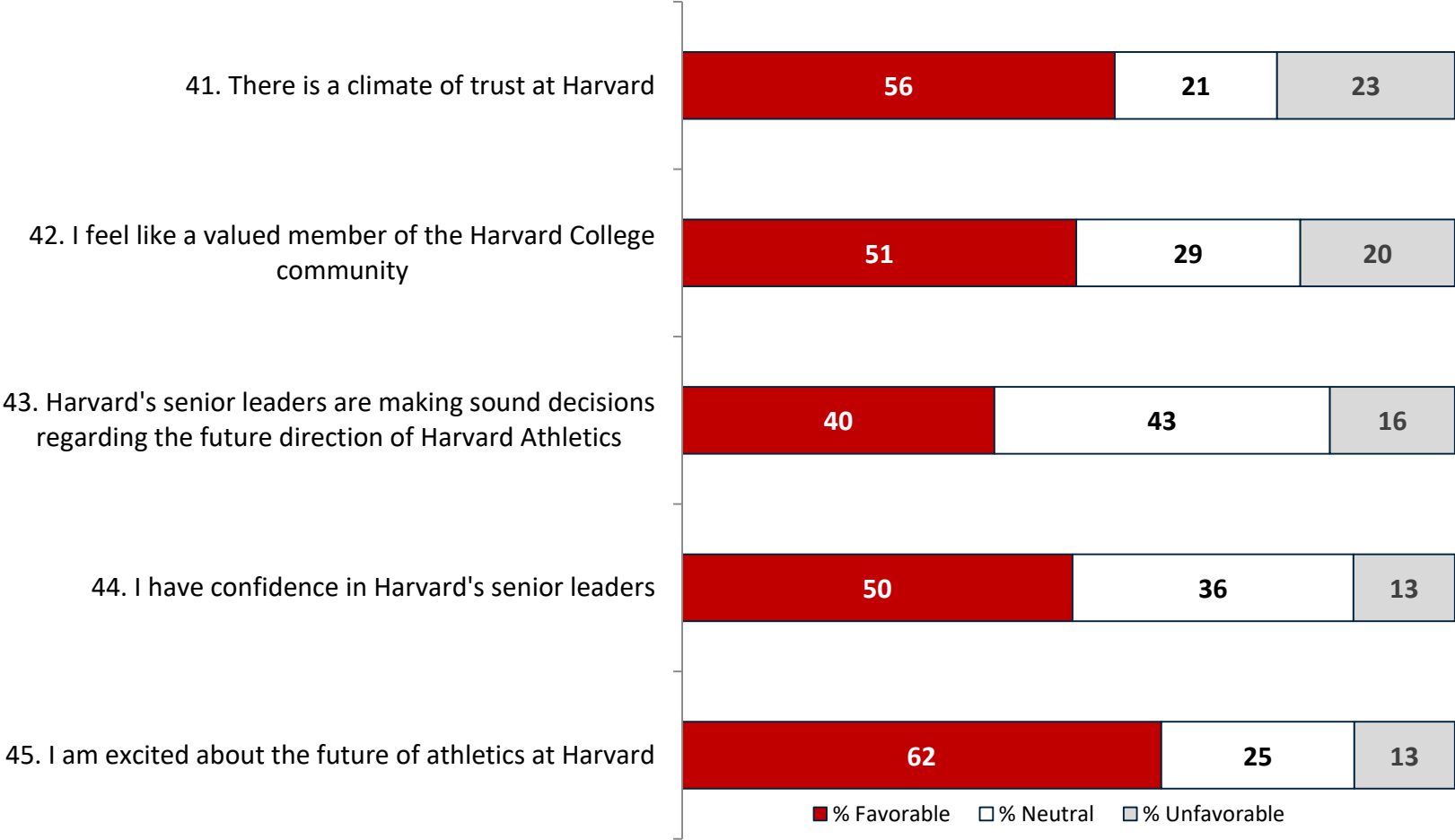
Our Effectiveness



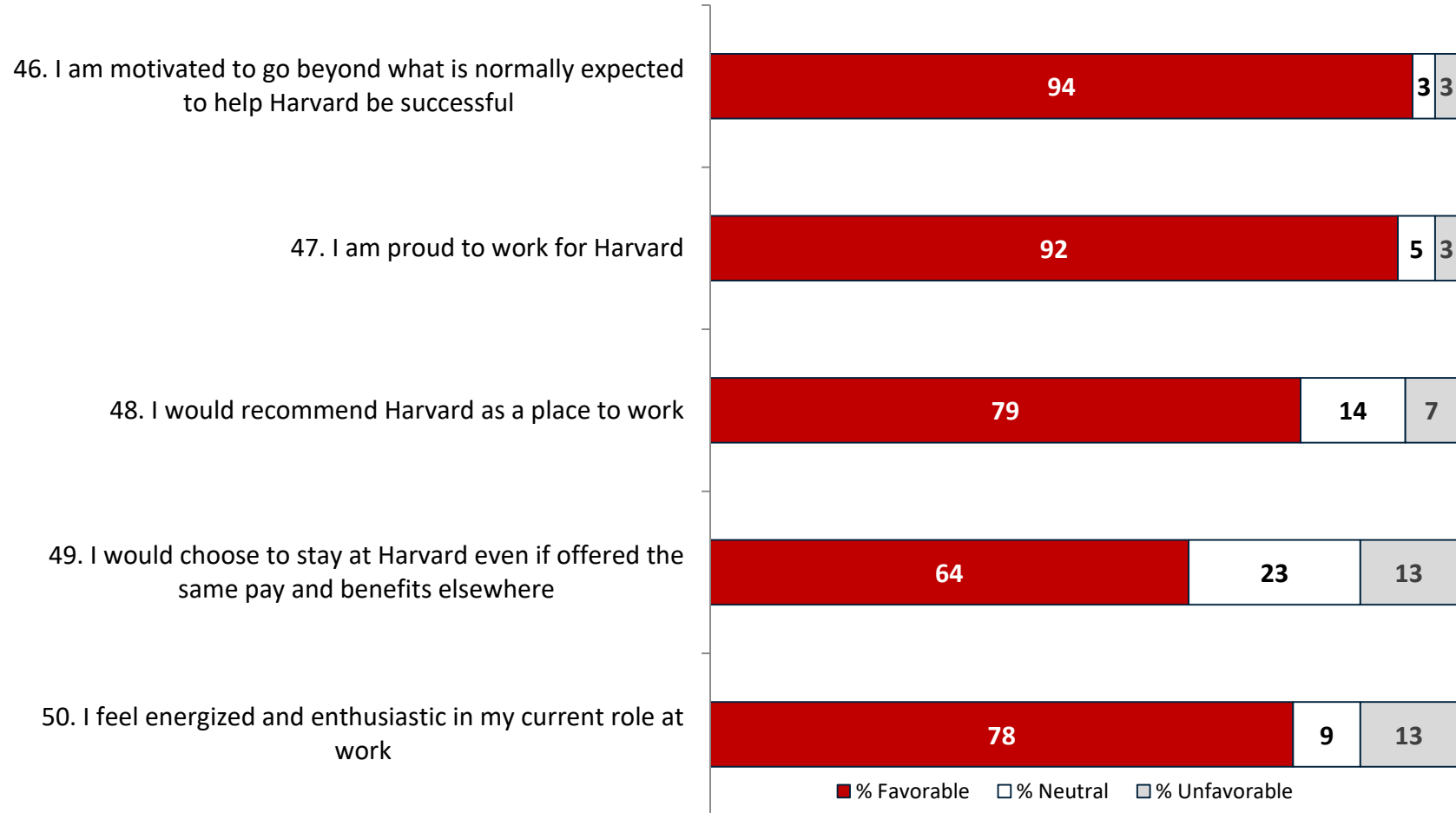
Athletics & Academics



Harvard College



My Engagement

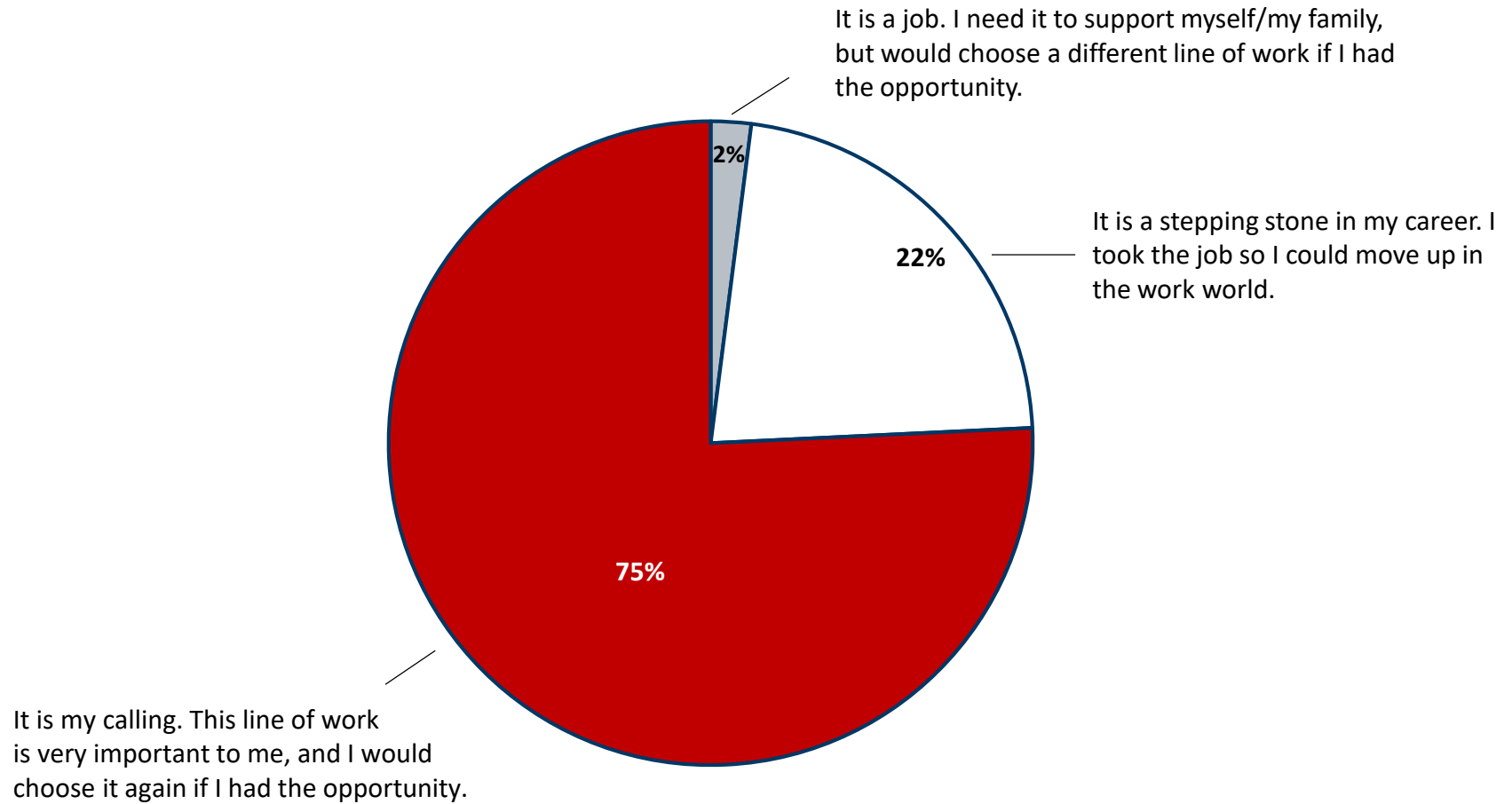


Comment Themes

What do you like best about working at Harvard?	Number of Comments
Working with Student-athletes	58
The people here/My colleagues	43
Harvard's mission/Education through athletics	31
Positive Work Environment	19
Being part of the Harvard Community/Culture	11
Opportunity to learn & develop	8
Autonomy	7
What do you like least about working at Harvard?	Number of Comments
The gap between Athletics & Academics	31
Structure/Silos/Lack of Coordination	27
Bureaucracy	22
Lack of Resources/Staff	13
Parking Expenses	8
Lack of Transparency/Communication/Decision Making	7
Workload and Work/life balance	7
Performance Management/Accountability/Coach Review Process	6
Limited Career Path/Security	6
Concerns about Human Resources	6
Limited support for student athletes/scheduling	5
Boston/Commute/Weather	5
Facilities	5
Feel Undervalued	5

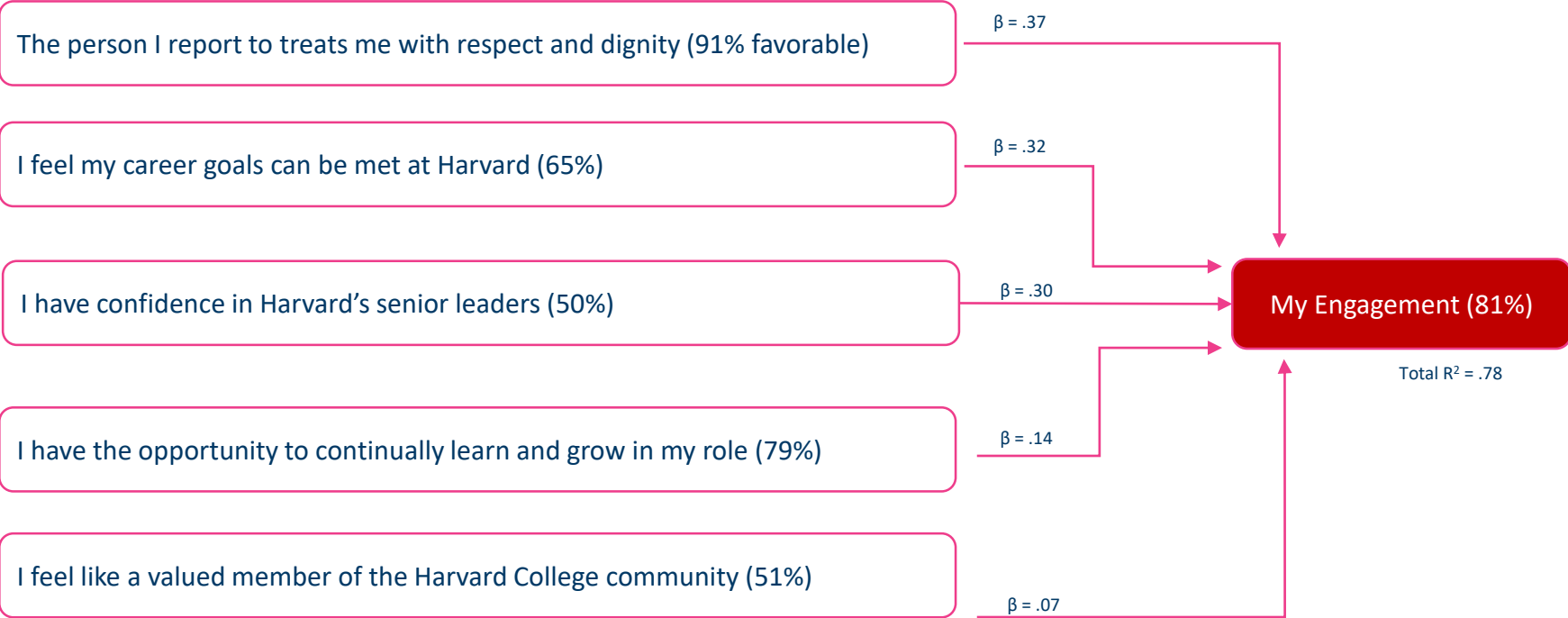
Relationship to Work

Which of the following best describes your work here at Harvard?



See Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997) for more about relationships to work

Item Level Key Drivers of Engagement



Harvard Athletics Community Pulse Survey

Timing Tuesday, January 21, 2020, to Monday, March 2, 2020

Method Web-based, customized, anonymous survey

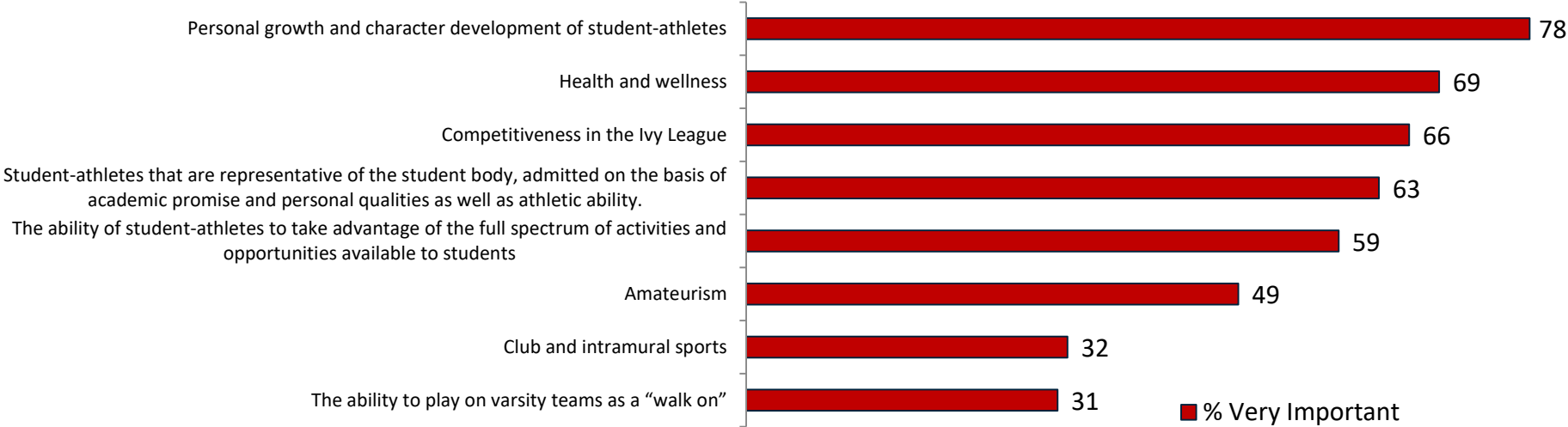
Instrument 3 closed ended diagnostic items, 1 open-end, 1 demographic item

Participants Administered to Harvard Athletics alumni, fans, and parents

Response Count 115 respondents

Harvard Community Pulse Survey Results

2. Harvard is seeking to create an athletics program that delivers transformational learning through athletics and serves as a model for student athletics in the 21st century. With this goal in mind, how important to you are the following aspects of athletics in university settings?



3. I am excited about the future of athletics at Harvard



4. I am proud of Harvard Athletics



■ % Favorable □ % Neutral ▒ % Unfavorable

References

Bailey, C., Yeoman, R., Madden, A., Thompson, M., & Kerridge, G. (2019). A Review of the Empirical Literature on Meaningful Work: Progress and Research Agenda. *Human Resource Development Review*, 18(1), 83–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484318804653>

Barrett, F.J. & Cooperrider, D. L. (1990). Generative metaphor intervention: A new approach to working with systems divided by conflict and caught in defensive perception. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 26(2), 219-239.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Brown GT, Hainline B, Kroshus E, Wilfer M, eds. *Mind, Body and Sport-Understanding and Supporting Student-Athlete Mental Wellness*. NCAA, Oct 2014. Downloaded from www.NCAAPublications.com on 11/2019.

Cameron, K.S. and Quinn, R.E. (2006). *Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture Based on Competing Values Framework*. Josey Bass, San Francisco.

Cooperrider, D. L. & Srivastva, S. (1987). Appreciative inquiry in organizational life. In Woodman, R. W. & Pasmore, W.A. (eds.). *Research in Organizational Change and Development*. Vol. 1. Stamford, CT: JAI Press. pp. 129–169.

Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin*, 95, 542-575. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542

Gerson, M.W. and Fernandez, N. (2013). Program to build resilience and thriving. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43: 2169-2184. doi:[10.1111/jasp.12168](https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12168)

References

- Gittel, J. H. (2012). New Directions for Relational Coordination Theory. The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship. 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199734610.013.0030.
- Jackson, P.Z. and McKergow, M. (2006). The Solutions Focus: Making Coaching and Change SIMPLE. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Johnson, B. (2014). Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems. Amherst, Mass: HRD Press.
- Kahn, W.A. (1990). Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work. Academy of Management Journal, 33, 692-724. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/256287>
- Kozlowski, S.W.J. and Bell, B.S. (2003). Work Groups and Teams in Organizations. In Handbook of Psychology, I.B. Weiner (Ed.). doi:[10.1002/0471264385.wei1214](https://doi.org/10.1002/0471264385.wei1214)
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). What Matters to Student Success: A Review of the Literature. National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success. National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.
- O'Meara, K., Knudsen, K., & Jones, J. (2013). The role of emotional competencies in faculty-doctoral student relationships. The Review of Higher Education, 36, 315-347. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2013.0021>
- Owen, H. (2008). Open space technology: A user's guide. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Porath, C., Spreitzer, G.M., Gibson, C., & Stevens, F. (2012). Thriving at work: Toward its measurement, construct validation, and theoretical refinement. Journal of Organizational Behavior, 33(2), 250-271.

References

- Rezania, D., & Gurney, R. (2014). Building successful student-athlete coach relationships: Examining coaching practices and commitment to the coach. *SpringerPlus*, 3(1), 383-416.
- Roxas, Adela S. and Ridinger, Lynn L. (2016). "Relationships of Coaching Behaviors to Student-Athlete Well-Being, "Higher Education Politics & Economics: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 10.
- Saks, A.M. and Gruman, J.A. (2014). What Do We Really Know About Employee Engagement? *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 25: 155-182. doi:[10.1002/hrdq.21187](https://doi.org/10.1002/hrdq.21187)
- Schaufeli, W., Bakker, A. and Salanova, M. (2006). The Measurement of Work Engagement with a Short Questionnaire: A Cross-National Study. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 66, 701-716. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013164405282471>
- Seligman, M.E.P. (2011). *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*. Free Press, New York.
- Stavros, J. & Hinrichs, G. (2009). *The thin book of SOAR: Building strengths-based strategy*. Bend, OR : Thinbook Publishing.
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Sternin, J., & Choo, R. (2000). The power of positive deviancy. *Harvard Business Review*, 78(1), 14–15.
- Ton, Z. (2014). *The Good Jobs Strategy: How The Smartest Companies Invest in Employees to Lower Costs and Boost Profits*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: New York.
- Weick, K. E. (1984). Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems. *American Psychologist*, 39(1), 40–49. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.39.1.40>

References

Weisbord, M. R., and Janoff, S. (1995). *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities*. Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, CA.

Wilson, J. H., Ryan, R. G., & Pugh, J. L. (2010). Professor–Student Rapport Scale Predicts Student Outcomes. *Teaching of Psychology*, 37(4), 246–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00986283.2010.510976>

Wrzesniewski, A., McCauley, C., Rozin, P. and Schwartz, B. (1997). Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People’s Relations to Their Work. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, 21-33.

