Heat Adaptation at HBS: From Distributed Efforts to Institutional Strategy

By the 2025-2026 SSAs from Sections F & G

As extreme heat becomes more frequent, intense, and prolonged, institutions are increasingly being asked not only how they will respond in the moment, but how they will adapt over time. For campuses like Harvard Business School, heat is no longer just a seasonal inconvenience. It is an emerging operational, planning, and governance challenge that touches buildings, landscapes, energy use, worker safety, and community well-being.

Our project set out to better understand how HBS, and Harvard more broadly, is currently responding to heat risk and where there may be opportunities to strengthen that response.

Why heat adaptation matters now

Heat is one of the most immediate and unevenly felt climate risks in cities. In the Boston area, rising temperatures and urban heat island effects mean that exposure can vary significantly across neighborhoods and even across different parts of a campus. Surface materials, tree canopy, building density, and access to shaded or cooled spaces all shape how heat is experienced.

For HBS, this matters for several reasons. The campus includes high-traffic outdoor spaces, dense building conditions, and facilities and operations that are increasingly exposed to hotter days and more frequent heat events. Heat also affects a wide range of stakeholders: students moving across campus, staff working outdoors, operations teams managing buildings and grounds, local community visitors, and planners making long-term infrastructure decisions.

The challenge is not only how to respond to extreme heat events, but how to prepare campus systems and spaces for hotter conditions over time.

What the project explored

The project examined HBS and Harvard's approach to heat adaptation through three lenses:

- HBS campus operations, facilities, and public realm
- Harvard-wide planning, sustainability, and research capabilities
- City and state policy, alongside best practices from other institutions and jurisdictions

To do this, we combined document review with stakeholder conversations. We looked at current initiatives, policy context, and examples of leading practice in areas such as heat sensing, public realm cooling, building standards, emergency response, and governance.

The goal was not to suggest that Harvard is starting from zero. In fact, one of the clearest findings from the project is that a number of meaningful heat-relevant initiatives already exist. The question is how those efforts can be integrated, strengthened, and scaled into a leading heat adaptation strategy.

What we found

A central finding of the project is that HBS and Harvard already have several building blocks of heat adaptation in place, but those efforts appear distributed rather than coordinated under a shared framework.

At HBS, existing examples include landscape and operations decisions that already respond to hotter conditions, even if they are not always named as “heat adaptation.” These include planting and irrigation approaches that reflect awareness of microclimate, heat tolerance, and water use.

At the Harvard-wide level, the University also has significant capabilities that are relevant to heat adaptation. These include research and innovation in building performance and cooling technologies, broader sustainability and planning functions, and relationships with external partners working on climate resilience.

At the same time, the project identified several recurring gaps:

- no clearly visible heat-specific governance structure
- no consolidated inventory of heat-related initiatives
- limited campus-scale heat sensing and visibility
- no shared framework for connecting pilots, planning, standards, and response

In other words, the issue is less the absence of activity than the absence of a mechanism to align, prioritize, and sustain it.

Why governance emerged as a central theme

Of all the domains we assessed, governance emerged as the most important cross-cutting issue.

Best practice does not necessarily require a single “Chief Heat Officer,” especially in an institutional setting like Harvard. But it does require clear ownership, cross-functional coordination, continuity, and a process for moving from isolated initiatives to institutional action.

Right now, heat-related activity appears to span operations, sustainability, planning, research, and external partnerships. That breadth is a strength, but without a clear coordinating structure, it can also make it difficult to set priorities, establish standards, scale successful pilots, and sustain momentum over time.

This is where Harvard has an opportunity. The University’s stormwater and broader resilience efforts suggest that more integrated models are possible internally, and the Waste Stewardship Coalition is a recent example of structured cross-unit collaboration. Heat adaptation may not require a wholly new bureaucracy, but it likely does require a more explicit home, mandate, and decision-making process.

What stronger heat adaptation could look like

The project points toward a practical path forward built on coordination rather than reinvention.

Potential next steps include:

- creating a shared inventory of heat-related initiatives across HBS and Harvard
- designating a coordinator or cross-functional working group
- improving campus heat sensing and hotspot visibility
- setting clearer standards for outdoor comfort, buildings, and operational response
- developing tiered heat thresholds and action plans
- expanding practical outdoor measures such as hydration access, shading, and cooling interventions
- sharing heat data with city and state groups

Importantly, many of these actions are not purely theoretical. They are grounded in examples from cities, universities, and public agencies that are already operationalizing heat adaptation through governance, infrastructure, and policy.

A broader opportunity for leadership

As cities and institutions begin to take heat more seriously, there is a growing need for models of adaptation that go beyond emergency response. Harvard is well positioned to contribute to that conversation.

The University has research depth, operational complexity, planning capacity, and visibility. If it can connect those strengths more deliberately, it has the potential not only to improve resilience on its own campuses, but also to help define what heat adaptation governance can look like in higher education.

That may be the most important takeaway from this work: Harvard does not need to start from scratch. But moving from distributed efforts to institutional strategy will require clearer authority, better coordination, and a shared commitment to making heat adaptation visible, actionable, and durable.