

# Toxic or Telling: The Harvard Experience on Extracurriculars and Vocations

Harvard's been branded as a pre-professional pipeline that funnels students into careers in Medicine, Law, Finance, Consulting, and Business. We want to see if the culture of Harvard really does have an influence in transforming people from high school to college. Specifically, how does Harvard affect students' vocational and extracurricular interests?

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## Introduction

Picasso Van Gogh concentrates in Art History. Well, he used to. Once obsessed with the makings of Ceramics as an outlet for self-expression, he is now Art History turned Economics, zombie-ing over Excel from nine-to-nine. Is Picasso a one-in-a-million student allured by the spreadsheets of Investment Banking, or is he one of many who find themselves pursuing a means to an end?

## Data

We took it upon ourselves to collect, analyze, and report the data underlying the incentives of selecting concentrations and extracurriculars at Harvard. HODP sent Harvard students a survey to see how many of them followed Picasso Van Gogh down a pre-professional path, and we visualized the data using Plotly. The survey asked questions about students' motivations behind pursuing their concentrations. In total, 64 participants filled out the survey, including 10 participants from the Class of '22, 9 from the Class of '23, 31 from the Class of '24, and 12 from the Class of '25, and 2 unspecified students.

## Academic Trends

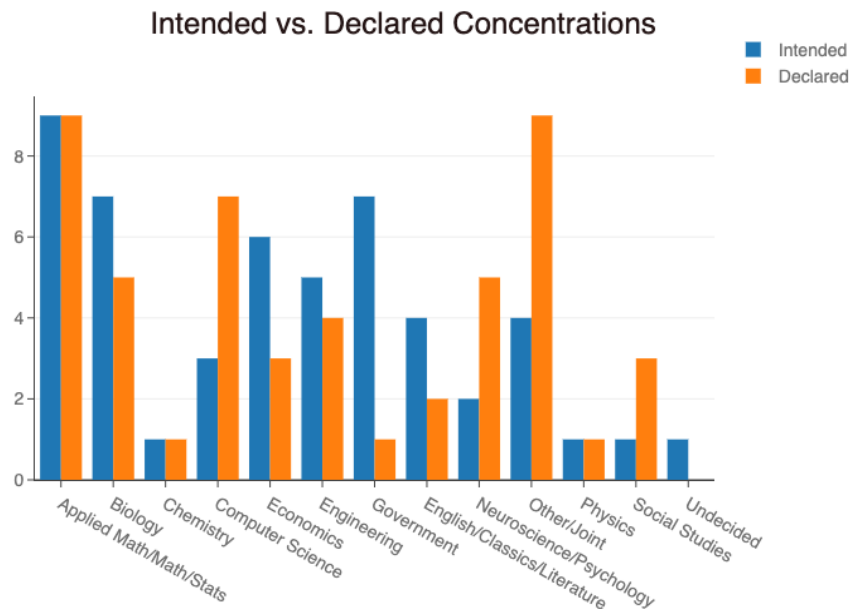


Figure 1: Survey respondents' distribution of intended concentrations compared to their distribution of declared concentrations. First-year students were excluded from this visualization.

To determine how Harvard affects academic interests of students, we asked our survey respondents what their intended concentrations on their Harvard application was and what their actual declared concentration is. According to [Business Insider](#), Harvard's top three concentrations are Economics, Government, and Computer Science. The sharp increase in computer science concentrators in Figure 1 reflects this trend, but government and economics concentrations seemed to have decreased. However, many of the joint concentrations also included computer science (3 respondents), government (5 respondents), or economics (4 respondents) as one of their joint fields, making these decreases much less drastic than they seem. Therefore, while Harvard does seem to lure students into this trifecta, according to our data, **students likely combine one of these fields with their original interests rather than entirely changing their academic plans.**

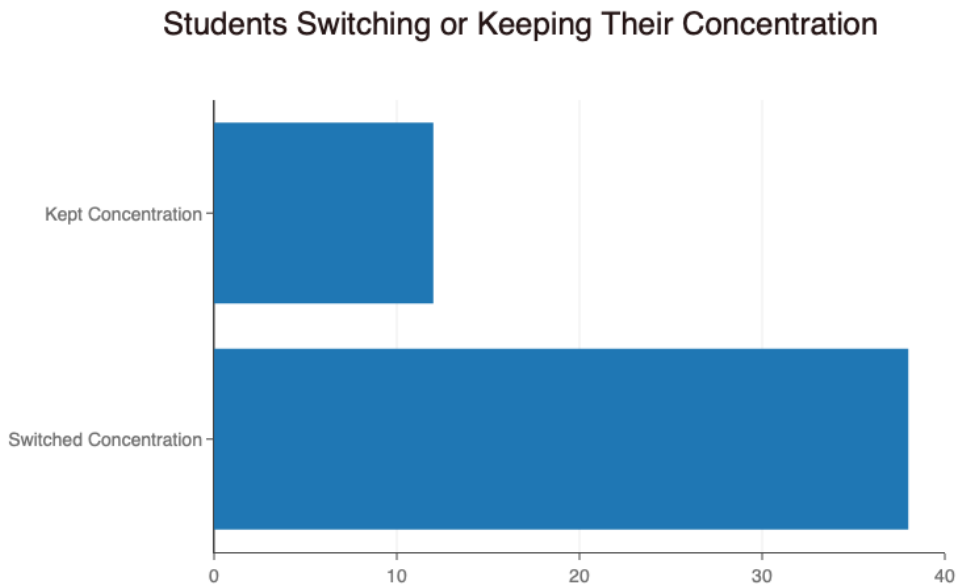


Figure 2: Comparing students who kept their intended concentration and those who switched

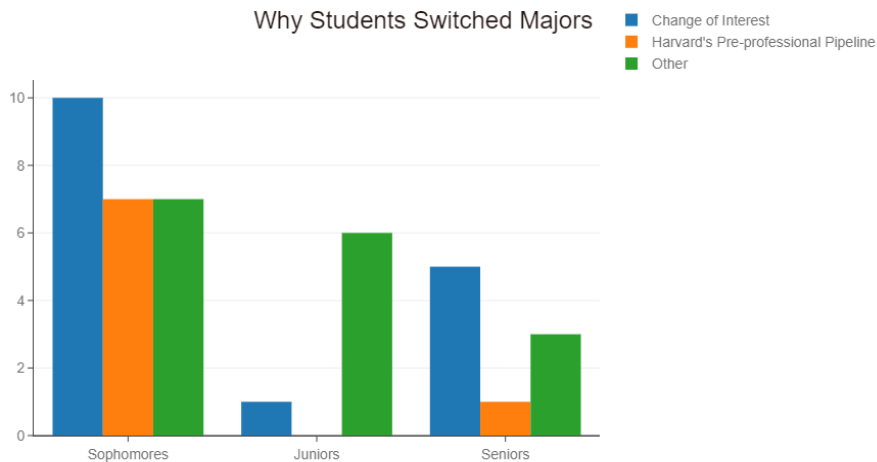


Figure 3: Reasons why students switched majors broken down by their class. "Other" refers to reasons such as family pressure, fame, and peers.

Furthermore, just like Picasso Van Gogh, the majority of Harvard students deviate from original intentions when applying to university. Although Harvard's "pre-professional pipeline" does affect students' ultimate concentration, especially for students in the Class of '24, **changes in passion influence their decision to change concentrations the most.** In addition, extraneous factors such as family and social pressure are also more significant than the pre-professional pipeline in determining students' decisions. It's

possible that the opportunities and the culture at Harvard are part of the reason why students' interests change, but ultimately their love for a particular subject plays the greatest role.

## Extracurricular Trends

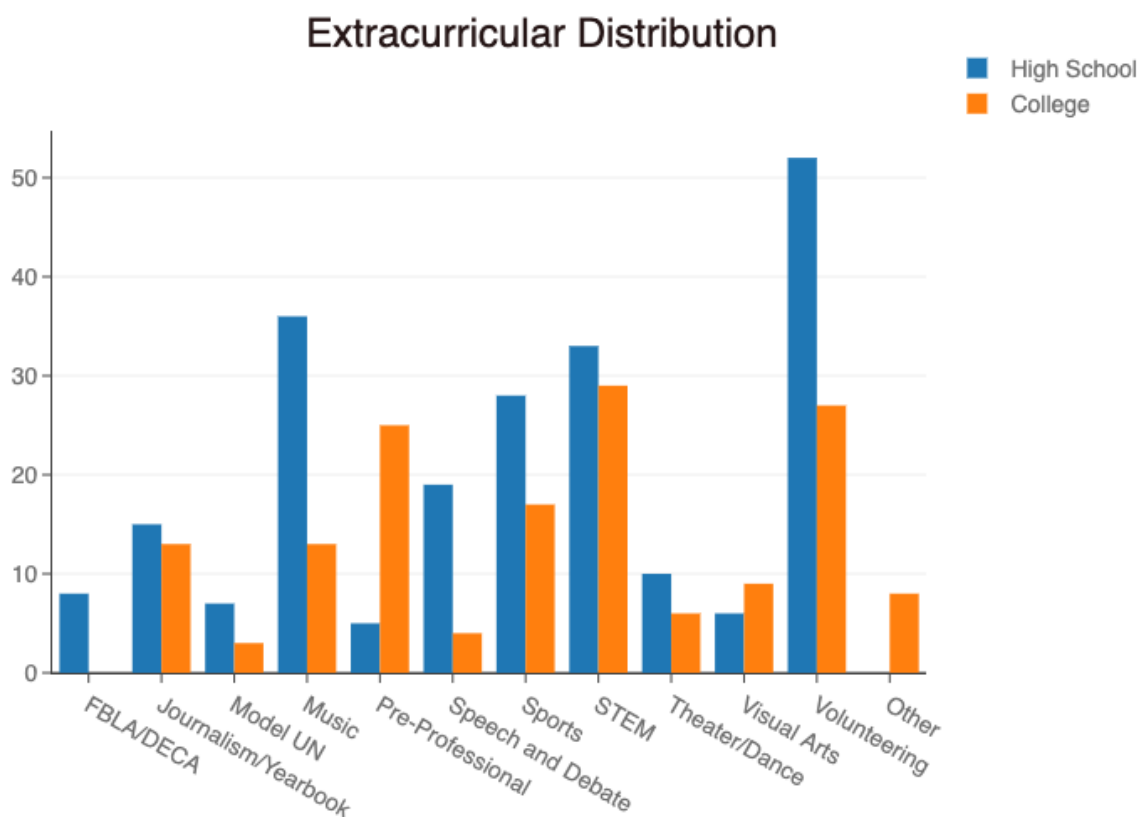


Figure 4: Survey respondents' distribution of high school activities compared to their distribution of college activities.

Next, we asked our respondents about their extracurriculars in college versus high school. Overall, there is a general decrease of involvement with clubs in college; however, extra-curricular interest is far more indicative of Harvard's pre-professional focus. As seen in Figure 4, there is a noticeable **increase in involvement with pre-professional clubs** in college. In fact, only the visual arts and pre-professional groups saw an increase in engagement. **Service oriented extracurriculars like volunteering saw a significant decrease compared to high school.** Likewise, extracurricular activities focusing on the refinement of specific skills, like music and speech, saw a noticeable decrease in involvement. STEM related activities saw a small decrease, staying relatively constant compared to other extracurriculars. These trends suggest that Harvard's pre-professional culture plays a significant role in how students spend their time out of classes. Through

their extracurriculars, respondents indicate that they are positioning themselves for STEM related or professional careers, rather than service-oriented jobs.

### Monetary Incentives and Pre-Professional Activities

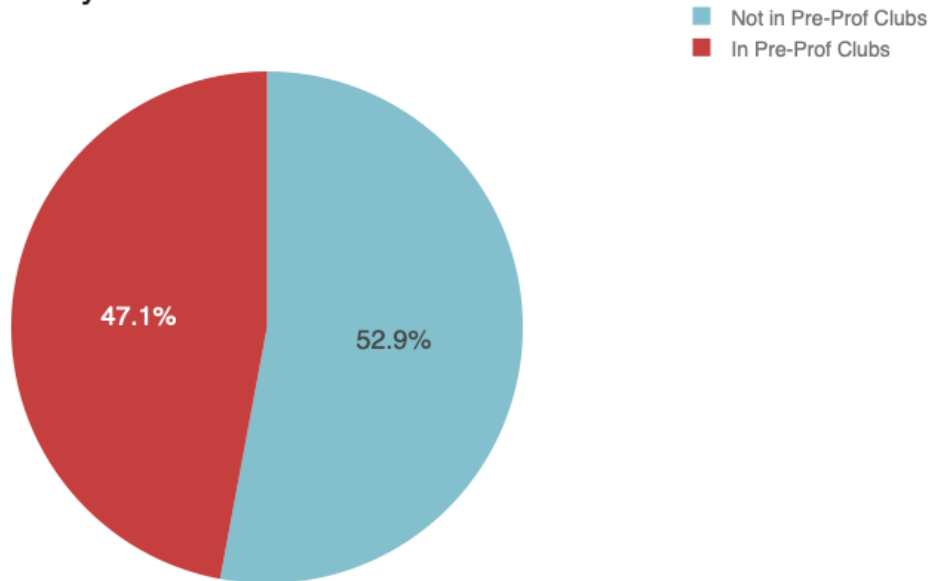


Figure 5: For students who selected their concentration because of "money," this visual showcases if they are in pre-professional clubs

Additionally, we wanted to gauge how much extracurricular involvement in pre-professional clubs stemmed from monetary incentives, especially amongst those who selected financial incentives to be the primary reason for switching their major.

**Figure 5 indicates that a majority of individuals who switched their majors due to monetary incentives are involved in pre-professional clubs.** This suggests that members believe pre-professional clubs offer a competitive edge over the rest of their peers on paper, especially considering that these clubs market themselves to be career and network boosters.

### College Apps for High School and Career/Resume for College

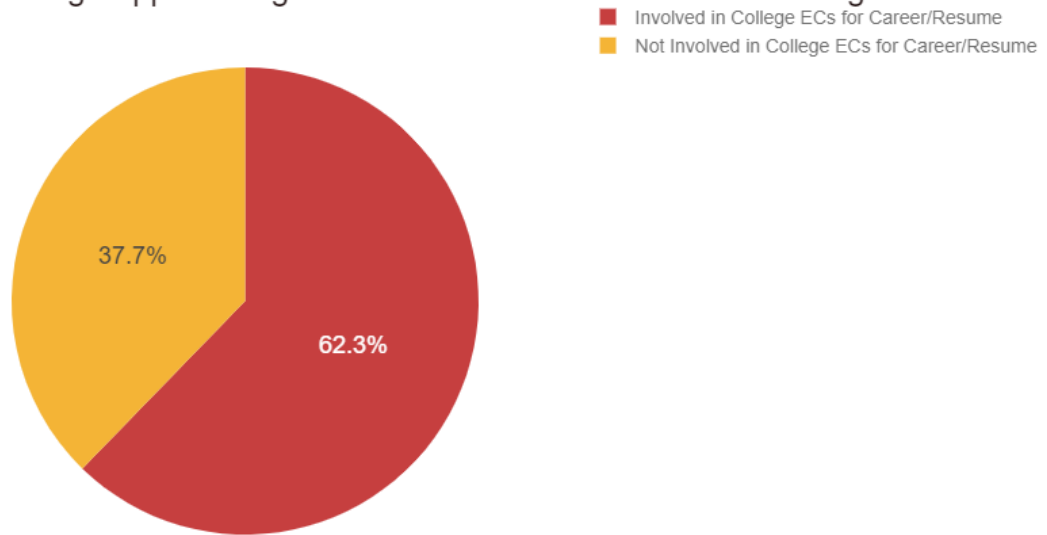


Figure 6: For students who selected their high school extracurriculars because of “college applications,” this visual showcases if they chose college extracurriculars to boost their career and resume.

Lastly, we wanted to examine the prevalence of “resume building” in college, specifically focusing on those who practiced it in high school. Figure 6 shows that just under a third of those who practice resume building in high school have continued to do so in college.

With the strong increase of pre-professional involvement shown in Figure 4 in mind,

**Figure 6 suggests that a majority of students join pre-professional clubs as a means of resume building.** These findings are indicative of Harvard’s pre-professional culture, as students continue to structure their free time around career development and resume enhancement.

### Conclusion

So is Picasso Van Gogh archetype as commonplace as one may think? Our data suggests that Harvard’s culture certainly pushes students to prioritize career and resume building, particularly in how students choose to spend their time outside of the classroom. At the same time, our sample size is fairly small compared to the overall Harvard undergraduate population, so some results could be skewed by self-selection of the type of students who are more inclined to fill out a HODP survey.

We’re curious to how Harvard and its students will evolve to the rest of the world, so stay tuned!

### Acknowledgements

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