Role of Cofactors/Co-enzymes in Stabilizing Protein-Ligand Complexes

by

HARNOOR KAUR ANAND

Submitted

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis titled "**Role of Cofactors/Co-enzymes in Stabilizing Protein-Ligand Complexes**" being submitted by Harnoor Kaur Anand to the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi, for the award of the Master of Technology, is an original research work carried out by her under my supervision. In my opinion, the thesis has reached the standards fulfilling the requirements of the regulations relating to the degree. The results contained in this thesis have

not been submitted in part or full to any other university or institute for the award of any degree.

August, 2025
Supervisor Name: Dr. N. Arul Murugan
Department of Computational Biology
Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi
New Delhi 110020

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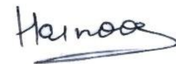

Harnoor Kaur Anand

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ABSTRACT

Flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD) is a ubiquitous redox cofactor that plays a fundamental role in various metabolic and enzymatic reactions. It is involved in electron transfer processes essential for cellular respiration, energy production, and redox homeostasis. Beyond its classical biochemical functions, recent research has suggested that FAD may serve as a promising drug target, particularly in the context of neurological diseases, where alterations in flavoproteins and redox imbalances contribute to disease progression. Despite its well-established role in enzymatic catalysis, the contribution of FAD to the overall stability of protein-ligand complexes remains an open question. Investigating how FAD influences ligand binding and protein conformational dynamics is crucial for understanding its potential as a therapeutic target.

In this study, we employed molecular dynamics (MD) simulations in an explicit solvent environment to analyze the interaction energy of protein-ligand complexes containing FAD. A set of diverse protein systems with FAD-dependent interactions was selected, and each complex was subjected to long-timescale MD simulations to capture its structural and energetic properties. By applying energy decomposition analysis, we calculated the interaction energies of all residues within the system, with a particular focus on FAD and the ligand. This allowed us to quantify the contribution of FAD to the stability of the complex and assess its role in modulating ligand interactions.

To further understand the structural consequences of FAD removal, volumetric analysis was performed to compare the binding pocket volumes in the presence and absence of FAD. This analysis provided insights into whether the cofactor-induced conformational changes in the binding site, potentially affecting ligand binding and protein function. The comparison of pocket volumes aimed to reveal possible allosteric effects exerted by FAD, shedding light on its stabilizing role within the protein-ligand system.

Our findings highlight the importance of FAD in modulating protein-ligand interactions, both from an energetic and structural perspective. The study provides a detailed understanding of how FAD contributes to the stability of protein-ligand complexes and underscores its potential as a target in drug discovery efforts for neurological diseases. By elucidating the molecular mechanisms through which FAD influences binding interactions, this work lays the foundation for future studies exploring FAD-targeted therapeutic strategies. These insights could be particularly valuable in the design of small-molecule inhibitors or modulators that exploit FAD’s structural and energetic role in protein function.

INTRODUCTION

Cofactors play a critical role in enzymatic functions, facilitating biochemical reactions by stabilizing transition states and participating in electron transfer processes. These molecules, which can be organic or inorganic, are essential for the structural and functional integrity of many proteins. Among organic cofactors, flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD) is particularly significant due to its role in redox reactions and its presence in various metabolic pathways. The intricate interactions between FAD and protein-ligand complexes have profound implications for enzymatic activity, metabolic regulation, and drug discovery. Understanding how FAD influences protein-ligand complexes is crucial for deciphering its role in enzymatic mechanisms and metabolic regulation. Many enzymes, including oxidoreductases, depend on FAD for their activity, and its presence can modulate ligand binding, alter enzymatic efficiency, and impact overall protein stability. In several cases, the binding of FAD induces conformational changes in the active site, potentially leading to allosteric regulation. Investigating these interactions is essential for exploring novel therapeutic strategies, particularly in diseases where FAD-dependent enzymes are implicated.

The concept of cofactors emerged in early enzymology studies when researchers identified that certain non-protein components were necessary for enzymatic activity. FAD was discovered as a key player in cellular respiration, particularly in the electron transport chain, where it facilitates ATP production through redox cycling. Over the decades, advancements in structural biology have revealed the precise molecular interactions of FAD with various proteins, emphasizing its role in stabilizing enzymatic structures and enhancing catalytic efficiency. The study of FAD's role in protein-ligand interactions has been greatly enhanced by computational techniques, including molecular docking and molecular dynamics (MD) simulations. These approaches allow for a detailed analysis of binding interactions, energetic contributions, and structural changes in protein complexes. MD simulations, in particular, provide insights into the dynamic nature of protein-ligand-cofactor interactions, revealing how FAD stabilizes or alters the function of specific enzymatic systems. Additionally, free energy calculations, such as MM/PBSA, enable the quantification of binding affinities, helping to elucidate the impact of FAD on protein-ligand stability.

This study aims to explore the stabilizing effect of FAD on protein-ligand complexes by employing molecular dynamics simulations and free energy calculations. By comparing volumetric changes and interaction energies in the presence and absence of FAD, we seek to understand the role of this cofactor in modulating ligand binding and overall protein function. These findings could provide valuable insights into allosteric regulation, cofactor-driven enzyme activation, and the development of FAD-targeted therapeutics.

2.1 Cofactors and Their Role in Biological Systems

Cofactors are essential non-protein molecules or ions that assist enzymes in catalyzing biochemical reactions. Enzymes are biological macromolecules responsible for regulating metabolic processes, and their functionality often depends on the presence of these cofactors. Without cofactors, many enzymatic reactions would either proceed at a significantly reduced rate or not occur at all. The role of cofactors extends beyond simply assisting enzymes; they contribute to structural stability, participate in redox reactions, and facilitate substrate binding. The presence or absence of a cofactor can have profound physiological consequences, influencing energy production, neurotransmitter synthesis, and detoxification pathways.

Cofactors can be broadly classified into two categories: organic cofactors, commonly referred to as coenzymes, and inorganic metal ions. Organic cofactors are complex molecules that act as transient carriers of chemical groups or electrons in metabolic pathways. Some of the most significant coenzymes include flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD), nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide (NAD^+/NADH), coenzyme A (CoA), and pyridoxal phosphate (PLP). These molecules are involved in essential biochemical reactions, such as oxidation-reduction processes, acetyl group transfers, and amino acid metabolism. In contrast, inorganic cofactors are primarily metal ions that contribute to enzyme function by stabilizing protein structures or directly participating in catalytic mechanisms. Examples include magnesium (Mg^{2+}), which is crucial for ATP-dependent reactions, zinc (Zn^{2+}), which is integral to enzymes like carbonic anhydrase, and iron (Fe^{2+}/Fe^{3+}), which is found in heme-containing enzymes such as cytochromes.

The mechanism by which cofactors aid enzymatic reactions varies depending on their type and function. Some cofactors act as structural stabilizers, ensuring that enzymes maintain their three-dimensional shape and remain catalytically active. Others function as electron carriers, facilitating redox reactions by transferring electrons between molecules. Coenzymes such as FAD and NAD^+ are particularly important in this regard, as they participate in metabolic pathways like the citric acid cycle and oxidative phosphorylation. Additionally, cofactors can contribute to substrate activation by properly orienting molecules within the enzyme’s active site, thereby enhancing reaction efficiency. In certain cases, cofactors form transient complexes with enzymes or substrates, directly influencing the reaction’s progress.

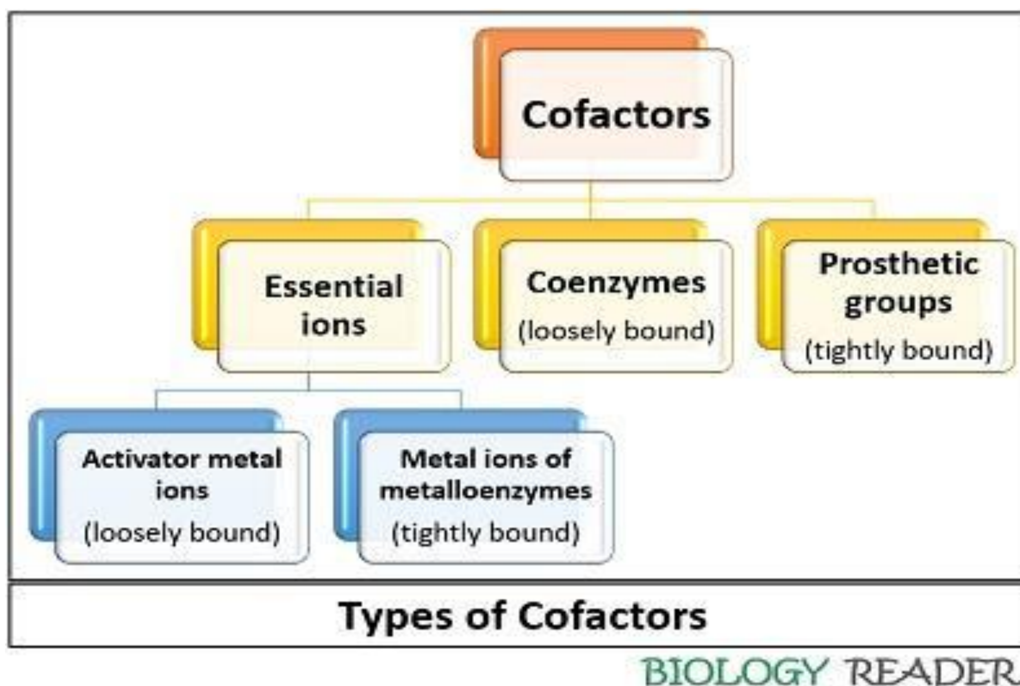

FIGURE 2.1 Types of cofactors flowchart

In metabolic processes, cofactors play a pivotal role in ensuring the efficiency and regulation of biochemical pathways. They are particularly significant in energy production, where molecules like FAD and NAD^+ are involved in ATP synthesis. These cofactors undergo cycles of oxidation and reduction, enabling the transfer of high-energy electrons necessary for cellular respiration. Additionally, cofactors are critical in nucleic acid metabolism, where magnesium ions stabilize nucleotide structures during DNA replication and RNA transcription. The role of cofactors extends to neurotransmitter biosynthesis as well. Coenzymes like tetrahydrobiopterin (BH4) facilitate the production of dopamine and serotonin, neurotransmitters that influence mood and cognition. Furthermore, cofactors such as glutathione are involved in antioxidant defense mechanisms, protecting cells from oxidative stress and preventing damage caused by reactive oxygen species (ROS).

Given their indispensable role in metabolism, deficiencies in cofactors can lead to severe physiological disorders. A deficiency in FAD, for instance, has been linked to neurodegenerative diseases due to its role in mitochondrial function and cellular energy balance. Similarly, a lack of NAD^+ can result in pellagra, a disease characterized by symptoms such as dermatitis, diarrhea, and dementia. Zinc deficiency is another example, leading to immune dysfunction, growth retardation, and skin disorders. Iron deficiency, one of the most common nutritional deficiencies worldwide, can cause anemia, leading to fatigue and impaired oxygen transport in the body. These examples highlight the importance of maintaining adequate cofactor levels for overall health and metabolic stability.

In conclusion, cofactors are fundamental to the functionality of enzymes and the regulation of metabolic pathways. Whether they are organic coenzymes or inorganic metal ions, their presence ensures that biochemical reactions proceed efficiently and effectively. Their role is particularly crucial in energy metabolism, neurotransmitter synthesis, and antioxidant defense mechanisms. Given their impact on health and disease, understanding cofactors is essential for both basic biological research and applied biomedical sciences. The next section will focus specifically on flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD), a crucial cofactor involved in redox reactions and its implications in neurological diseases.

2.2 Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD)

Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) is a crucial redox-active cofactor involved in various metabolic pathways, particularly those related to energy production and electron transfer. It is a dinucleotide composed of riboflavin (vitamin B2) and adenosine, linked through a pyrophosphate bond. As a prosthetic group, FAD is permanently associated with flavoproteins, playing a central role in oxidation-reduction reactions. Its ability to reversibly cycle between oxidized (FAD), semiquinone (FADH•), and fully reduced ($FADH_2$) states makes it a highly versatile cofactor. This redox flexibility allows FAD to participate in enzymatic reactions where it facilitates electron transfer, enabling the oxidation of substrates and the generation of ATP. Many enzymes, including oxidoreductases, rely on FAD for catalysis, making it indispensable for cellular metabolism.

The biosynthesis of FAD begins with the uptake and phosphorylation of riboflavin, which is derived from dietary sources such as eggs, milk, green leafy vegetables, and meat. Riboflavin is first converted into flavin mononucleotide (FMN) by riboflavin kinase and subsequently into FAD through the action of FAD synthetase. These biochemical transformations are tightly regulated, ensuring that cells maintain adequate FAD levels to support metabolic demands. Since riboflavin is water-soluble and cannot be stored in large quantities, a continuous dietary supply is essential. Deficiencies in riboflavin lead to reduced FAD availability, impairing redox reactions and disrupting mitochondrial function. This can result in metabolic disorders, fatigue, and neurological symptoms, emphasizing the importance of riboflavin intake in

maintaining cellular homeostasis.

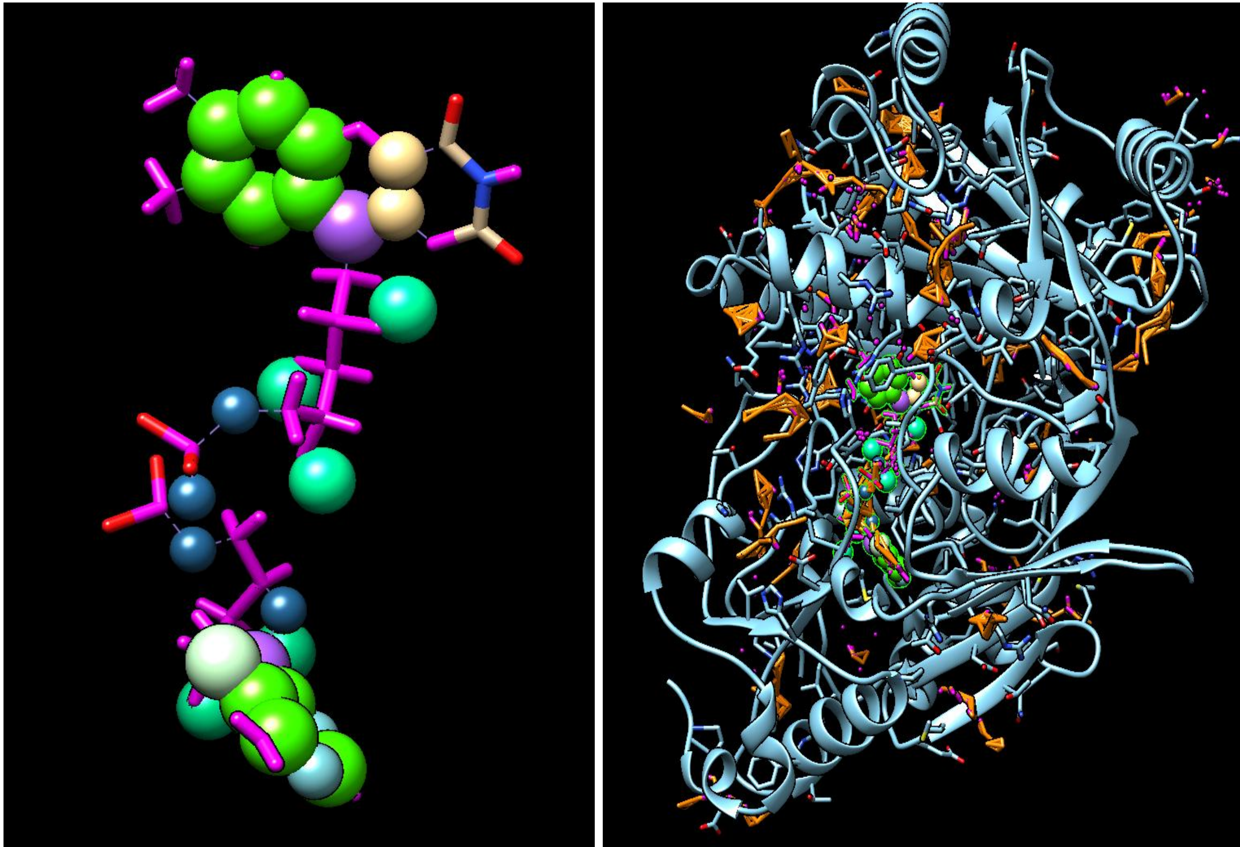

FIGURE 2.2 AND 2.3 : Structure of FAD and FAD bound to a protein(6YAQ)

FAD plays a central role in numerous biochemical pathways, particularly in mitochondrial metabolism. It is a key component of the citric acid cycle (Krebs cycle), where it serves as an electron acceptor in the oxidation of succinate to fumarate via the enzyme succinate dehydrogenase. This reaction not only contributes to the cycle's progression but also links the citric acid cycle to the electron transport chain. In this context, $FADH_2$ donates electrons directly to ubiquinone (CoQ), bypassing Complex I and contributing to ATP synthesis. This process highlights FAD's role in cellular respiration, where it facilitates the conversion of nutrients into usable energy. Additionally, FAD is involved in β-oxidation, the metabolic pathway responsible for breaking down fatty acids. Acyl-CoA dehydrogenases use FAD to catalyze the initial oxidation step, allowing fatty acids to be processed for energy production.

Beyond its function in energy metabolism, FAD is integral to oxidative stress regulation. As a redox cofactor, it participates in the enzymatic detoxification of reactive oxygen species (ROS). Enzymes such as glutathione reductase rely on FAD to maintain cellular redox balance by regenerating reduced glutathione,

a key antioxidant. Moreover, FAD-dependent oxidases, such as NADPH oxidase and monoamine oxidase, contribute to the controlled generation of ROS for cellular signaling and immune responses. Dysregulation of FAD-dependent redox processes can lead to excessive oxidative stress, resulting in mitochondrial damage, lipid peroxidation, and DNA mutations. This underscores the significance of FAD in protecting cells from oxidative damage and maintaining redox homeostasis.

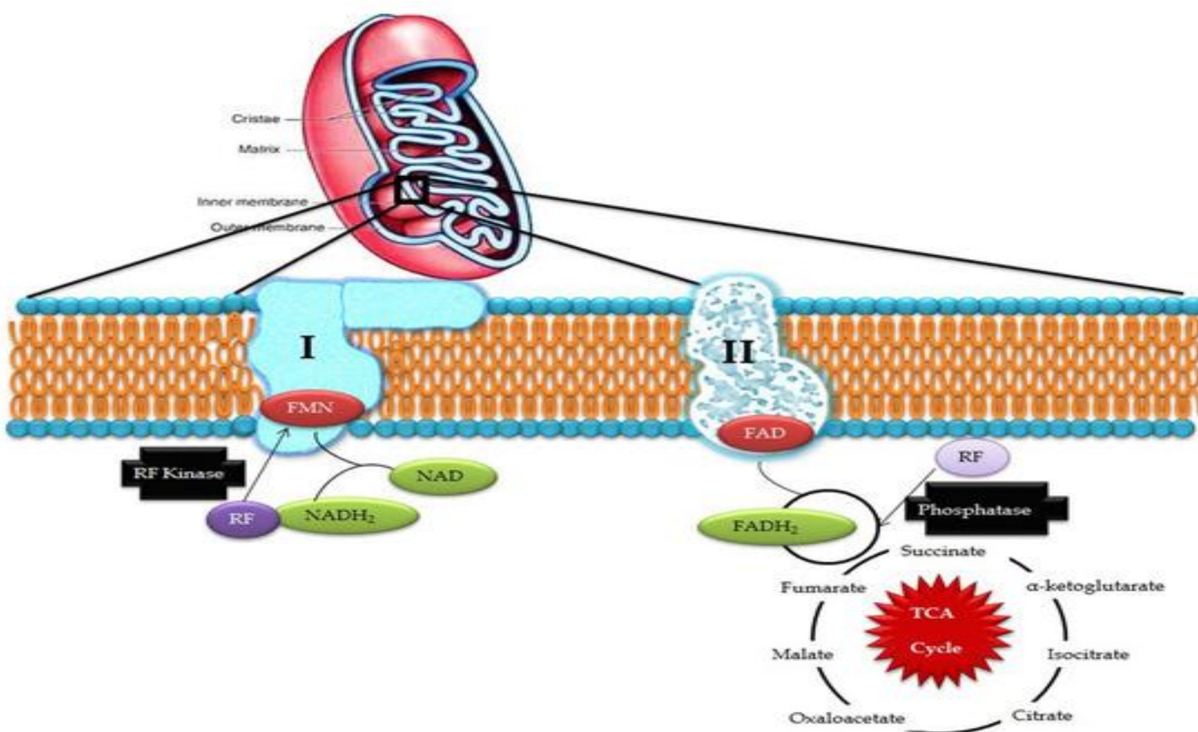

FIGURE 2.4 - Oxidative phosphorylation pathway

FAD also influences protein structure and stability. In many flavoproteins, the binding of FAD induces conformational changes that enhance enzymatic activity. Some proteins rely on FAD as a structural component, stabilizing their three-dimensional conformation. This structural role is evident in certain electron transport chain complexes, where FAD-binding domains contribute to protein folding and function. Furthermore, FAD-dependent enzymes are involved in post-translational modifications, such as lysine-specific demethylase 1 (LSD1), which regulates epigenetic modifications by removing methyl groups from histones. Through these interactions, FAD not only mediates metabolic reactions but also influences gene expression and protein function at a molecular level.

Given its diverse biochemical roles, FAD is an attractive target for therapeutic intervention. Several drugs modulate FAD-dependent enzymes to treat metabolic and neurological disorders. For example, inhibitors of monoamine oxidase are used to manage depression and Parkinson's disease by regulating neurotransmitter metabolism. Additionally, targeting FAD-dependent oxidases can help control oxidative stress-related diseases. The therapeutic potential of FAD-based interventions continues to be explored, with ongoing research investigating its role in cancer metabolism, neurodegeneration, and mitochondrial disorders.

FAD is a versatile and indispensable cofactor that supports a wide range of biological functions, from energy metabolism and redox homeostasis to protein stability and epigenetic regulation. Its presence in fundamental metabolic pathways underscores its significance in cellular physiology. Understanding the biochemical properties and functions of FAD provides valuable insights into its role in health and disease, paving the way for novel therapeutic approaches targeting FAD-dependent processes.

2.3 FAD in Neurological Diseases

Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) plays a crucial role in maintaining neuronal function and overall brain health. As a key cofactor in mitochondrial metabolism and redox reactions, FAD is essential for sustaining the high energy demands of the nervous system. Neurons rely on oxidative phosphorylation to generate ATP, and many of the enzymes involved in this process are FAD-dependent. Any disruption in FAD availability or function can lead to severe neurological consequences, including neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's disease, and amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The brain is highly susceptible to oxidative stress due to its high oxygen consumption and lipid-rich composition, making FAD's role in redox balance and mitochondrial function particularly important for neuronal survival.

One of the primary ways FAD contributes to neurological health is through its involvement in mitochondrial energy metabolism. Enzymes such as succinate dehydrogenase (complex II of the electron transport chain) and acyl-CoA dehydrogenases in fatty acid oxidation rely on FAD to transfer electrons and facilitate ATP production. Mitochondrial dysfunction has been implicated in several neurodegenerative diseases, as impaired ATP synthesis can lead to neuronal cell death. In Parkinson's disease, for example, the loss of dopaminergic neurons in the substantia nigra is closely linked to mitochondrial dysfunction. Mutations in genes associated with mitochondrial maintenance, such as PINK1 and PARKIN, disrupt electron transport chain efficiency and increase oxidative stress. Since many mitochondrial enzymes require FAD,

deficiencies or functional impairments in FAD-dependent processes can exacerbate these mitochondrial defects, accelerating neurodegeneration.

In addition to its role in energy metabolism, FAD is involved in protecting neurons from oxidative damage. The brain generates reactive oxygen species (ROS) as a byproduct of metabolic activity, and if left unchecked, these ROS can cause lipid peroxidation, protein oxidation, and DNA damage. FAD-dependent enzymes such as glutathione reductase and thioredoxin reductase play essential roles in neutralizing oxidative stress by maintaining the reduced state of cellular antioxidants. Glutathione reductase, for example, uses FAD to regenerate reduced glutathione (GSH), one of the most important antioxidant molecules in cells. When FAD-dependent antioxidant mechanisms are compromised, as observed in neurodegenerative disorders, oxidative stress overwhelms the cell's defense systems, leading to neuronal death. This phenomenon is particularly evident in Alzheimer's disease, where oxidative damage contributes to amyloid-beta plaque formation and tau protein aggregation.

Another critical aspect of FAD's involvement in neurological diseases is its role in neurotransmitter metabolism. Monoamine oxidases (MAO-A and MAO-B) are FAD-dependent enzymes responsible for the breakdown of neurotransmitters such as dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine. Dysregulation of these enzymes has been linked to several neurological and psychiatric disorders. In Parkinson's disease, excessive MAO-B activity leads to increased dopamine breakdown, exacerbating dopamine deficiency and contributing to motor symptoms. Consequently, MAO-B inhibitors such as selegiline and rasagiline are used as therapeutic agents to slow dopamine degradation and alleviate symptoms. Similarly, imbalances in MAO-A activity have been associated with mood disorders, including depression and anxiety, further highlighting the importance of FAD in maintaining neurotransmitter homeostasis.

FAD's influence extends beyond metabolism and neurotransmitter regulation, impacting epigenetic modifications and gene expression in the nervous system. Flavin-dependent histone demethylases, such as lysine-specific demethylase 1 (LSD1), regulate chromatin structure and gene transcription by removing methyl groups from histones. These enzymes require FAD as a cofactor to catalyze oxidative demethylation reactions. Disruptions in FAD-dependent epigenetic regulation have been linked to neurodevelopmental disorders and cognitive decline. For instance, altered LSD1 activity has been associated with Huntington's disease, where abnormal histone modifications contribute to neuronal dysfunction and progressive neurodegeneration. By modulating gene expression, FAD plays a role in neuronal plasticity, learning, and memory formation, making it a crucial factor in both normal brain function and disease pathology.

Emerging research suggests that targeting FAD-dependent pathways could offer novel therapeutic strategies for neurological diseases. Enhancing FAD availability through riboflavin supplementation has shown

promise in treating mitochondrial disorders and neurodegenerative conditions. Riboflavin therapy has been beneficial in patients with multiple acyl-CoA dehydrogenase deficiency, a disorder characterized by defective FAD-dependent fatty acid metabolism. Additionally, drugs that modulate FAD-dependent enzymes, such as MAO inhibitors and histone demethylase inhibitors, are being explored for their potential neuroprotective effects. By understanding the role of FAD in neuronal health and disease, researchers can develop targeted interventions that leverage FAD's biochemical properties to prevent or slow neurodegenerative processes.

FAD is indispensable for maintaining brain function, supporting mitochondrial energy production, regulating oxidative stress, controlling neurotransmitter metabolism, and influencing gene expression. Its involvement in multiple cellular processes underscores its importance in neurological health, and disruptions in FAD-dependent pathways have been implicated in several neurodegenerative diseases. As research continues to uncover the molecular mechanisms linking FAD to neuronal survival and dysfunction, new therapeutic approaches may emerge, offering hope for patients suffering from debilitating neurological conditions.

2.4 Volumetric Analysis and Allosteric Binding

Volumetric analysis is an essential approach in structural biology that provides insight into the spatial properties of protein binding pockets, ligand interactions, and potential allosteric regulation. Understanding the volume of a protein's binding site helps in determining how cofactors, ligands, or inhibitors fit into the pocket and influence the protein's function. In the context of flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD) and its role in enzymatic activity, volumetric analysis is particularly useful for studying how FAD binding affects the overall conformation of a protein and whether it induces allosteric effects that regulate enzyme function. By analyzing pocket volumes with and without FAD, researchers can identify significant conformational changes that may contribute to protein stability, enzyme activity, or inhibition mechanisms.

One of the primary methods used for volumetric analysis involves computational tools that calculate the geometric properties of binding sites. Software like fpocket, SiteMap, and CASTp can analyze the shape, size, and depth of protein pockets, providing quantitative measurements that aid in understanding ligand interactions. In the case of FAD-dependent enzymes, comparing the pocket volumes before and after FAD binding can reveal whether the cofactor induces an expansion or contraction of the binding site. This structural change can influence the accessibility of other ligands, potentially modulating enzymatic activity. If FAD binding leads to a significant pocket volume reduction, it might prevent other molecules from accessing the active site, acting as a regulatory mechanism. Conversely, if FAD binding causes the pocket

to expand or reshape, it might facilitate interactions with additional cofactors or substrates, enhancing enzyme function.

Allosteric binding, a fundamental regulatory mechanism in enzymatic reactions, occurs when a ligand binds to a site other than the enzyme's active site, triggering a conformational change that influences enzymatic activity. Volumetric analysis is particularly valuable for identifying and characterizing allosteric sites, as changes in pocket volume upon ligand binding can indicate potential allosteric effects. In the case of FAD, its binding can lead to structural rearrangements in the protein, altering the shape and accessibility of distal sites. These changes can either enhance or inhibit enzymatic activity, depending on whether the allosteric modification stabilizes an active or inactive conformation. Many metabolic enzymes and signaling proteins utilize allosteric regulation to control their activity dynamically, making volumetric analysis a critical tool for understanding these processes.

Computational studies have demonstrated that FAD binding often induces conformational shifts that extend beyond the immediate binding pocket, affecting distant regions of the protein. This is particularly evident in flavoproteins, where FAD participates in electron transfer reactions. The binding of FAD may stabilize a closed conformation that prevents solvent access, reducing unnecessary side reactions and increasing catalytic efficiency. Alternatively, in some cases, FAD binding may promote an open conformation, facilitating interactions with substrates or additional cofactors. These conformational changes can be quantified using molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, which allow researchers to track pocket volume fluctuations over time and assess how FAD stabilizes specific structural states.

Allosteric inhibitors leverage volumetric changes to modulate protein function, and understanding these interactions has important implications for drug discovery. Many allosteric drugs do not compete directly with substrate binding but instead exploit conformational changes induced by cofactor or ligand binding to alter enzymatic activity. By analyzing pocket volume variations in response to ligand binding, researchers can identify allosteric sites that may serve as potential drug targets. For instance, in the case of FAD-dependent enzymes, designing small molecules that selectively bind to allosteric pockets influenced by FAD could provide a novel strategy for modulating enzyme activity without interfering with the primary catalytic site. Such an approach is particularly relevant in diseases where dysregulation of FAD-dependent pathways contributes to pathology, such as metabolic disorders and neurodegenerative diseases.

Experimental validation of volumetric analysis findings is crucial to confirm computational predictions. Techniques such as X-ray crystallography, nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, and cryo-electron microscopy provide high-resolution structural data that can be used to verify changes in pocket volume and ligand-induced conformational shifts. Site-directed mutagenesis studies can further clarify the

functional significance of these volumetric changes by altering residues within the binding pocket and assessing their impact on enzymatic activity. By integrating computational and experimental approaches, researchers can build a comprehensive understanding of how FAD binding influences protein structure and function.

Volumetric analysis and allosteric binding are powerful tools for exploring the structural and functional consequences of ligand interactions in proteins. In the case of FAD-dependent enzymes, these approaches provide valuable insights into how FAD binding affects pocket volume, induces conformational changes, and modulates enzymatic activity. Understanding these dynamics has significant implications for drug discovery, as allosteric modulation offers a promising strategy for designing selective inhibitors that target specific regulatory sites. By continuing to refine computational and experimental techniques, researchers can unlock new avenues for studying allosteric regulation and developing therapeutics that leverage volumetric changes to control protein function.

2.5 MD SIMULATION

Molecular Dynamics (MD) simulations provide a robust computational approach to understanding biomolecular interactions at the atomic level, making them an essential tool in studying protein-ligand-cofactor systems. In this study, MD simulations were employed to analyze the role of Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) in stabilizing protein-ligand complexes by calculating interaction energies and assessing structural dynamics. The rationale behind choosing MD simulations lies in their ability to capture the conformational flexibility of biomolecules, transient interactions, and energetic contributions that cannot be readily obtained from static experimental structures such as X-ray crystallography or cryo-electron microscopy. By simulating the dynamic nature of protein-ligand-FAD complexes in a solvated environment, this study aims to determine how FAD influences the stability and energetics of these interactions, providing insights into its potential allosteric effects.

The binding of a ligand or cofactor to a protein often induces structural rearrangements that can either stabilize or destabilize the complex. While experimental techniques can provide snapshots of these interactions, they do not capture the continuous fluctuations and energy landscapes that govern molecular recognition. MD simulations overcome this limitation by modeling the time evolution of a system under physiological conditions, allowing for a detailed exploration of how FAD interacts with protein-ligand complexes over an extended period. By applying Newton's laws of motion to every atom in the system, MD enables the assessment of structural stability, conformational flexibility, and thermodynamic properties that contribute to the overall interaction energy of FAD with its binding partners.

To achieve an accurate representation of these interactions, a well-defined protocol was followed, beginning with system preparation, including energy minimization, solvation, ionization, and equilibration under controlled temperature and pressure. The choice of an explicit solvent model was crucial to ensure that solvation effects were accurately accounted for, as solvent molecules play a significant role in mediating protein-ligand-cofactor interactions. Following equilibration, production MD simulations were performed, during which key structural parameters such as root mean square deviation (RMSD), root mean square fluctuation (RMSF), hydrogen bonding, and interaction energy were monitored over time.

The primary objective of performing MD simulations in this study was to quantify the interaction energy of FAD within the protein-ligand complex and to compare it with systems lacking FAD. By analyzing the interaction energies computed from the force field parameters, the stabilizing or destabilizing effect of FAD on the overall complex could be determined. The binding free energy was estimated using methods such as Molecular Mechanics/Poisson-Boltzmann Surface Area (MM/PBSA), which decomposes the total binding energy into its van der Waals, electrostatic, and solvation components. A significant difference in binding energy between the protein-ligand complex with and without FAD would indicate that FAD plays an essential role in modulating the overall stability of the system, potentially through allosteric regulation.

In addition to interaction energy calculations, MD simulations also provided insights into the dynamic behavior of the binding pocket. The presence of FAD may induce conformational changes that alter the accessibility and flexibility of the binding site, which could have implications for ligand binding and enzymatic activity. Changes in the radius of gyration, secondary structure elements, and intra-protein hydrogen bond networks were analyzed to assess the extent to which FAD affects the protein's conformational landscape. Furthermore, the persistence of hydrogen bonds between FAD, the ligand, and key active site residues over the simulation trajectory provided a quantitative measure of the cofactor's contribution to binding stability.

One of the critical aspects explored through MD simulations was whether FAD exerts an allosteric effect on the ligand-binding site. By comparing pocket volumes and interaction energy landscapes in the presence and absence of FAD, it was possible to determine if FAD's binding altered the shape, dynamics, or energy profile of the active site. If FAD binding leads to a reduction in pocket flexibility or a shift in energy distribution favoring ligand retention, it would suggest an allosteric stabilization mechanism. Conversely, if FAD binding increases flexibility or disrupts key interactions, it might indicate an allosteric destabilization effect.

The findings obtained from MD simulations in this study serve as a computational framework for understanding the energetic contribution of FAD in protein-ligand complexes. Since FAD is an essential

cofactor in many enzymatic reactions, insights from these simulations can have broader implications for drug discovery efforts targeting flavoproteins. If FAD binding significantly stabilizes the complex, this could suggest that small molecules mimicking FAD's interaction pattern might be designed to enhance enzyme function. Conversely, if FAD's presence disrupts ligand binding, it could indicate potential opportunities for designing inhibitors that exploit this allosteric effect.

By employing MD simulations, this study provides a detailed and dynamic perspective on how FAD influences protein-ligand interactions at an atomic level. The ability to capture interaction energies, pocket flexibility, and conformational shifts over time allows for a comprehensive assessment of FAD's role beyond static structural models. These insights not only enhance the fundamental understanding of FAD-dependent systems but also pave the way for further computational and experimental studies aimed at exploring the therapeutic potential of targeting FAD-protein interactions.

2.6 Explicit Solvent Model in MD

In molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, the representation of the solvent environment plays a crucial role in determining the accuracy and reliability of the results. Since biological macromolecules, including proteins, ligands, and cofactors like Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD), function in aqueous environments, the proper treatment of solvent interactions is essential for capturing realistic biomolecular behavior. In this study, an explicit solvent model was employed to enhance the accuracy of MD simulations, particularly in evaluating the interaction energy of FAD with protein-ligand complexes. The explicit solvent approach ensures that solvation effects, hydrogen bonding networks, and electrostatic interactions are accurately represented, leading to a more precise understanding of FAD's role in stabilizing or modulating protein-ligand interactions.

The explicit solvent model treats individual water molecules as discrete entities, allowing them to interact dynamically with solutes based on real physical principles. Unlike the implicit solvent model, which represents the solvent as a continuous dielectric medium, the explicit solvent approach accounts for molecular-level fluctuations, water-mediated interactions, and the formation or disruption of hydration shells. This level of detail is particularly important when studying cofactor interactions, as the surrounding water molecules significantly influence binding energetics and molecular flexibility. In the case of FAD, which engages in multiple hydrogen bonds and electrostatic interactions with the protein and ligand, an explicit solvent model provides a more realistic environment to assess these interactions.

To incorporate explicit solvation in the simulations, the system was solvated using a pre-equilibrated water box, typically containing the TIP3P or SPC water model, which are widely used in biomolecular simulations. The choice of water model is crucial, as it affects the calculated diffusion coefficients, viscosity, and thermodynamic properties of the system. The solvation step ensures that the biomolecule is fully immersed in a sufficiently large solvent box, preventing artificial interactions due to periodic boundary conditions. The minimum solute-wall distance was carefully set to ensure that the protein-ligand-FAD complex had sufficient space to move freely without interacting with its periodic images.

After solvation, counterions such as Na^+ or Cl^- were added to neutralize the system, ensuring that electrostatic calculations during MD simulations were accurate. The presence of charged species, including FAD in its oxidized or reduced states, necessitated a neutralized and properly equilibrated system to prevent artificial charge imbalances that could affect energy calculations. Energy minimization was performed after solvation to remove steric clashes between solvent molecules and the solute, followed by gradual heating and equilibration under constant temperature and pressure conditions to allow the solvent to adapt to the biomolecular system.

One of the primary advantages of the explicit solvent model in this study was its ability to capture water-mediated interactions between FAD, the protein, and the ligand. Water molecules often participate in bridging interactions, stabilizing binding pockets by forming transient hydrogen bonds between key residues and the cofactor. By monitoring water occupancy in the binding pocket over the course of the simulation, it was possible to assess whether FAD altered the hydration pattern of the active site, potentially influencing ligand binding stability. The solvent also played a role in modulating electrostatic interactions, particularly in cases where charged or polar residues were involved in FAD binding.

Additionally, explicit solvation was crucial in determining the dynamic stability of the complex. The solvent viscosity affects diffusion rates, influencing how ligands and cofactors explore conformational space during simulations. The ability to model solvent-exchange events and hydration shell dynamics provided insights into whether FAD binding led to structural stabilization or increased flexibility within the complex. These effects could not be accurately captured using an implicit solvent model, which lacks molecular detail and cannot represent individual water-mediated interactions.

Another key reason for using explicit solvation was the accurate computation of free energy components, particularly in MM/PBSA analysis. Since solvation free energy plays a critical role in binding energetics, the presence of explicit water molecules allowed for a more accurate decomposition of electrostatic and nonpolar contributions to the interaction energy. The displacement of ordered water molecules upon FAD binding was also analyzed, as this entropic contribution can significantly influence cofactor stabilization.

In the context of allosteric regulation, the explicit solvent model helped assess whether FAD binding induced long-range conformational changes that were mediated by solvent dynamics. If the binding of FAD led to alterations in water distribution near allosteric sites, this could suggest a mechanism by which FAD indirectly affects ligand binding through hydration effects. Such insights would not be possible with an implicit solvent model, which lacks the resolution needed to detect these subtle yet functionally significant interactions.

The use of an explicit solvent model in MD simulations significantly enhanced the accuracy of this study's findings regarding FAD's role in stabilizing protein-ligand complexes. By capturing water-mediated interactions, electrostatic shielding effects, and hydration shell dynamics, the explicit solvent approach provided a comprehensive understanding of how FAD influences the energetic landscape of protein-ligand interactions. This detailed representation of the solvent environment allowed for more reliable conclusions regarding FAD's stabilizing effects and its potential role in allosteric regulation, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of its biological significance.

2.7 MM/PBSA CALCULATION

Molecular Mechanics/Poisson-Boltzmann Surface Area (MM/PBSA) calculations are a widely used approach for estimating the binding free energy of biomolecular complexes. In this study, MM/PBSA was employed to quantify the interaction energy of Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) with the protein-ligand complex and assess its stabilizing effect. Given that FAD plays a crucial role in enzymatic reactions and protein-ligand interactions, determining its contribution to the overall binding free energy is essential for understanding its influence on complex stability. MM/PBSA provides a computationally efficient yet accurate method for decomposing energy contributions and evaluating how FAD affects the energetics of the system.

The MM/PBSA approach combines molecular mechanics force fields with continuum solvation models to estimate the free energy of binding. Unlike alchemical free energy methods, which require extensive sampling and perturbation calculations, MM/PBSA offers a balance between computational cost and accuracy. It is particularly well-suited for post-processing molecular dynamics (MD) trajectories, allowing the evaluation of binding energetics over multiple conformational snapshots. This methodology was used to compare the free energy of the protein-ligand complex in the presence and absence of FAD, providing insights into its stabilizing effect.

In MM/PBSA calculations, the binding free energy (ΔG_bind) is computed as the difference between the free energies of the bound complex and its individual components:

$$\Delta G_{bind} = G_{complex} - (G_{protein} + G_{ligand} + G_{FAD})$$

Each component of the free energy is further decomposed into molecular mechanics energy terms, solvation energy, and entropic contributions. The molecular mechanics energy (MM) consists of bonded, electrostatic, and van der Waals interactions, which are derived from the force field used in the MD simulation. The bonded terms (bond, angle, and dihedral energies) remain relatively constant throughout the simulation, while electrostatic and van der Waals interactions are crucial in determining binding affinity. Given that FAD contains multiple charged and polar moieties, its electrostatic interactions with the protein and ligand play a significant role in stabilizing the complex.

The solvation energy is computed using the Poisson-Boltzmann (PB) model for polar solvation and the solvent-accessible surface area (SASA) model for nonpolar solvation. The PB model approximates the electrostatic contribution of the solvent by solving the Poisson-Boltzmann equation, which accounts for the influence of the dielectric environment on the molecular electrostatics. This is particularly important for FAD, as it is involved in redox reactions and forms strong electrostatic interactions with its binding partners. The SASA model, on the other hand, estimates the nonpolar solvation contribution based on the hydrophobic effect, which is relevant for determining how FAD's aromatic isoalloxazine ring interacts with the protein-ligand complex.

To obtain a statistically reliable estimate of the binding free energy, MM/PBSA calculations were performed on multiple snapshots extracted from the MD trajectory. The selection of snapshots was based on equilibrium phase sampling, ensuring that the results represented the dominant conformational states of the system. The binding free energy was then averaged over these frames to minimize fluctuations and improve accuracy. By comparing the MM/PBSA results for the protein-ligand complex with and without FAD, it was possible to quantify FAD's contribution to binding stability.

One of the primary advantages of MM/PBSA in this study was its ability to provide a detailed decomposition of energy terms, allowing an in-depth understanding of how FAD influences binding. The electrostatic and van der Waals contributions from FAD to the total binding energy were analyzed to determine whether its presence enhanced ligand affinity. If the addition of FAD resulted in a more favorable binding free energy, this would indicate a stabilizing effect on the complex, supporting the hypothesis that FAD plays a role in modulating protein-ligand interactions.

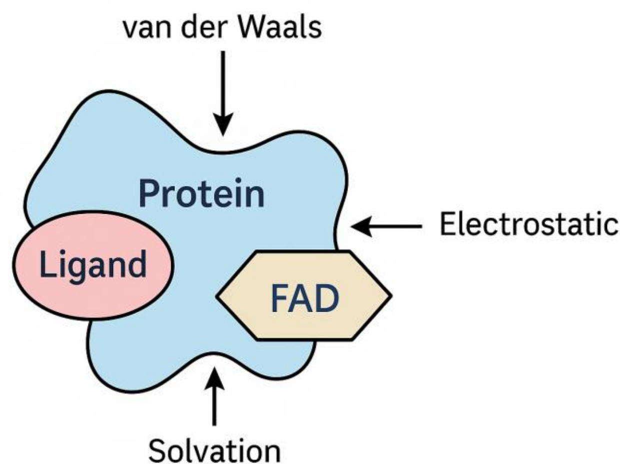

FIGURE 2.5 – Energy terms analyzed by MM/PBSA

Additionally, MM/PBSA calculations helped assess potential allosteric effects of FAD binding. If the presence of FAD significantly altered the energetic landscape of the protein-ligand interaction, this could suggest an indirect regulatory mechanism. The results from MM/PBSA were also compared with the volumetric analysis of binding pockets to see if changes in binding energy correlated with alterations in pocket volume, further supporting the hypothesis that FAD influences protein function through allosteric modulation.

Another critical aspect of MM/PBSA calculations was evaluating the entropic contribution to binding, which is often challenging to estimate accurately. While the standard MM/PBSA approach does not explicitly include entropy, additional normal mode analysis or quasi-harmonic methods can be employed to approximate entropic effects. Since FAD binding may induce conformational changes in the protein-ligand complex, accounting for entropy is essential for a comprehensive understanding of its energetic contribution.

The MM/PBSA results provided valuable insights into how FAD influences protein-ligand interactions at an energetic level. By quantifying the free energy changes upon FAD binding, this study was able to determine whether FAD enhances the stability of the complex or introduces an allosteric effect that modulates ligand affinity. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of cofactors in enzymatic function and protein-ligand interactions, highlighting the importance of computational approaches in studying complex biological systems.

2.8 FUTURE SCOPE

The study of Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) in stabilizing protein-ligand complexes offers numerous avenues for future research, particularly in drug discovery, enzymology, and computational biophysics. The findings from this study provide a strong foundation for further investigations into the role of cofactors in modulating enzymatic activity and protein-ligand interactions. Future work could focus on expanding computational and experimental approaches to validate the stabilizing effects of FAD, exploring new cofactor-driven drug design strategies, and improving computational methodologies to enhance accuracy and predictive power.

One of the primary directions for future research is the experimental validation of the computational results obtained in this study. While Molecular Dynamics (MD) simulations and Molecular Mechanics/Poisson-Boltzmann Surface Area (MM/PBSA) calculations provide valuable insights into the energetic contribution of FAD to protein-ligand complexes, experimental techniques such as X-ray crystallography, nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, and cryo-electron microscopy (cryo-EM) can offer direct structural validation. By solving the structures of protein-ligand complexes with and without FAD, researchers can assess whether the predicted changes in pocket volume and binding stability correspond to real structural alterations. Additionally, isothermal titration calorimetry (ITC) and differential scanning calorimetry (DSC) could be employed to quantify the thermodynamic parameters of FAD binding, providing a direct measure of its stabilizing effect.

Beyond validation, the findings of this study open up new possibilities for cofactor-targeted drug discovery. Given that FAD plays a crucial role in enzymatic reactions, its influence on ligand binding could be leveraged to design novel drugs that either enhance or inhibit its stabilizing effects. For example, in cases where FAD stabilizes an enzyme-ligand complex involved in a disease pathway, small molecules could be designed to disrupt this interaction, leading to potential therapeutic applications. Conversely, for diseases where FAD-dependent enzymes are beneficial, efforts could focus on designing drugs that enhance FAD binding and activity. This concept aligns with the emerging field of cofactor pharmacology, where targeting cofactors in enzyme function is gaining attention as a novel therapeutic strategy.

Another important future direction is the investigation of allosteric effects induced by FAD binding. The volumetric analysis and binding energy calculations performed in this study suggest that FAD may influence protein function beyond direct active site stabilization. Future studies could explore whether FAD binding induces conformational changes that affect distant functional sites on the protein. This could be examined through enhanced sampling techniques in MD simulations, such as accelerated MD (aMD), Gaussian accelerated MD (GaMD), or metadynamics, which allow the exploration of rare conformational

transitions that may not be captured in conventional MD simulations. Understanding how FAD induces allosteric effects could reveal new ways to modulate enzymatic activity for therapeutic benefit.

Advancements in computational techniques could also improve the accuracy and efficiency of future studies on cofactor-protein interactions. While MM/PBSA calculations provide a relatively fast and reliable method for estimating binding free energies, incorporating more sophisticated free energy perturbation (FEP) or thermodynamic integration (TI) methods could offer even higher accuracy in predicting the effect of FAD on protein-ligand stability. Additionally, machine learning approaches could be integrated with MD simulations to predict the stabilizing effects of FAD across different protein families. Deep learning models trained on large-scale MD datasets could be developed to classify cofactors based on their stabilizing effects, leading to predictive frameworks for identifying other potential stabilizing cofactors beyond FAD.

Another avenue for future research is expanding the study to a broader range of FAD-dependent enzymes. This study focused on a specific set of protein-ligand complexes, but FAD is involved in numerous enzymatic pathways across different biological systems. Investigating how FAD influences ligand binding in diverse enzyme families, such as oxidoreductases, dehydrogenases, and monooxygenases, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of its role as a stabilizing cofactor. Additionally, comparative studies with other cofactors like NAD, FMN, and heme could help distinguish unique versus shared mechanisms of stabilization.

From a biomedical perspective, future research could focus on the implications of FAD binding in disease-related proteins. Given its involvement in mitochondrial function, oxidative stress regulation, and neurodegenerative disorders, FAD’s role in disease progression could be further explored. Computational and experimental studies could examine whether FAD stabilizes pathogenic protein-ligand interactions or whether its depletion leads to destabilization in disease contexts. Identifying how FAD affects the energetics of disease-relevant proteins could inform strategies for therapeutic intervention, either by modulating FAD levels or designing drugs that mimic its stabilizing effects.

Finally, interdisciplinary collaboration between computational and experimental biologists, structural biologists, and medicinal chemists will be key to translating these findings into real-world applications. By integrating computational predictions with biochemical assays, cellular models, and in vivo studies, the impact of FAD on protein-ligand interactions can be thoroughly characterized. Such efforts could ultimately contribute to the development of FAD-based therapeutics, cofactor-targeted drugs, and a deeper understanding of the fundamental principles governing enzyme function.

In conclusion, the study of FAD’s stabilizing effect on protein-ligand complexes provides a rich platform for future research. Experimental validation, expanded computational methodologies, cofactor-driven drug

design, and investigations into allosteric regulation represent promising directions that could further elucidate the role of FAD in biological systems. The integration of computational and experimental approaches will be essential for unlocking the full potential of FAD in modulating protein function and advancing therapeutic applications.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 STEPS FOR CALCULATION

STEP 1 - Retrieval of FAD-Containing Protein Structures Using PDB Advanced Search

In this initial step, we collected high-resolution protein structures containing flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD) from the Protein Data Bank (PDB). This database is a comprehensive repository for three-dimensional structural data of biological macromolecules. We utilized the advanced search feature of the PDB, which allows for precise queries based on specific ligands or cofactors. By specifying FAD as the ligand of interest, we systematically identified protein-ligand complexes in which FAD is a bound cofactor. This approach ensured that the dataset encompassed a diverse range of protein families and biological contexts where FAD plays a critical role. Selecting these complexes laid the foundation for our subsequent molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, enabling us to investigate the energetic and structural contributions of FAD to protein-ligand interactions. This targeted retrieval was essential for ensuring the relevance and robustness of our computational analyses.

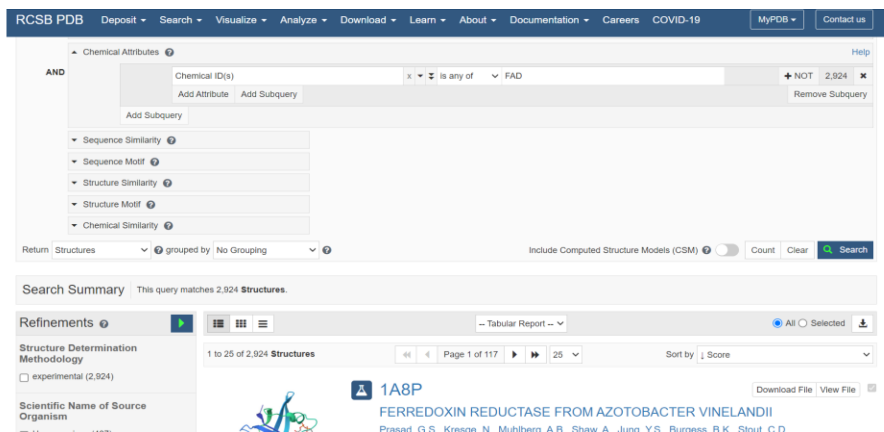

FIGURE 3.1 -Advanced search option in RCSB PDB

STEP 2 - Spatial and Geometric Analysis: Center of Mass Calculations and Ligand-Cofactor Distance/Angle

In this step, we performed a detailed spatial and geometric analysis to characterize the relative positioning of FAD and its interacting ligands within each protein complex. Initially, we computed the centers of mass (COM) for both the FAD molecule and the ligand, restricting our analysis to molecules within the same protein chain to avoid interchain artifacts. Calculating the COM provides a reliable reference point that represents the spatial distribution of each molecule's mass, enabling consistent measurement across different systems.

Following the COM determination, we quantified the Euclidean distance between the centers of mass of FAD and the ligand. This measurement allowed us to assess the proximity and potential interaction strength between the two molecules. Additionally, we calculated the angle between vectors formed by key structural features (such as specific bonds or axes) of FAD and the ligand. This angle provides insight into the spatial orientation and potential directional preferences of the binding interaction, which are critical for understanding the influence of FAD on ligand binding dynamics.

Together, these geometric parameters (COM distance and angle) formed the basis for evaluating how FAD modulates ligand interactions and stability within the protein-ligand complex. This analysis not only established a structural framework for subsequent energy decomposition but also offered valuable insights into the potential mechanistic role of FAD in stabilizing and orienting ligands within the binding pocket.

```python
import os
import gzip
import numpy as np
import pandas as pd
from Bio.PDB import PDBParser, is_aa

# Function to calculate the center of mass of a list of atoms
def calculate_center_of_mass(atoms):
    mass = {'H': 1.0079, 'C': 12.0107, 'N': 14.0067, 'O': 15.9994, 'P': 30.9738, 'S': 32.065}
    total_mass = 0.0
    center_of_mass = np.zeros(3)

    for atom in atoms:
        atom_mass = mass.get(atom.element, 1.0)
        center_of_mass += atom.coord * atom_mass
        total_mass += atom_mass
        print(f"Atom {atom.element}, Coord: {atom.coord}, Mass: {atom_mass}")

    if total_mass == 0:
        return np.zeros(3)

    center_of_mass /= total_mass
    print(f"Center of Mass: {center_of_mass}")
    return center_of_mass
```

```python
# Function to calculate Euclidean distance between two points
def calculate_distance(point1, point2):
    print(f"Calculating distance between {point1} and {point2}")
    return np.linalg.norm(point1 - point2)

# Function to process both .pdb and .pdb.gz files and compute distances
def process_pdb_files(pdb_dir):
    parser = PDBParser(QUIET=True)
    results = []
```

FIGURE 3.2 – Snippet of the code

STEP 3 - fpocket Volumetric Analysis: Binding Pocket Characterization with and without FAD

In this step, we utilized **fpocket**, a widely used pocket detection and characterization tool, to investigate the volumetric properties of the binding site in the presence and absence of FAD and the ligand. We created three different versions of each protein structure to comprehensively evaluate the effect of FAD and the ligand on the pocket geometry:

1. **With FAD and Ligand:** This configuration represents the native protein-ligand-FAD complex, allowing us to observe the unaltered binding pocket environment and its natural volume.
2. **Without FAD:** This structure was generated by removing only the FAD cofactor from the original structure, enabling us to assess how the absence of FAD affects the binding site's shape and size.
3. **Without FAD and Ligand:** In this case, both FAD and the ligand were removed from the structure, revealing the underlying pocket that would otherwise accommodate these molecules and serving as a baseline to compare against.

Each structure was processed through **fpocket**, which calculated the pocket volumes and provided detailed descriptions of the geometric characteristics of each binding site. By comparing the pocket volumes across these three configurations, we could quantify the extent to which FAD stabilizes and influences the binding pocket's shape and size.

To install fpocket, we followed the instructions provided on the GitHub repository (https://github.com/Discngine/fpocket) as shown in the figure below, by cloning the repository and compiling the code

Finally, the results were plotted to visualize the volumetric differences, highlighting the potential allosteric or stabilizing effects that FAD might exert on the binding pocket. This volumetric analysis provided essential structural insights into how FAD presence or absence modulates the binding site and potentially influences ligand binding affinity and orientation within the protein-ligand system.

STEP 4 - Data Preprocessing for MD Simulation: Preparation of Protein-Ligand-FAD Complexes

Prior to initiating molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, it was critical to generate clean, high-quality input files that accurately represented the biological systems under study. This step involved a series of essential sub-steps, each utilizing specialized computational tools to ensure robust and reproducible results:

Step 4.1 – Identification of Relevant Ligands

Tool: *Manual curation and data analysis*
Each protein structure (PDB file) often contains multiple small molecules, including solvents, ions, and crystallographic artifacts. Identifying the biologically relevant ligand was a key initial step, achieved through a combination of manual inspection and systematic parsing of PDB files using Python's pandas library. This filtering ensured that only the target ligand—the molecule of pharmacological interest—was retained for further study. By excluding irrelevant molecules, we preserved the biological fidelity of the simulations, enabling precise analysis of FAD-ligand interactions.

Step 4.2 – Filtering Chains Containing Both FAD and Ligand

Tool: *Custom Python script*
To capture the correct biological environment, it was vital to isolate only those protein chains that contained both the FAD cofactor and the target ligand. A custom Python function systematically parsed the PDB files, identifying chain IDs that hosted both molecules by examining HETATM records. This step prevented spurious results that might arise from analyzing incomplete or biologically irrelevant chains, ensuring that only functionally relevant protein-ligand-FAD systems advanced to the next stage.

Step 4.3 – Cleaning the Protein Structures

Tool: *pdb4amber*
Structural inconsistencies such as alternate atom positions, missing residues, or nonstandard nomenclature could compromise force field assignment and simulation stability. To address this, the pdb4amber utility from the AMBER suite was employed. This tool systematically cleaned each protein-ligand-FAD file by fixing atom naming conventions, adding missing heavy atoms where appropriate, and ensuring compatibility with AMBER force fields. The output was a reliable and consistent structural file ready for parameterization.

Step 4.4 – Extraction and Hydrogenation of FAD and Ligand

Tools: *Custom Python script* and *Reduce*
To accurately simulate the interactions of FAD and the ligand, both molecules were extracted into separate PDB files using a custom Python script. Hydrogens were then added using Reduce, a widely used hydrogenation tool. Adding explicit hydrogens is essential for partial charge calculation and molecular mechanics force field assignment. This step ensured the correct protonation states and chemical completeness of the molecules, prerequisites for high-fidelity simulations.

Step 4.5 – Generation of MOL2 and FRCMOD Files

Tools: *Antechamber* and *Parmchk2*

For the ligand and FAD to be compatible with the AMBER force field, it was necessary to generate parameter and coordinate files. Using Antechamber, partial charges and atom types were assigned to each molecule, producing MOL2 files. Then, Parmchk2 was used to generate FRCMOD files containing any missing force field parameters. These tools ensured that each molecule could be seamlessly integrated into the AMBER simulation environment with physically realistic energetics.

Step 4.6 – Stripping FAD and Ligand from the Protein

Tool: *Custom Python script*

To facilitate comparative simulations of the apo (unbound) protein, a version of the protein structure was generated by removing both the FAD and the ligand. A custom Python script performed this operation efficiently by parsing and filtering the PDB file. This control setup enabled direct comparisons between holo and apo simulations, highlighting the structural and energetic roles of FAD and the ligand.

Step 4.7 – Assembly and Solvation of the System

Tool: *tleap* (from the AMBER suite)

Finally, the cleaned and parameterized protein, FAD, and ligand structures were assembled into complete protein-ligand-FAD complexes using tleap. This tool combined the individual components, solvated the systems in an explicit water box (TIP3P model), and added counter-ions to neutralize the system. tleap generated topology (.prmtop) and coordinate (.inpcrd) files that are essential for MD simulations. Proper assembly and solvation ensured that the simulations reflected the physiological environment and that all components interacted as they would in vivo.

Significance:

This rigorous preprocessing pipeline, integrating custom Python scripts with AMBER tools like pdb4amber, Reduce, Antechamber, Parmchk2, and tleap, was essential for ensuring simulation-ready structures. Each sub-step addressed a specific challenge—chain selection, structural cleaning, parameter generation, and system assembly—laying the foundation for accurate and meaningful MD simulations. The use of specialized tools at each stage ensured that all molecules were chemically complete, properly parameterized, and biologically relevant, leading to simulations that provide trustworthy insights into protein-ligand-FAD interactions.

STEP 5 - Energy Minimization-

Purpose:

Energy minimization was performed to relieve any steric clashes and to relax the protein-ligand-FAD complexes into a stable, low-energy conformation prior to molecular dynamics simulations. This step ensures that the system starts from a physically realistic state, reducing potential artifacts in subsequent dynamic studies.

Methodology and Tools:

This step utilized the sander module of the AMBER simulation package, a well-established tool in computational chemistry for force field-based minimization and molecular dynamics. The minimization protocol incorporated both the steepest descent and conjugate gradient algorithms in a sequential manner to achieve a reliable convergence to the local energy minimum. The parameters used included 2000 total cycles of minimization, with the first 1000 steps using steepest descent to remove large steric clashes, followed by 1000 steps of conjugate gradient to refine the structure further. A nonbonded cutoff of 10 Å was applied to effectively balance computational efficiency with the need to capture essential nonbonded interactions, while the simulations were carried out in a constant-volume environment. Additional settings included a frequency of 100 steps for energy output printing (ntpr=100) and no trajectory or restart file writing (ntwx=0, ntwr=0).

Significance:

By implementing these settings, the energy minimization step successfully stabilized each protein-ligand-FAD complex, ensuring that subsequent molecular dynamics simulations started from a physically realistic and stable structure. This not only improved the accuracy of the dynamic studies but also contributed to the reliability of downstream analyses, including interaction energy decomposition and pocket volume calculations. The use of AMBER's robust force field implementation and well-tuned minimization parameters ensured that the systems were prepared in a consistent and reproducible manner, laying the groundwork for rigorous and meaningful simulation results.

STEP 6 - Molecular Dynamics Production Run

Purpose:

Following energy minimization, the protein-ligand-FAD complexes were subjected to a series of molecular dynamics (MD) simulations to explore their dynamic behavior and equilibrate the system under near-

physiological conditions. This step ensures that the structure is fully relaxed in a solvated environment and that key interactions can be observed throughout different stages of equilibration and production runs.

Methodology and Tools:

The simulations were performed using the AMBER MD package, leveraging both GPU-accelerated and CPU-based engines (pmemd.cuda and pmemd.MPI, respectively). The simulation workflow comprised four sub-steps, each with specific settings and significance:

Heating:

This initial phase gradually increased the system temperature from 0 K to 300 K over 20 ps using a Langevin thermostat (ntt=3) with a collision frequency of 1.0 ps^{-1}. A constant volume ensemble (ntb=1) was applied to maintain system stability during heating. Non-bonded interactions were truncated at a 10 Å cutoff, and a time step of 0.002 ps was used, balancing accuracy and efficiency.

Short CPU Equilibration:

A 100 ps simulation was conducted using CPU-based MPI parallelism to stabilize the box dimensions (ntb=2, ntp=1, taup=2.0), ensuring that the system equilibrated at 1 bar pressure. This step used a Langevin thermostat with a target temperature of 300 K, allowing the system density to converge gradually.

Long Equilibration:

A 1 ns GPU-accelerated equilibration was executed to further relax the system and ensure stable hydrogen bonding and solvent distributions. This step continued under constant pressure (ntb=2) and temperature (300 K), using similar control parameters as earlier but extended to 500,000 steps (1 ns).

Production Run:

The final 10 ns production simulation provided the data for subsequent analysis. Again run on GPUs, this step allowed extensive sampling of protein-ligand-FAD interactions, crucial for assessing binding stability and dynamic behavior. The simulation parameters mirrored earlier stages but were extended to 5,000,000 steps.

Significance:

This multi-stage MD protocol, combining GPU-accelerated pmemd.cuda for intensive sampling and MPI-based pmemd.MPI for box stabilization, ensured a robust and efficient equilibration and production run. By gradually increasing system complexity—from heating to short CPU equilibration to GPU-driven equilibration and production—this stepwise approach minimized artifacts and enhanced the reliability of

simulation outcomes. Collecting coordinate data at regular intervals (ntpr=1000, ntwx=1000) facilitated high-resolution trajectory analysis, enabling residue-level insights into protein-ligand-FAD interactions during dynamic processes.

STEP 7 - MM/PBSA Calculation

Purpose:

The goal of this step was to quantify the binding free energy of the ligand within the protein-FAD complex using the Molecular Mechanics/Poisson–Boltzmann Surface Area (MM/PBSA) approach. This widely adopted post-processing technique offers a computationally efficient means to estimate binding affinities from molecular dynamics (MD) trajectories, helping to identify key residues stabilizing the complex.

Methodology and Tools:

The MM/PBSA calculations were carried out using the AMBER MMPBSA.py module, a robust tool integrated within the AMBER suite that automates the extraction of snapshots from MD trajectories and subsequent energy decomposition.

- Trajectory and Topology Preparation:
  For each protein-ligand-FAD system, the production MD trajectory was processed alongside the corresponding topology files (.prmtop), ensuring consistent system representations. A consistent solvent-excluded surface (SES) dielectric model was applied (igb=5), reflecting physiological solvent conditions.

- Energy Decomposition:
  The MM/PBSA analysis included both total binding free energy estimation and per-residue decomposition. This allowed identification of individual residues, including FAD, that contribute significantly to the ligand's binding stability. By focusing on idecomp=1 (pairwise decomposition), we captured detailed energetic contributions from key residues, critical for understanding the role of FAD in stabilizing the complex.

- Residue Masking:
  Residue masks were employed to explicitly define the protein, FAD, and ligand components for accurate energy partitioning. Careful construction of these masks ensured that the decomposition targeted the intended interactions, highlighting how FAD influences ligand binding.

- Output and Analysis:
  The outputs included the total binding free energy and individual residue contributions. This data

was analyzed further to identify energetic hotspots and visualize the significance of FAD's role in modulating binding interactions.

Significance:
MM/PBSA provided a rapid yet informative evaluation of binding energetics, revealing how the presence of FAD influences ligand binding both directly and through allosteric effects. By integrating this analysis with dynamic data from MD simulations, the study was able to offer a comprehensive understanding of FAD's stabilizing influence on the protein-ligand system. The use of AMBER's MMPBSA.py ensured reproducibility and compatibility with the MD pipeline, reinforcing the reliability of the binding energy estimates derived from these simulations.

Step 8 – Graphical Analysis of Residue-Wise Contribution

Purpose:
The objective of this step was to visualize the contribution of each residue to the total binding free energy, with a specific focus on evaluating the energetic role of FAD in stabilizing the ligand-protein complex. By mapping these contributions graphically, we could readily identify which residues—including FAD—were key energetic contributors.

Methodology and Tools:
The residue-wise energy decomposition data generated by AMBER's MMPBSA.py was processed using Python with Matplotlib, a versatile plotting library suitable for scientific visualization.

- Data Parsing:
  The decomposition files (typically .dat or .csv formats) contained per-residue energy contributions. A custom Python script was developed to read these files, extract relevant columns (typically Residue ID, Residue Name, and Total Energy Contribution), and organize them into a structured dataset.
- Residue Selection:
  In line with the study's focus, the script excluded the ligand residue itself to avoid overshadowing the analysis with direct ligand energy, while retaining the FAD residue to assess its specific contribution.
- Plot Generation:
  Bar plots were generated using Matplotlib to illustrate the relative contributions of each residue.

    - X-axis: Residue IDs (or names)
    - Y-axis: Total binding free energy contribution (kcal/mol)
    - Color Coding: FAD was distinctly highlighted to facilitate quick identification of its contribution compared to surrounding residues.

- Output:
  The plots were saved in high-resolution PNG format for easy inclusion in reports, presentations, or publications, ensuring accessibility across different platforms, including local laptops and remote servers.

Significance:
Graphical visualization of per-residue energy contributions provided a clear, intuitive means of assessing the stabilizing role of FAD within the protein-ligand complex. This analysis revealed potential allosteric effects, indicating how FAD might influence the binding site geometry or energetics indirectly. Highlighting FAD's contribution also supported the study's broader aim of evaluating its potential as a therapeutic target in drug discovery efforts, particularly in the context of neurological diseases.

Step 9 – Automation of the Whole Pipeline

Purpose:
The final step of the project involved developing a comprehensive **automated pipeline** that seamlessly integrates all the preceding steps—ranging from PDB file processing and system preparation to molecular dynamics simulations and MMPBSA binding free energy calculations. The pipeline ensures consistency, reproducibility, and efficiency by eliminating manual intervention at each stage.

Methodology and Tools:
The pipeline was implemented using **Python**, with a combination of built-in modules like **os** and **subprocess** for file operations and command-line execution. The script also leverages key tools from the **AmberTools** suite, including:

- **pdb4amber** (for PDB cleanup)
- **reduce** (for hydrogen addition)
- **antechamber** and **parmchk2** (for force field parameter generation)
- **tleap** (for system assembly and solvation)

- **pmemd.cuda** and **pmemd.MPI** (for MD simulations)
- **MMPBSA.py** (for binding free energy analysis)

By combining these tools, the pipeline efficiently orchestrates each step, producing high-quality simulation-ready systems and reliable energy data for subsequent analysis.

Pipeline Structure:
The pipeline is logically divided into key modules:

1. **PDB Filtering and Chain Extraction:**
   - Selects relevant chains containing both the **ligand** and **FAD**.
2. **PDB Cleanup and Preparation:**
   - Removes non-standard atoms, missing atoms, and adds hydrogens where needed.
3. **Parameter Generation:**
   - Prepares **mol2** and **frcmod** files for ligands and FAD.
4. **System Assembly:**
   - Uses **tleap** to assemble the protein-ligand-FAD system in a solvated box with appropriate counterions.
5. **Energy Minimization:**
   - Prepares systems for production runs by relaxing geometries and removing steric clashes.
6. **Full MD Simulation Pipeline:**
   - Executes heating, short equilibration (CPU), long equilibration (GPU), and final production runs.
7. **Binding Free Energy Calculations:**
   - Automatically identifies **residue ranges** for MMPBSA analysis and performs energy decomposition.

Significance:
Automation greatly enhanced the **reproducibility** and **scalability** of the workflow, enabling high-throughput processing of multiple protein-ligand systems. It reduced manual errors and ensured consistent

application of parameter settings across all steps, which is essential for comparative analysis. The modular design of the pipeline also allows researchers to **customize** or **extend** specific stages, making it a flexible foundation for future studies exploring protein-ligand interactions involving **FAD or any other preffered ligand** .

In summary, this fully automated pipeline bridges the gap between data acquisition and meaningful analysis, transforming a complex, multi-step workflow into a streamlined, user-friendly process that can be deployed across diverse protein systems.

RESULTS

SECTION 4.1

4.1.1: Volumetric Analysis: A Detailed Examination of Binding Pocket Dynamics

In this study, we aim to investigate the structural and functional roles of Flavin adenine dinucleotide (FAD) and a specific substrate in regulating pocket volumes within a protein complex. Understanding how the presence or absence of these crucial molecules affects pocket dynamics is not merely an academic exercise; it is critically important for deciphering their profound influence on protein stability, allosteric regulation, and catalytic activity.

The dynamic nature of protein binding pockets, which constantly sample various conformations, is fundamental to their biological function. Small molecules, such as cofactors and substrates, can significantly perturb these dynamics, leading to specific structural adaptations that are essential for molecular recognition, enzymatic catalysis, and signal transduction pathways. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of these volumetric changes provides direct insights into how these molecular interactions dictate protein behavior and functional states.

To achieve this, we meticulously analyzed pocket volumes under three distinct and controlled conditions:

- **With FAD**: This served as our control state, representing the protein's native binding site conformation when FAD is present and presumably stabilizing the pocket. By examining this condition, we establish a baseline for a functionally optimized and stable pocket environment.
- **Without FAD**: By experimentally removing FAD (or simulating its absence), we sought to quantify the extent of destabilization and the increase in conformational flexibility induced by its absence. This condition is crucial for understanding FAD's intrinsic structural contribution, independent of its redox activity.

4.1.2 Dataset and pairing

We assembled paired measurements for each structure by computing the volume of the top-ranked fpocket cavity ("Pocket-1") with FAD present and after removing FAD from the same structure. This yields N = 2,895 matched Pocket-1 pairs (one pair per structure). For completeness, we also computed paired volumes for the next best cavity ("Pocket-2") and aggregated all pockets to assess global trends (n totals shown below).

The analysis below integrates (i) a scatter of Pocket-1 volumes with vs without FAD, (ii) a histogram of ΔV values, and (iii) distribution plots (violin and box) comparing absolute volumes under the two conditions. The corresponding source statistics were taken directly from the provided CSV summaries and the paired measurement file.

Pocket-1 volumes: paired comparison

Across the 2,895 Pocket-1 pairs, 68.22% of cases lie above the y = x line in the with-vs-without scatter (i.e., the pocket is larger after removing FAD). The mean ΔV is +563 $Å^3$ and the median ΔV is +182 $Å^3$. A Wilson 95% confidence interval for the fraction with ΔV>0 is 66.50–69.89%. In other words, for roughly two-thirds of structures, removing FAD makes the top pocket roomier, consistent with a stabilizing/compacting role for FAD in the native complex.

These pairwise results are visually apparent in your scatter (most points above the diagonal) and are quantified by the ΔV histogram, which is right-skewed (skew ≈ 1.80) with a long positive tail. The interquartile range of ΔV is about 1,100 $Å^3$ (Q1 ≈ −8.6 $Å^3$, Q3 ≈ 1,091 $Å^3$), indicating that while the median effect is modest, a sizeable subset exhibits large pocket openings upon cofactor removal.

Absolute volumes tell the same story. The median Pocket-1 volume is ~725 $Å^3$ with FAD versus ~1,334 $Å^3$ without FAD; means are ~988 $Å^3$ and ~1,551 $Å^3$, respectively. Thus, both central tendency and tails shift upward when FAD is absent, as seen in the violin and box plots.

Key numbers (Pocket-1, N=2,895):

- % with ΔV > 0: 68.22% (95% CI 66.50–69.89%)
- ΔV mean / median: +563 / +182 $Å^3$
- ΔV IQR: ~1,100 $Å^3$ (Q1 ≈ −8.6 $Å^3$; Q3 ≈ +1,091 $Å^3$)
- V(FAD) median / mean: ~725 / ~988 $Å^3$
- V(no-FAD) median / mean: ~1,334 / ~1,551 $Å^3$

- With-vs-without correlation (Pocket-1 volumes): $r \approx 0.59$ (moderate), implying the same structures tend to have big pockets in both states, but systematically bigger without FAD.

Statistical tests (paired)

Paired tests were run in two ways: classical paired t-tests on volume differences and the nonparametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test on matched pairs. Because the sign convention in the CSV summaries is V(FAD) − V(no-FAD) for "mean_diff", a negative mean_diff implies the pocket is smaller with FAD (i.e., $\Delta V > 0$ in our definition).

- Pocket-1: +FAD vs −FAD
  $n = 2{,}895$; mean_diff = −563.24 Å^3; $t = -28.91$; $p < 1\times10^{-16}$; Wilcoxon $p \approx 2.1\times10^{-16}$; Cohen's $d \approx -0.54$ (moderate).
  Interpretation: highly significant reduction in pocket volume when FAD is present.
- Pocket-1: +FAD vs −FAD−Ligand
  $n = 2{,}895$; mean_diff = −424.28 Å^3; $t = -18.02$; $p < 1\times10^{-16}$; Wilcoxon $p \approx 1.9\times10^{-62}$; $d \approx -0.33$.
  Interpretation: even when both FAD and the substrate are removed, the dominant effect still tracks with FAD's presence/absence; the magnitude is smaller than the −FAD comparison but remains highly significant.
- Pocket-2 for comparison: +FAD vs −FAD
  $n = 2{,}895$; mean_diff = −298.36 Å^3; $t = -20.81$; $p < 1\times10^{-16}$; $d \approx -0.39$.
  Interpretation: the secondary cavity also tends to tighten with FAD, but the effect size is weaker than Pocket-1.
- Pocket-2: +FAD vs −FAD−Ligand
  $n = 2{,}895$; mean_diff = −115.00 Å^3; $t = -6.87$; $p \approx 7.7\times10^{-12}$; Wilcoxon $p = 0.20$ (ns); $d \approx -0.13$.
  Interpretation: the sensitivity in Pocket-2 is marginal after removing both FAD and ligand; nonparametric evidence is not significant, suggesting the dominant structural signal is localized to the primary pocket.
- All pockets combined :
  $n = 5{,}790$; mean_diff = −430.80 Å^3; t $p \approx 7.1\times10^{-247}$, Wilcoxon $p \approx 1.4\times10^{-214}$; $d \approx -0.46$.
  Interpretation: pooling reinforces the direction and robustness of the effect.

Taken together, the paired tests agree with the descriptive statistics and plots: FAD systematically compacts the main binding cavity, with a moderate average effect size and a long-tailed subset showing pronounced compaction.

Distributional features and robustness

Two distribution features are worth noting:

1. Right-skewed ΔV: Although the median ΔV is ~+182 Å³, the mean is larger (+563 Å³) because a minority of structures expand dramatically without FAD (max ΔV ≈ +9,820 Å³), driving the positive tail. This matches the visible long tail in the ΔV histogram.

2. Percent change stability vs outliers: The median percent change in Pocket-1 is about +19.6%, with Q1 ≈ −1.4% and Q3 ≈ +161%. The mean percent change is much larger due to a few extreme cases where the with-FAD pocket is very small, so percentage inflation is huge—again consistent with the right tail and arguing for reporting both median and IQR alongside the mean.

We also note a moderate correlation (r ≈ 0.59) between with-FAD and without-FAD volumes, which means pocket size is partly an intrinsic property of the structure, but FAD shifts the baseline downward (tighter) in a consistent, statistically significant way.

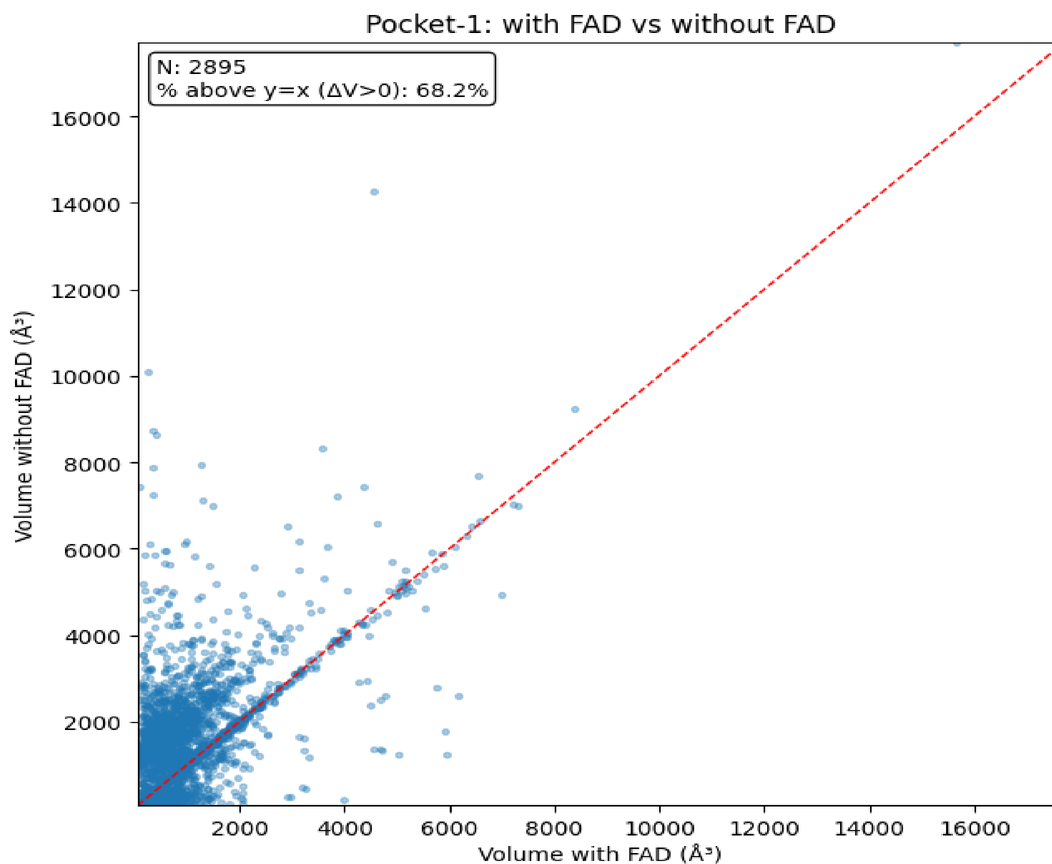

FIGURE 4.1 – Scatter plot shows the pairwise dominance of ΔV>0.

Each dot is a *paired* measurement from the same structure: the x-axis is Pocket-1 volume when FAD is present, the y-axis is the volume after removing FAD. The red dashed line is $y = x$. Points above this diagonal are cases where the pocket is larger without FAD ($\Delta V>0$); points below the line are cases where the pocket is smaller without FAD ($\Delta V<0$). The inset gives the sample size ($N = 2,895$) and the fraction of points above the line (68.2%).

If FAD has no structural effect, points should scatter symmetrically around the diagonal. Instead, there's a clear upward bias—most points sit above the line—indicating that removing FAD tends to open the primary cavity. The densest cloud is in the lower-left (hundreds to low thousands of Å^{3}), implying many proteins have compact primary pockets to begin with, but even in this region a majority of pairs still fall above the line.

Key takeaways.

- Direction of effect: In ~two-thirds of structures, Pocket-1 becomes bigger when FAD is removed.
- Strength & consistency: The bias above the diagonal is present across the full x-range (small and large pockets), arguing this isn't driven only by a subset of unusually small or large pockets.
- Outliers: A handful of dots far from the cloud (very high y values) show large expansions without FAD. These create the long positive tail seen again in the histogram.

What this implies.
At the level of matched pairs, the scatter visually confirms a systematic compaction of the primary pocket in the FAD-bound state. This is the most intuitive picture to communicate the central claim: *"with FAD → tighter; without FAD → looser."*

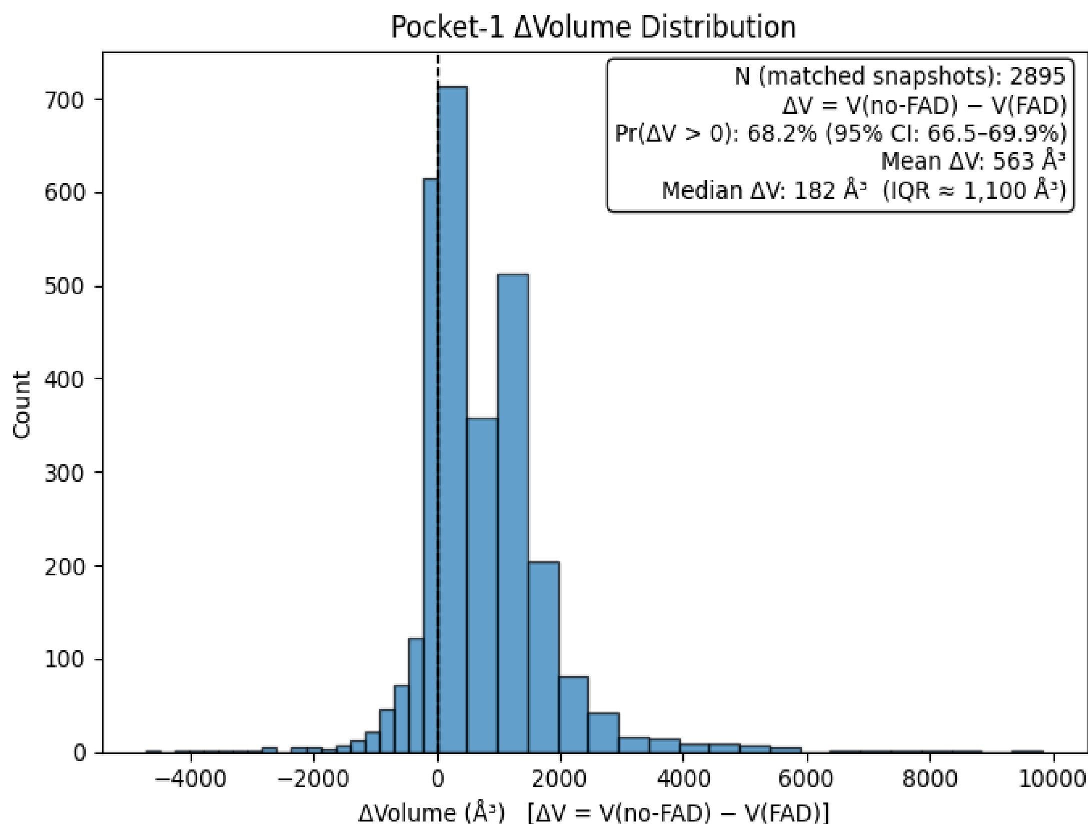

FIGURE 4.2– Histogram quantifies the distribution of those differences and reveals a right tail of large openings.

This is the distribution of ΔV = V(no-FAD) − V(FAD) for Pocket-1 across the same N = 2,895 pairs. Bars to the right of zero are cases where the pocket opens on FAD removal; bars to the left are cases where it shrinks. The inset reports the headline numbers (Pr(ΔV>0) = 68.2%, mean ΔV ≈ +563 $Å^3$, median ΔV ≈ +182 $Å^3$, IQR ≈ 1,100 $Å^3$, and a 95% CI of 66.5–69.9% for the proportion above zero).

The distribution is right-skewed: most of the mass lies just to the right of zero (typical openings of a few hundred $Å^3$), but a long positive tail extends to several thousand $Å^3$. The median being much smaller than the mean is exactly what you expect with a tail: the "typical" change is modest (~hundreds of $Å^3$), yet a minority of cases undergo very large openings without FAD

Key takeaways.

- Consistency over mere averages: Reporting both the median and the IQR shows the compaction effect is widespread, not just carried by a few extreme systems.

- Biophysical interpretation: The long positive tail suggests some proteins rely heavily on FAD as a structural brace; remove it and the cavity relaxes dramatically.

What this implies.
The histogram converts the scatter's visual bias into distributional evidence: compaction is not only common (≥ two-thirds of pairs) but sometimes pronounced, which is precisely why we see strong significance in the paired tests.

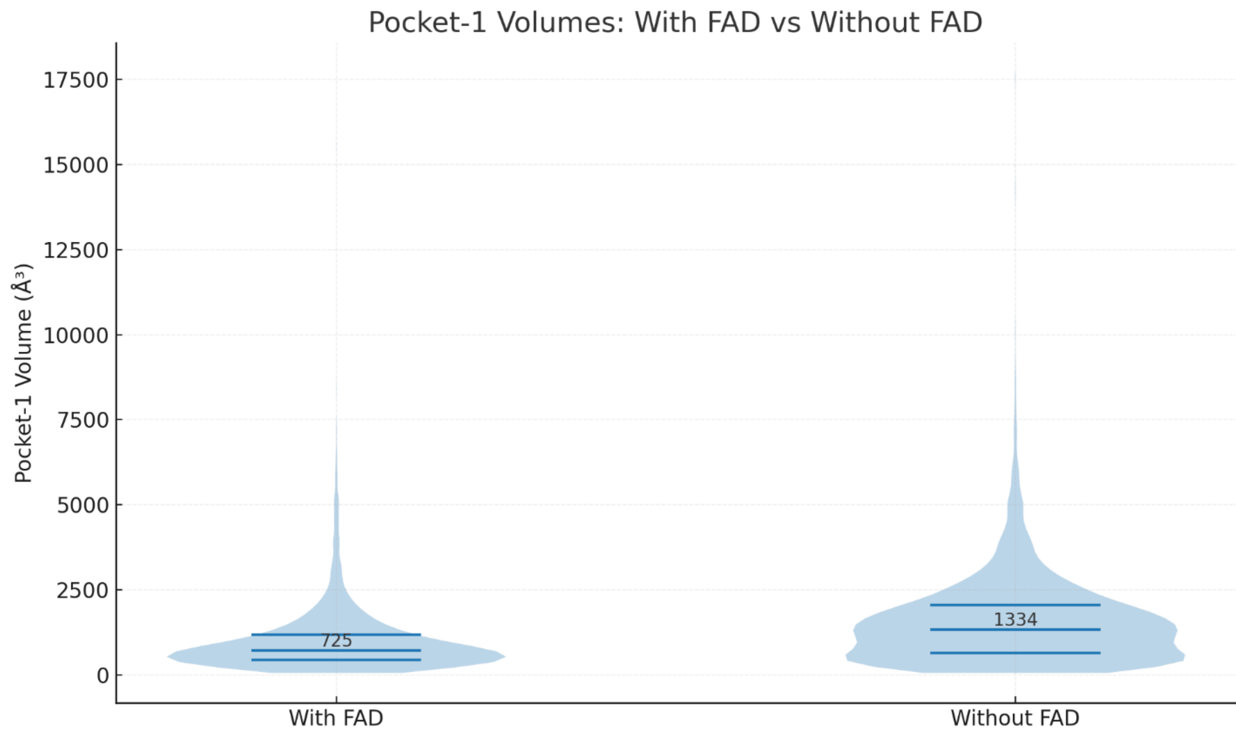

FIGURE 4.3– Violin plot visualizes how the entire density of pocket volumes shifts upward and broadens without FAD.
Each violin is a smoothed density of absolute Pocket-1 volumes in a given state. Horizontal bars mark summary statistics; your plot also annotates the medians: about 725 Å³ (with FAD) versus 1,334 Å³ (without FAD).

- Height is the value range (Å³).
- Width at a given height shows how many structures live around that volume—wider = more common.
- The with-FAD violin is concentrated at lower volumes and narrows sooner, indicating compactness and less spread.

- The without-FAD violin bulges at higher volumes and remains wide further up, reflecting larger and more variable pockets when FAD is absent

Key takeaways.

- Shift in central tendency: Median and bulk density both move upward without FAD, echoing the $\Delta V>0$ majority.
- Variance difference: The "no-FAD" state shows a fatter upper body, signaling more heterogeneity—some pockets open a little, some open a lot.

What this implies.
Beyond means and medians, the violin conveys a global shape change: FAD not only shifts volumes down but also tightens the distribution, consistent with reduced breathing/flexibility when the cofactor is seated.

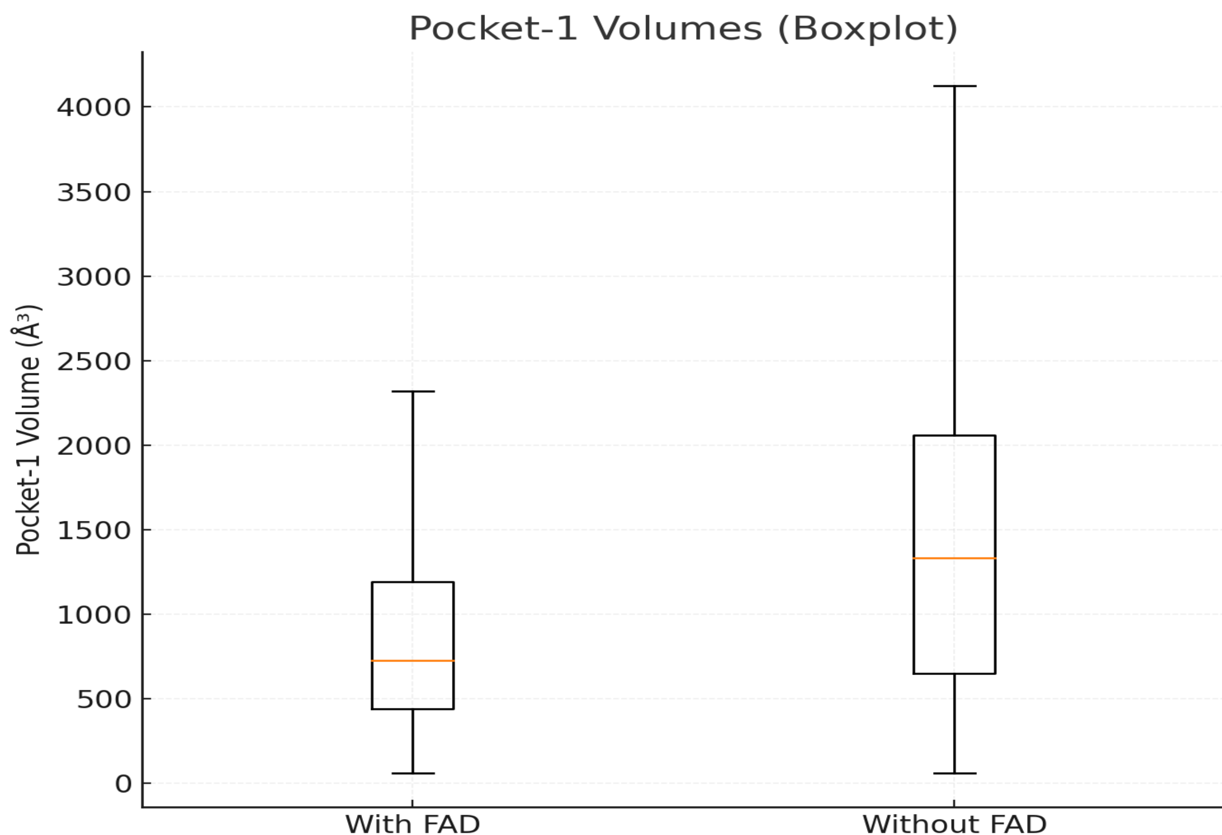

FIGURE 4.4– Boxplot confirms the median/IQR shift with a representation that's robust to outliers.

Standard box-and-whisker summary of Pocket-1 volumes in the two states. The box spans the interquartile range (IQR), the center line is the median, and whiskers indicate the typical range (with points beyond them as outliers).

- The with-FAD box sits lower, with a smaller IQR—volumes cluster in a tighter, compact band.
- The without-FAD box shifts higher and is taller, and whiskers stretch further upward—clear evidence of larger and more dispersed volumes once FAD is removed.

Key takeaways.

- Robust to tails: Unlike means, boxplots are robust to extreme outliers; the upward shift here confirms the effect is not an artifact of a few gigantic ΔV cases.
- Visual parsimony: For a slide or a quick summary, this figure alone conveys both direction (higher without FAD) and variability (wider without FAD).

What this implies.
Together with the violin plot, the boxplot clinches the distribution-level story: FAD makes the primary pocket smaller on average and less spread out—a hallmark of structural stabilization.

Visual summaries

- Figure 1 (Scatter, “Pocket-1: with FAD vs without FAD”): Most points lie above the diagonal; the inset shows N = 2,895 and 68.2% above $y = x$, summarizing the paired dominance of $\Delta V > 0$.
- Figure 2 (Histogram of ΔV): Shows ΔV distribution with mean ≈ +563 Å^3, median ≈ +182 Å^3, and a long positive tail; the 95% CI for $Pr(\Delta V>0)$ is 66.5–69.9% (inset).
- Figure 3 (Violin plot): The density bulks are lower for with-FAD and higher/wider for without-FAD; medians (~725 Å^3 vs 1,334 Å^3) are annotated on the violins.
- Figure 4 (Boxplot): Replicates the same central shift, with longer whiskers without FAD, illustrating larger variance and more high-volume outliers when the cofactor is removed.

Interpretation

Functionally, these results indicate that FAD acts like a structural brace for the primary cavity: when present, Pocket-1 tightens (smaller volume, less spread); when removed, the cavity relaxes and often

opens. The effect persists across thousands of diverse structures, is moderate in magnitude on average, and is statistically robust to both parametric and non-parametric tests. The weaker and partly non-significant signals in Pocket-2 suggest the phenomenon is localized, supporting a direct structural link between the FAD binding site and the main functional pocket.

SECTION 4.2:

4.2.1 MD SIMULATION AND MMPBSA

This section presents the findings derived from the molecular dynamics (MD) simulations, specifically focusing on the energetic contributions of Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) to a diverse set of protein-ligand complexes. The analysis quantifies the total interaction energy of FAD within each complex, providing insights into its role in protein stability and conformational dynamics.

4.2.2 Overview of FAD Total Interaction Energies

The total interaction energy of FAD was calculated for 500 unique protein-ligand systems over the course of the molecular dynamics simulations. These values represent the average energetic contribution of FAD to the overall stability of each complex, reflecting the strength of its binding and interaction with the surrounding protein environment. The comprehensive summary statistics for these energies are presented in Table 1, offering a quantitative overview of the entire dataset.

Statistic	**Value (kcal/mol)**
Count	500
Mean	-1.567
Standard Deviation	1.939
Minimum	-9.759
25% Quantile	-2.414
50% Quantile (Median)	-0.938
75% Quantile	-0.071

Maximum	0.830

Table 1: Summary Statistics for FAD Total Interaction Energy (n=500 protein systems)

As detailed in Table 1, the mean FAD total interaction energy across all systems was **-1.567 kcal/mol**, while the median was **-0.938 kcal/mol**. The consistently negative values for both the mean and median strongly indicate a general and widespread tendency for FAD to exert a stabilizing influence on the protein-ligand complexes it associates with. This stabilization is crucial for maintaining the structural integrity and functional conformation of flavoproteins. The standard deviation of **1.939 kcal/mol**, however, signifies a substantial degree of variability in the magnitude of this stabilizing contribution across the different protein systems. This suggests that while FAD is generally stabilizing, the specific protein context and the nature of its binding site significantly modulate the strength of this interaction.

The observed interaction energies spanned a considerable range, from a highly stabilizing minimum of **-9.759 kcal/mol** to a maximum of **0.830 kcal/mol**, which indicates a slightly repulsive or very weak interaction in some cases. This broad spectrum of energies underscores that FAD's contribution to protein stability is not uniform but rather highly dependent on specific protein-FAD interfaces. The overall distribution of these FAD total interaction energies is visually represented in Figure 1, providing a graphical insight into the frequency of different energy magnitudes.

4.2.3 Highly Stabilizing FAD Interactions

Further in-depth analysis of the dataset revealed specific protein systems where FAD contributes exceptionally strong stabilizing interactions, significantly exceeding the average observed stabilization. The top 10 protein systems exhibiting the most negative (most stabilizing) FAD total interaction energies are systematically listed in Table 2. These systems represent prime examples where FAD's presence is energetically crucial for the complex's stability.

PDB_ID	**FAD_TOTAL_ENERGY (kcal/mol)**
3JSX	-9.759
4ZVN	-9.430
3FW1	-8.966

2NPX	-6.622
5U8W	-5.188
3W2G	-5.116
6YAQ	-4.880
5I1W	-4.764
3W2E	-4.586
2WS3	-4.561

Table 2: Top 10 Protein Systems with the Most Stabilizing FAD Total Interaction Energies

As prominently highlighted in Table 2, **PDB ID 3JSX** exhibited the most profound stabilizing interaction with a FAD_TOTAL_ENERGY of **-9.759 kcal/mol**. This value is substantially more negative than the overall dataset mean, indicating an exceptionally strong and potentially highly optimized interaction between FAD and the protein in this particular complex. Such a strong energetic contribution suggests a critical role for FAD in maintaining the structural integrity, active site conformation, or overall functional state of this protein. Similarly, other systems such as **4ZVN** (-9.430 kcal/mol) and **3FW1** (-8.966 kcal/mol) also demonstrated remarkably strong FAD-mediated stabilization. These highly negative interaction energies collectively underscore the pivotal role FAD can play in ensuring the compact and stable conformation of specific protein-ligand complexes, which is often a prerequisite for their catalytic activity or regulatory functions.

A visual comparison of these top 10 most stabilizing interactions is provided in Figure 2, allowing for a quick assessment of their relative strengths.

Figure 2: Top 10 Most Stabilizing FAD-Protein Interactions

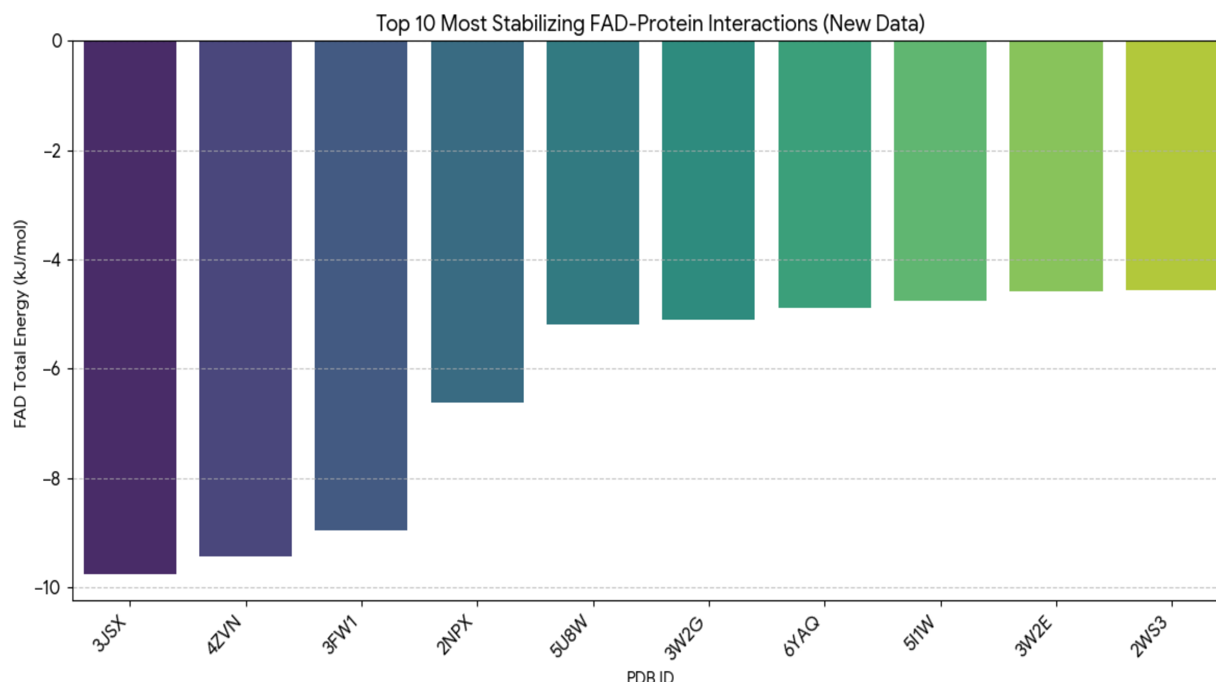

FIGURE 4.5 -clearly illustrates the distinct differences in the magnitude of FAD's stabilizing contribution among these top systems, with PDB ID 3JSX standing out as having the most energetically favored interaction. The visual representation reinforces the numerical data, making the hierarchy of these strong interactions immediately apparent. Further detailed analyses, including specific structural insights into the FAD binding site, key interacting residues, and dynamic properties for each of these top 10 protein systems, will be presented in subsequent sections or dedicated figures to elucidate the molecular basis of these strong interactions. (e.g., "Figures 4-13 will provide individual structural and dynamic analyses for each of the top 10 PDB IDs: 3JSX, 4ZVN, 3FW1, 2NPX, 5U8W, 3W2G, 6YAQ, 5I1W, 3W2E, and 2WS3, respectively.")

4.2.4 Variability in FAD Contributions and Potential Influencing Factors

While the predominant trend observed was that of FAD contributing to protein stability, the presence of interaction energies close to zero or even slightly positive (up to **0.830 kcal/mol**) indicates that FAD's energetic contribution is not universally uniform across all protein environments. This significant variability suggests that the precise nature of FAD binding, including the specific hydrogen bonding networks, hydrophobic contacts, electrostatic interactions, and overall steric fit within the binding pocket, plays a crucial role in determining its overall energetic impact. Proteins with less negative or positive FAD interaction energies might rely more on other factors for stability, or FAD's role in these systems might be primarily catalytic or structural scaffolding rather than direct energetic stabilization.

The broad spread of data and the presence of outliers, as depicted in the box plot (Figure 3), further emphasize this context-dependent behavior.

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4.2.5 Summary of Key Findings

In summary, the comprehensive analysis of FAD total interaction energies across 500 protein-ligand complexes derived from molecular dynamics simulations demonstrates that FAD generally plays a significant and often crucial stabilizing role. While the average contribution is negative, there is considerable system-to-system variability, ranging from exceptionally strong stabilizing interactions (e.g., -9.759 kcal/mol in PDB ID 3JSX) to weaker or even slightly repulsive interactions. This variability underscores the context-dependent nature of FAD's energetic contribution, which is likely governed by the specific chemical and structural environment of its binding site within each protein. These findings lay the essential groundwork for further, more detailed investigations into the structural determinants governing the strength and nature of FAD-protein interactions, and their implications for protein function and stability.

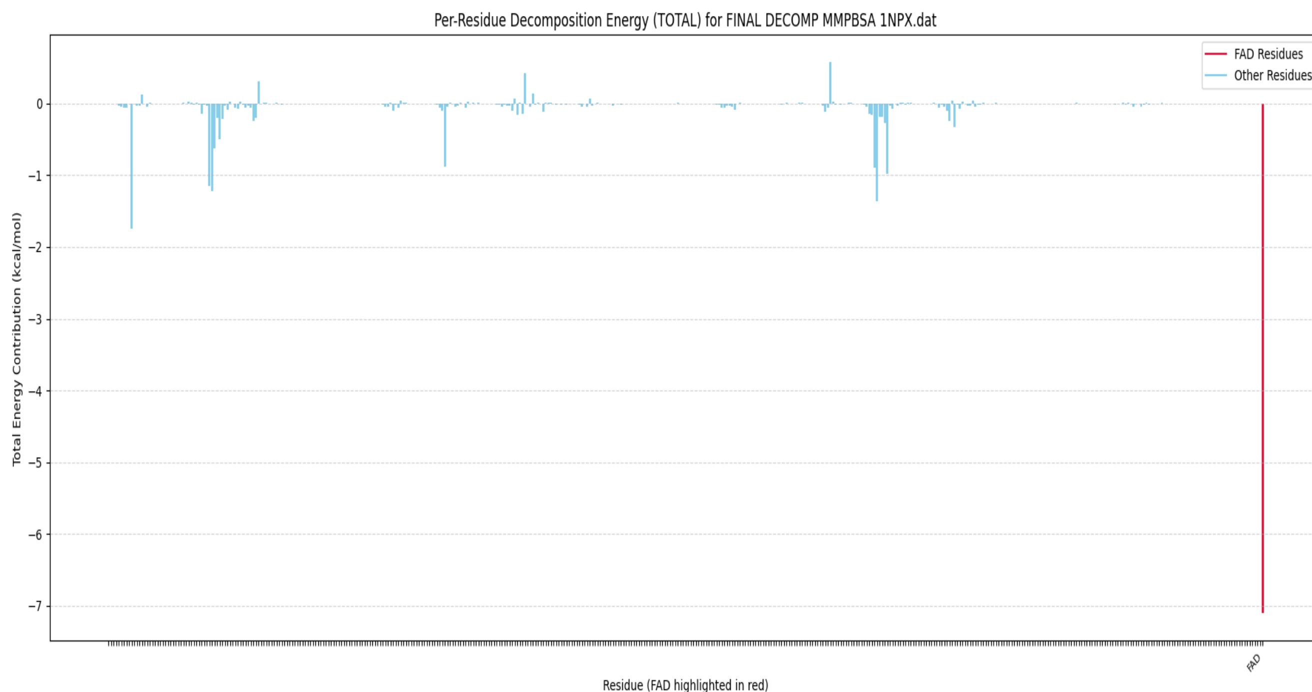

FIGURE 4.6- Residue wise decomposition of protein 1NPX

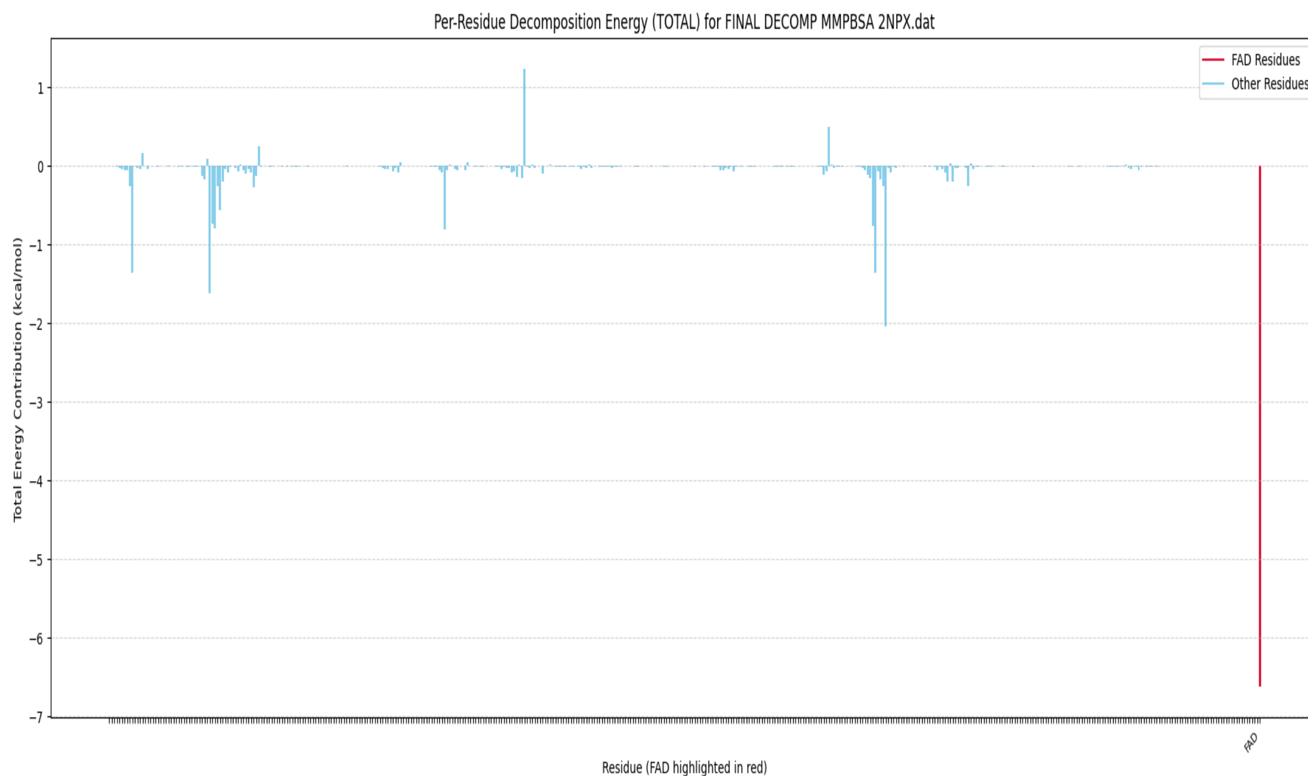

FIGURE 4.7- Residue wise decomposition of protein 2NPX

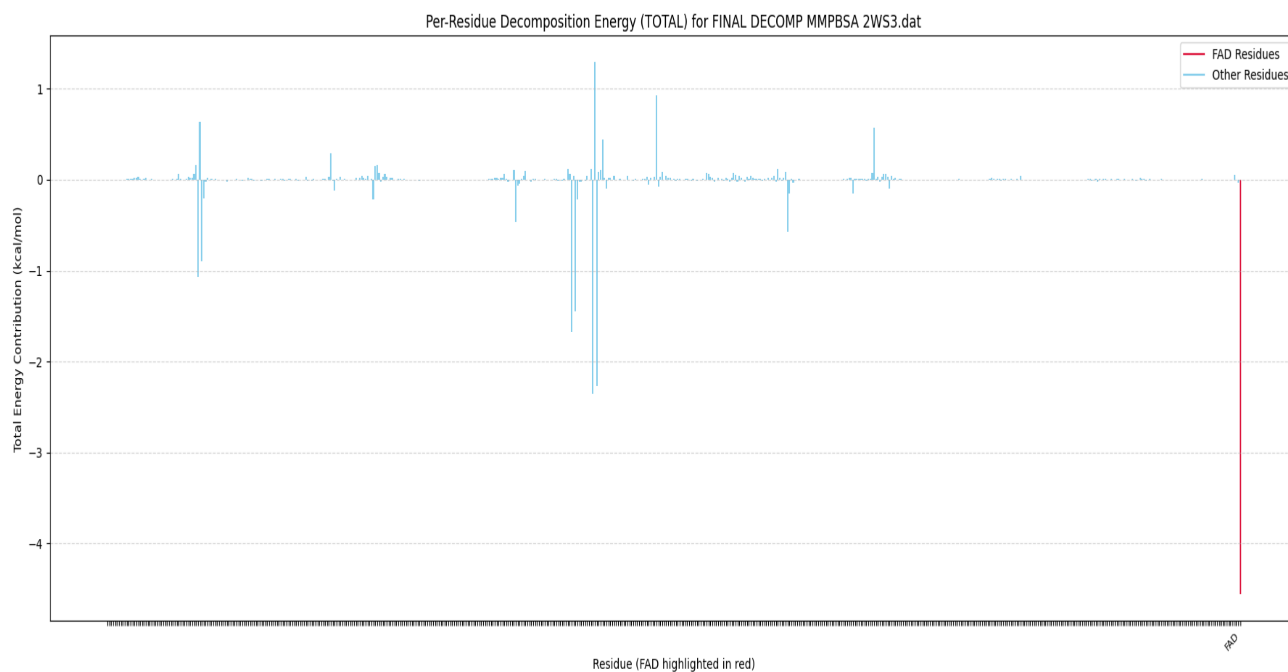

FIGURE 4.8- Residue wise decomposition of protein 2WS3

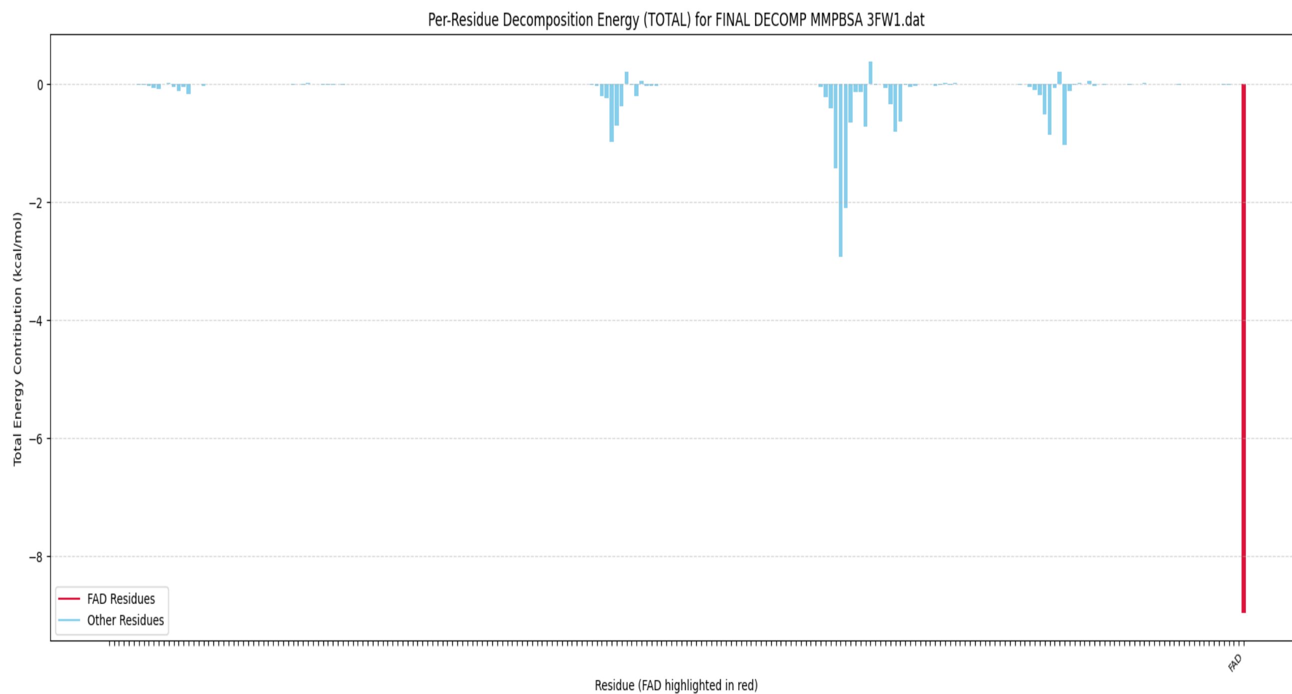

FIGURE 4.9- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3FW1

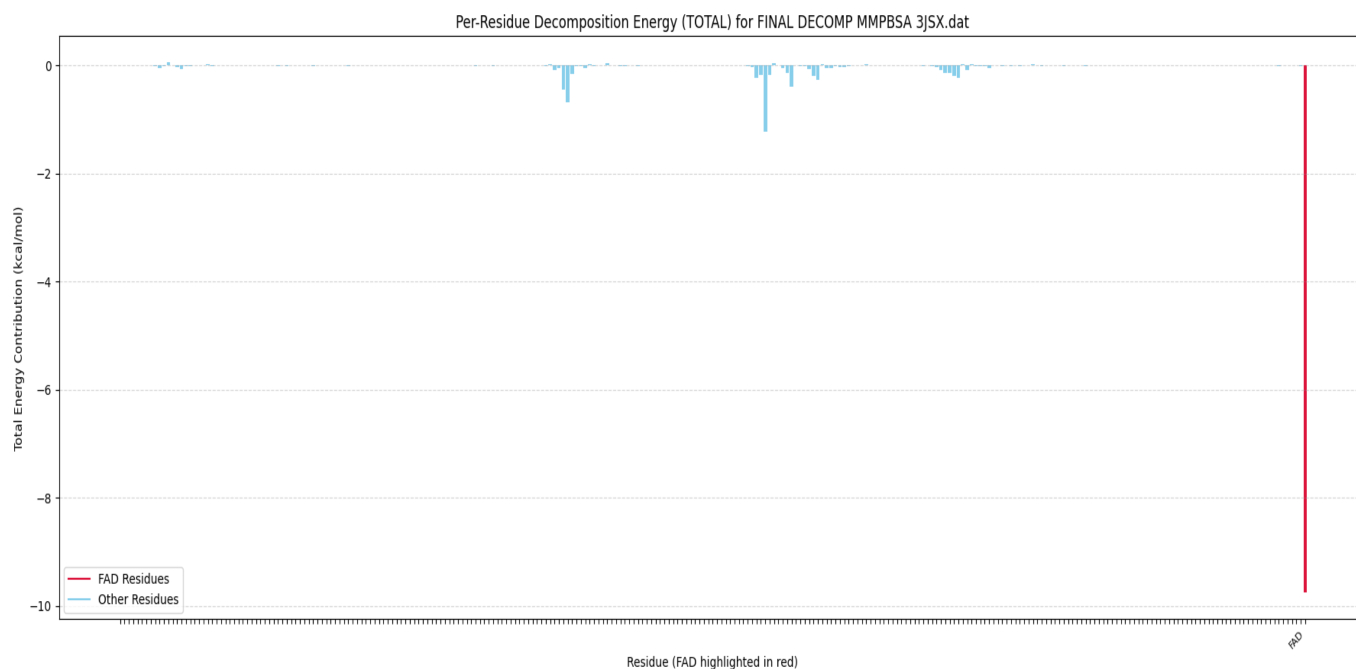

FIGURE 4.10- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3JSX

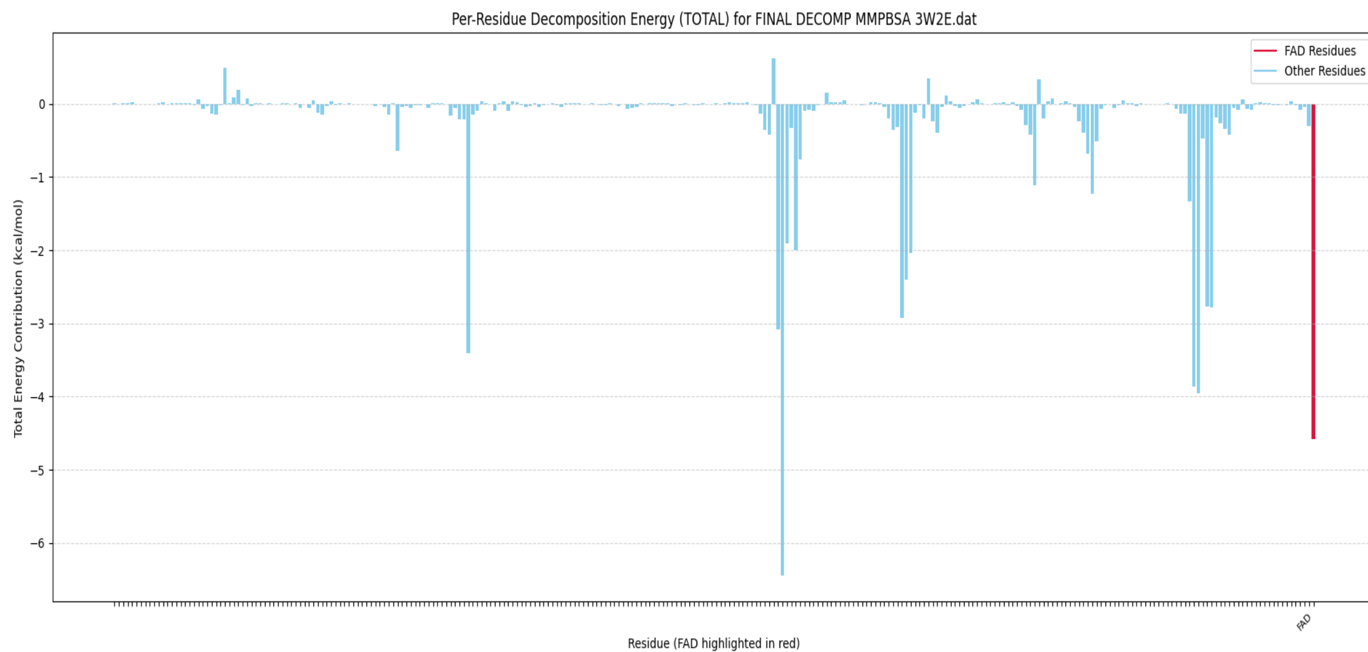

FIGURE 4.11- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3W2E

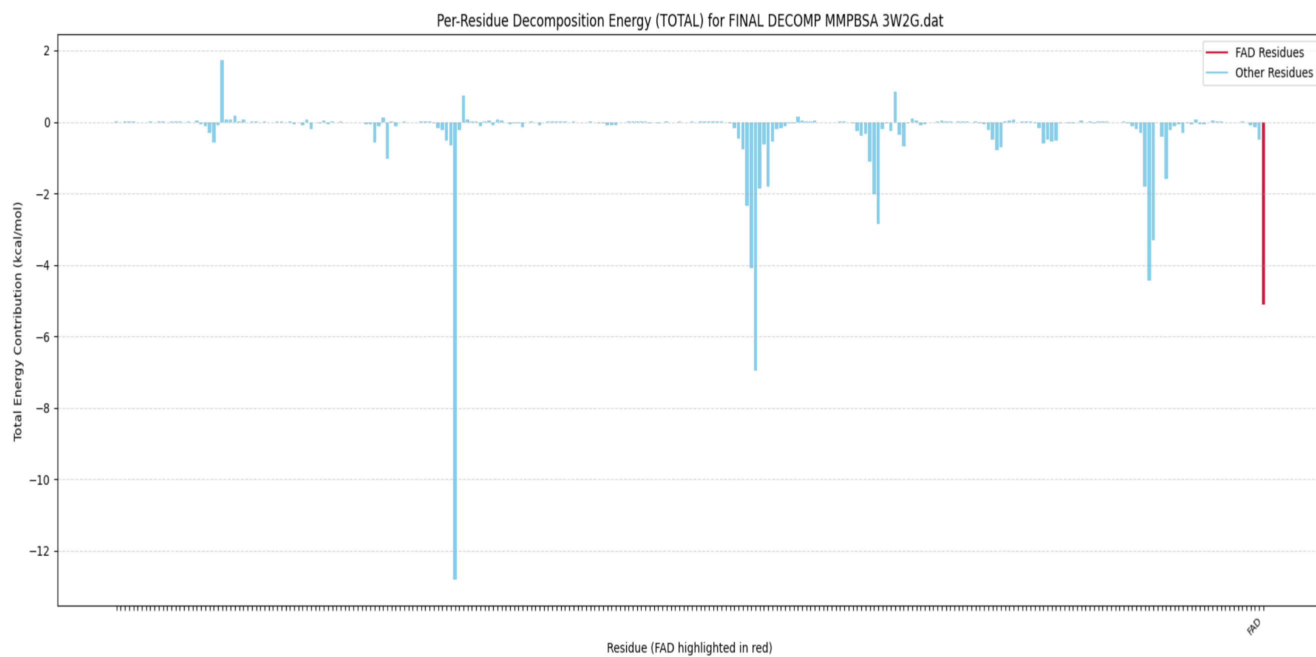

FIGURE 4.12- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3W2G

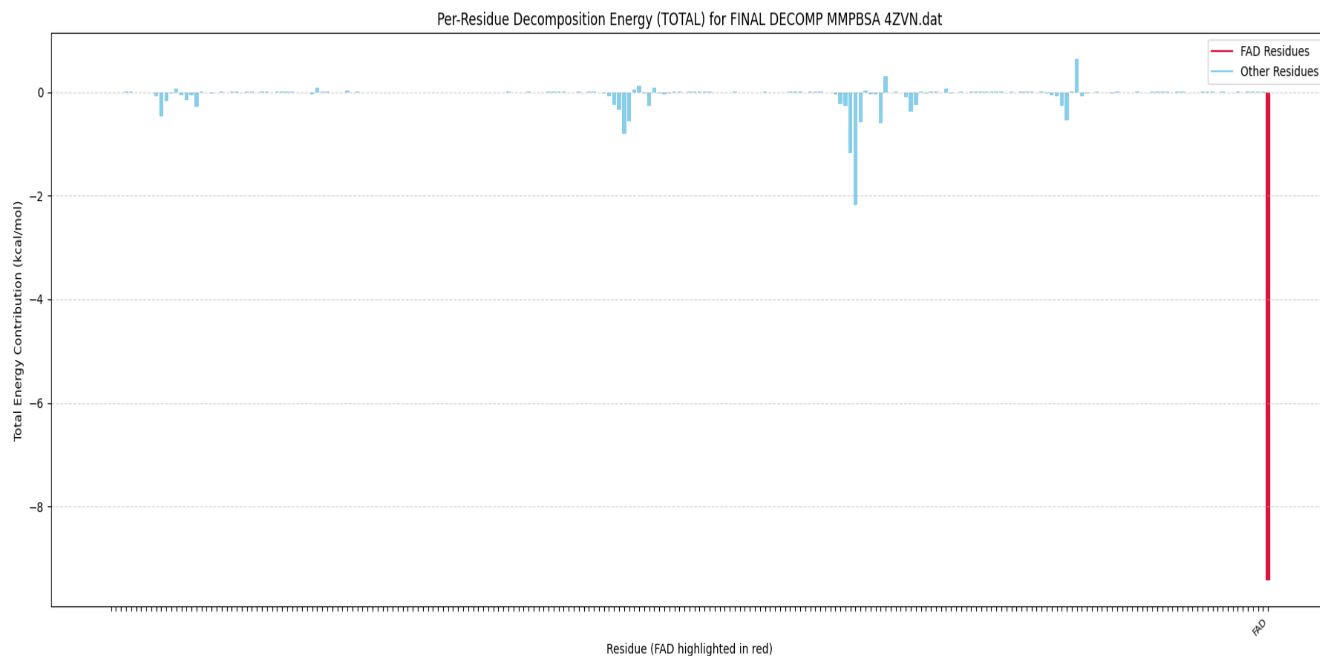

FIGURE 4.13- Residue wise decomposition of protein 4ZVN

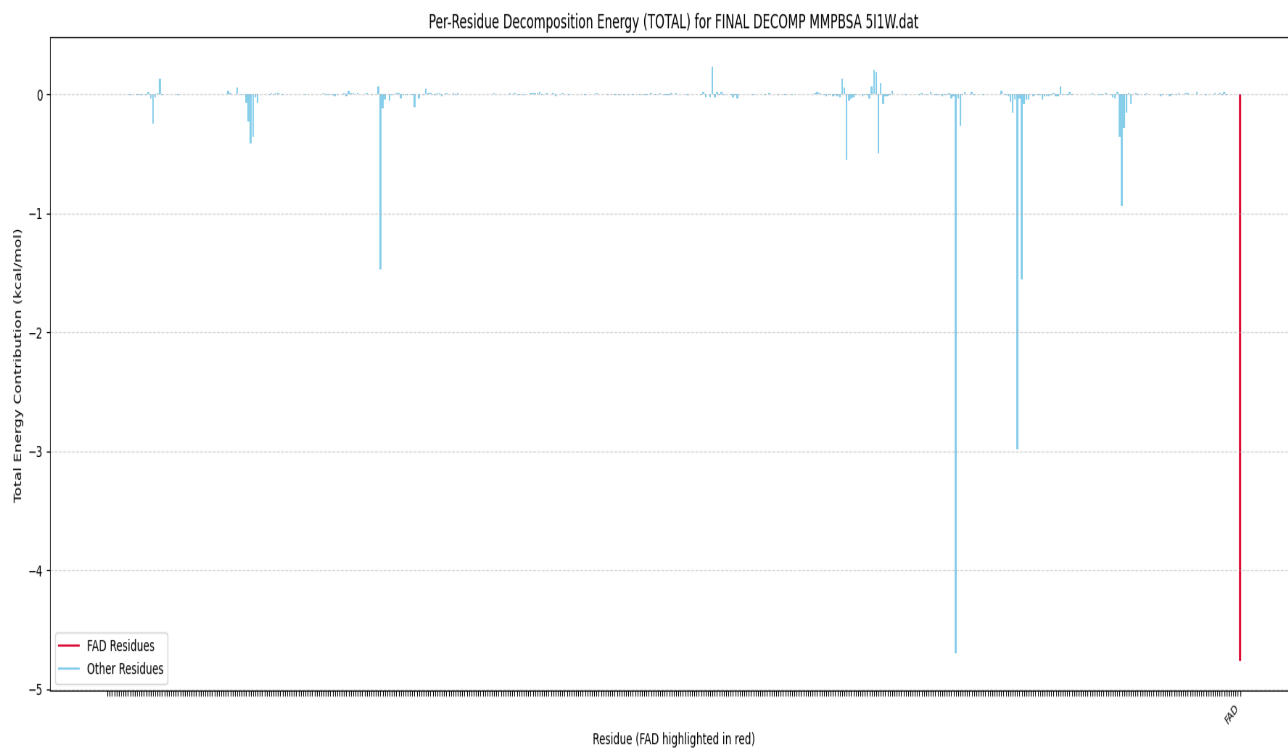

FIGURE 4.14- Residue wise decomposition of protein 5I1W

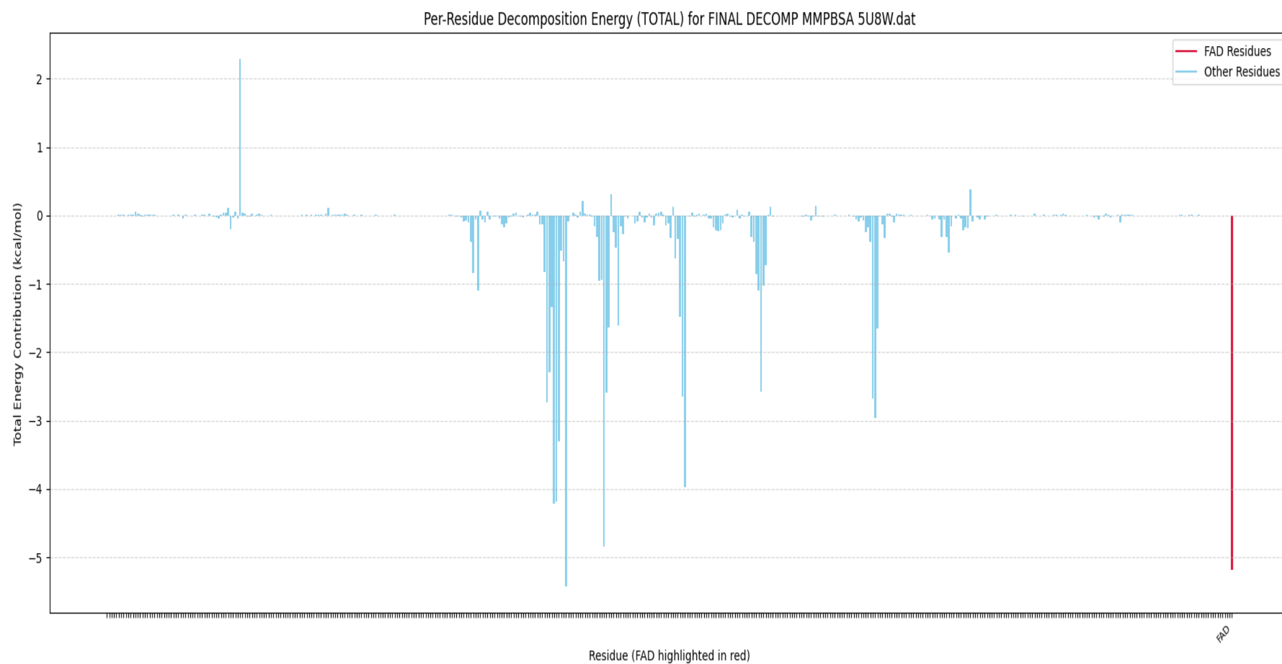

FIGURE 4.15- Residue wise decomposition of protein 5U8W

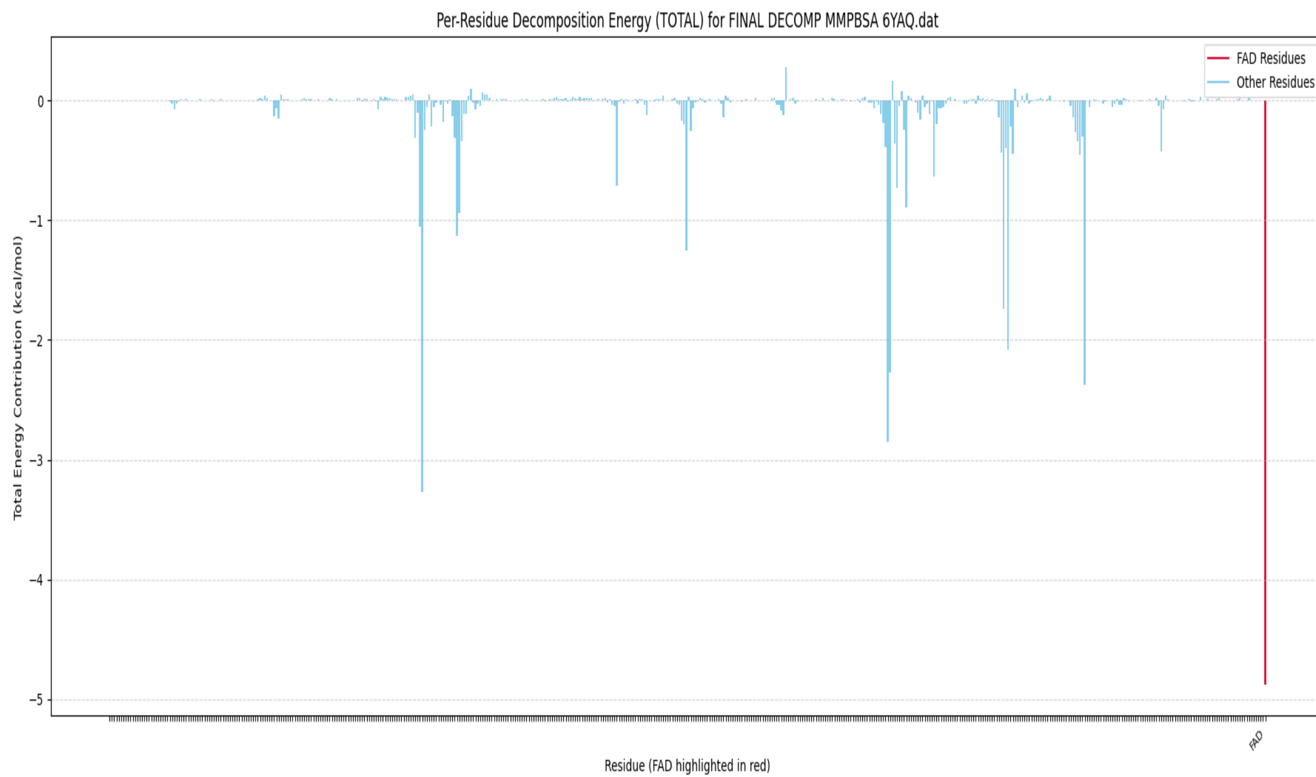

FIGURE 4.16- Residue wise decomposition of protein 6YAQ

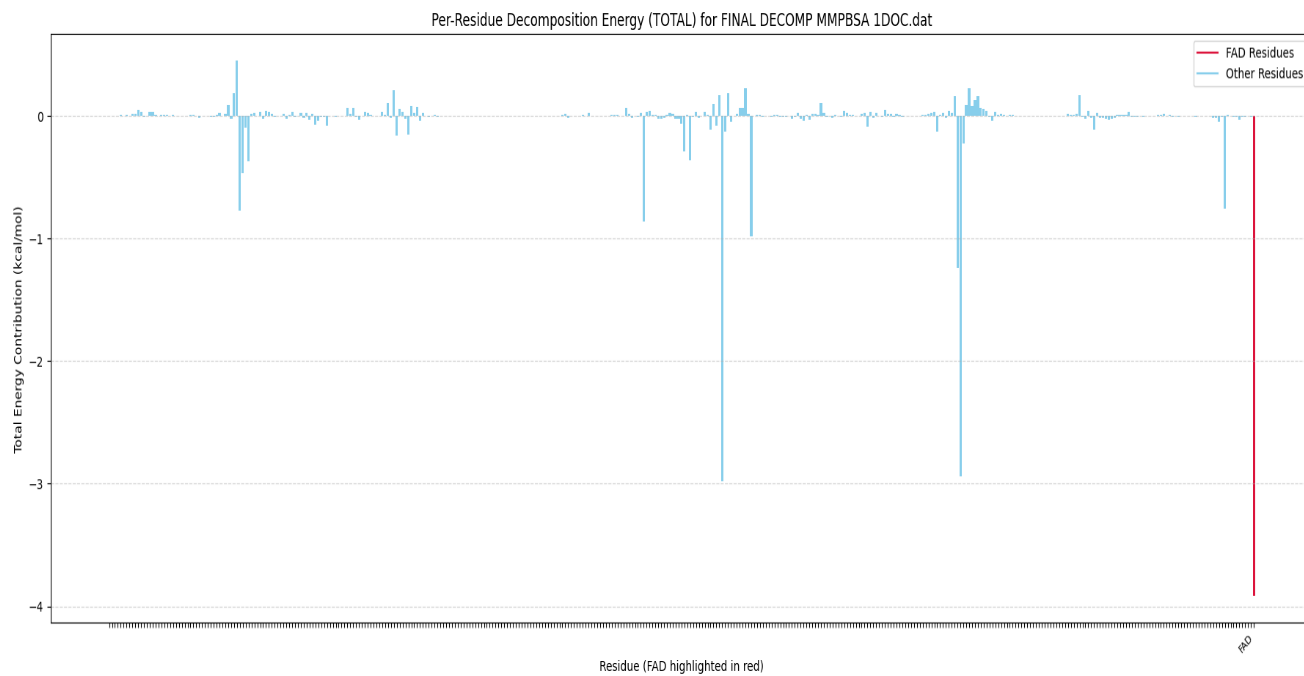

FIGURE 4.17- Residue wise decomposition of protein 1DOC

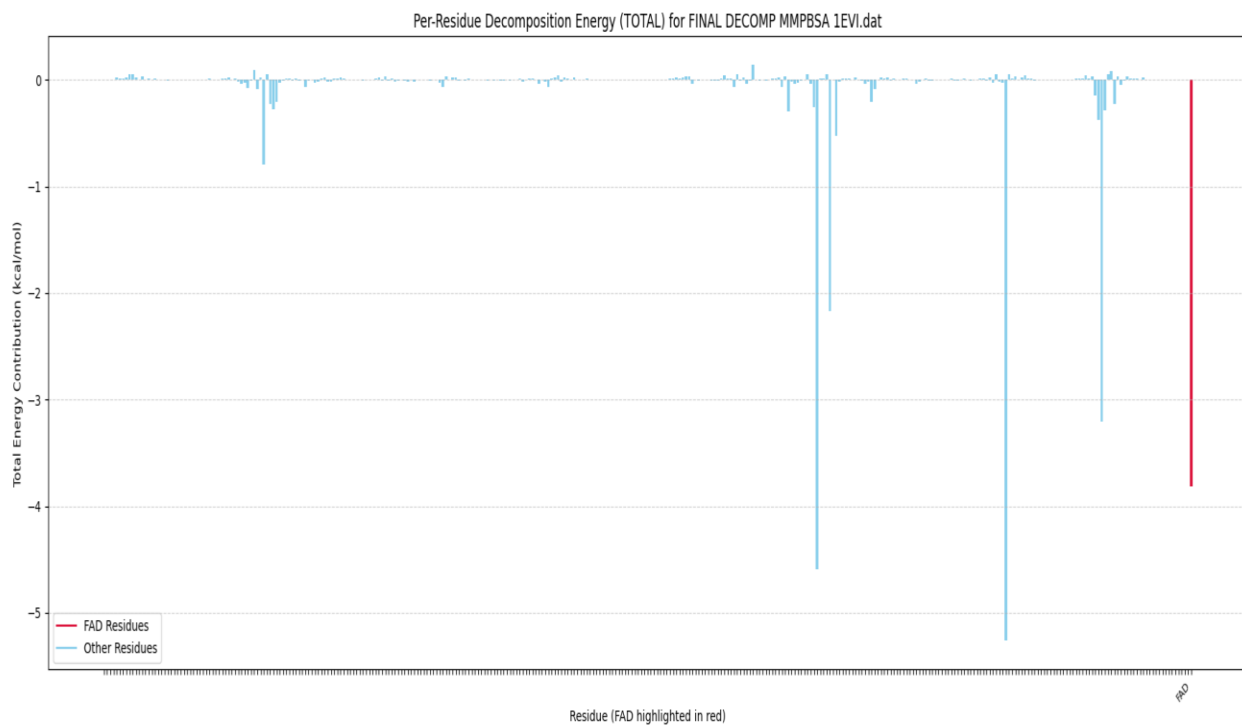

FIGURE 4.18- Residue wise decomposition of protein 1EVI

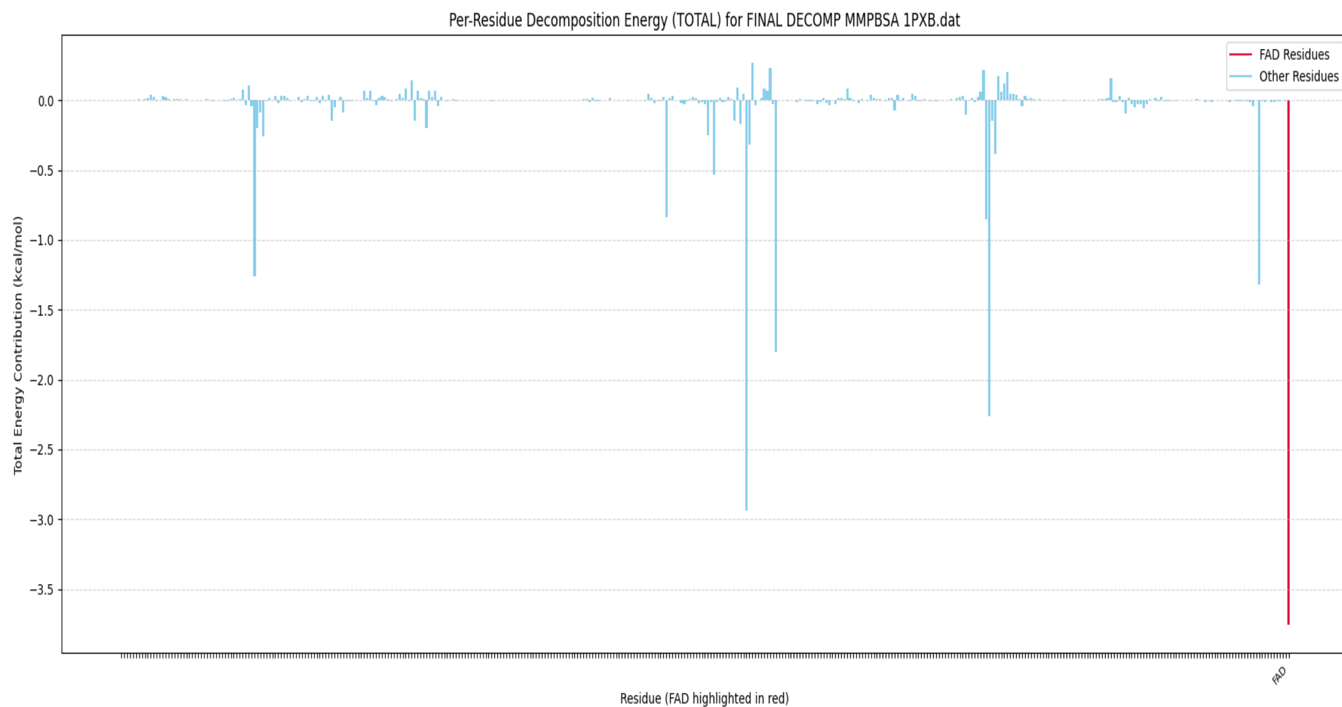

FIGURE 4.19- Residue wise decomposition of protein 1PXB

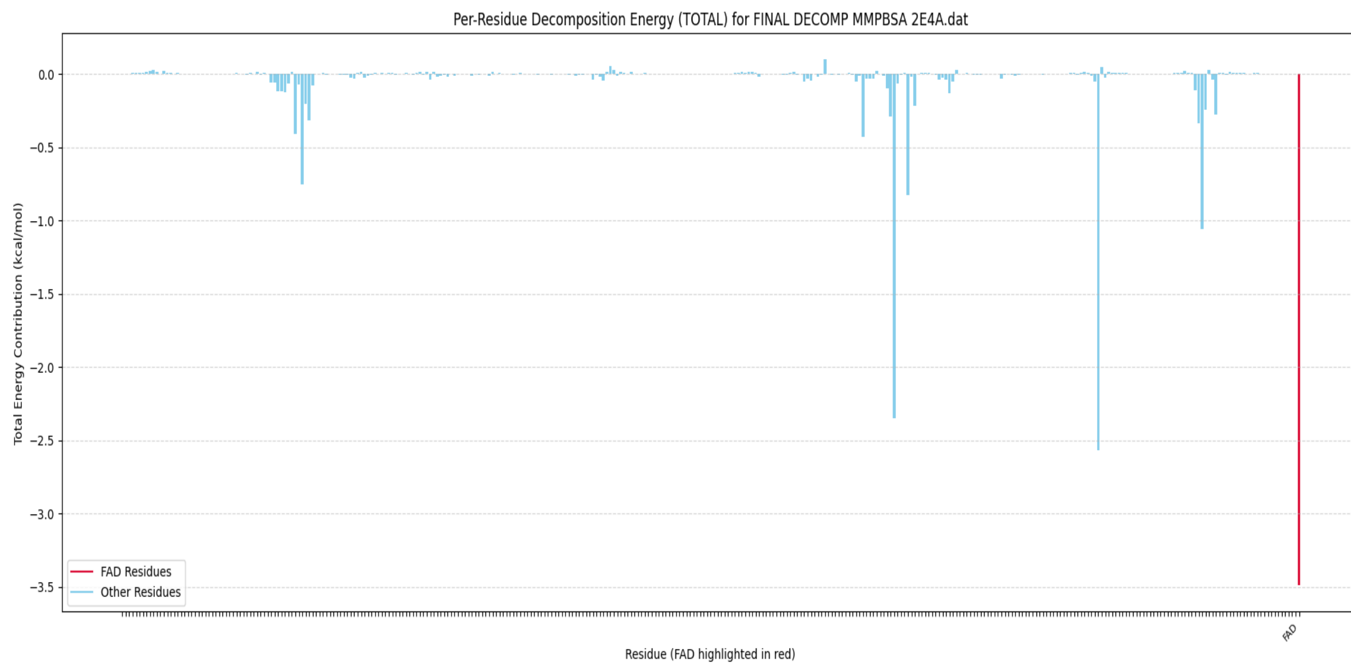

FIGURE 4.20- Residue wise decomposition of protein 2E4A

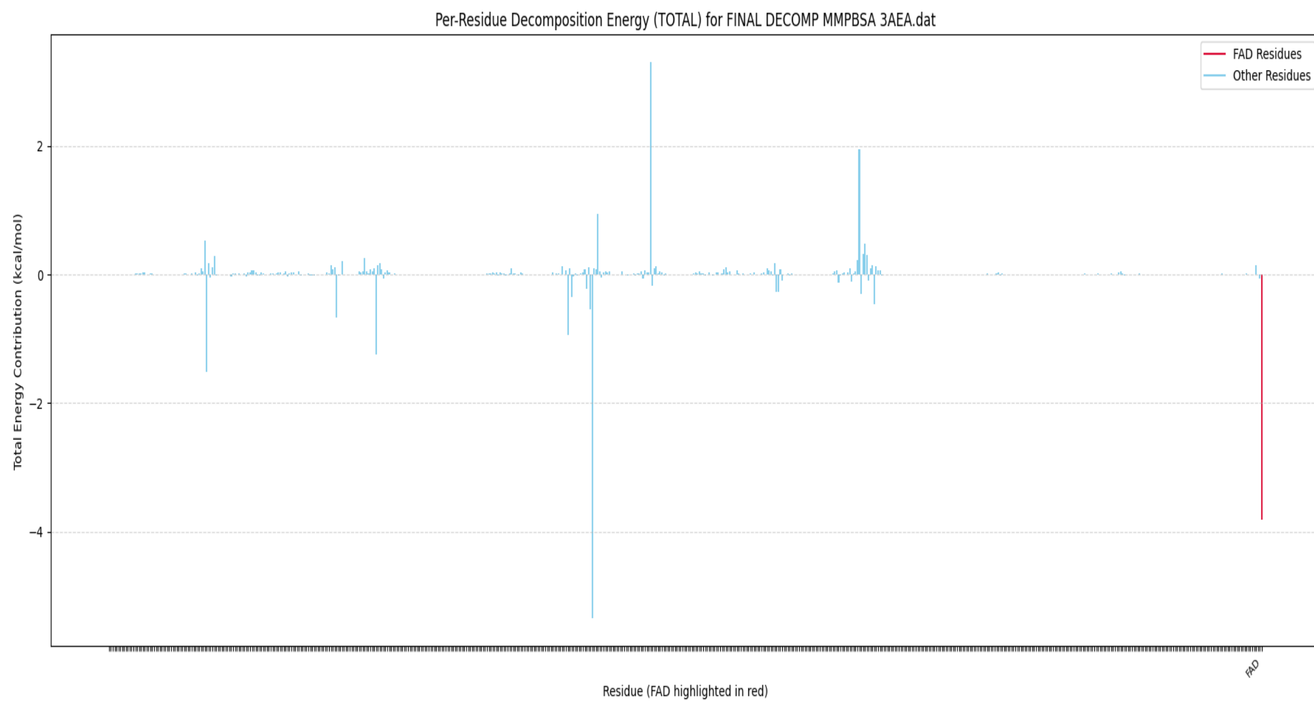

FIGURE 4.21- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3AEA

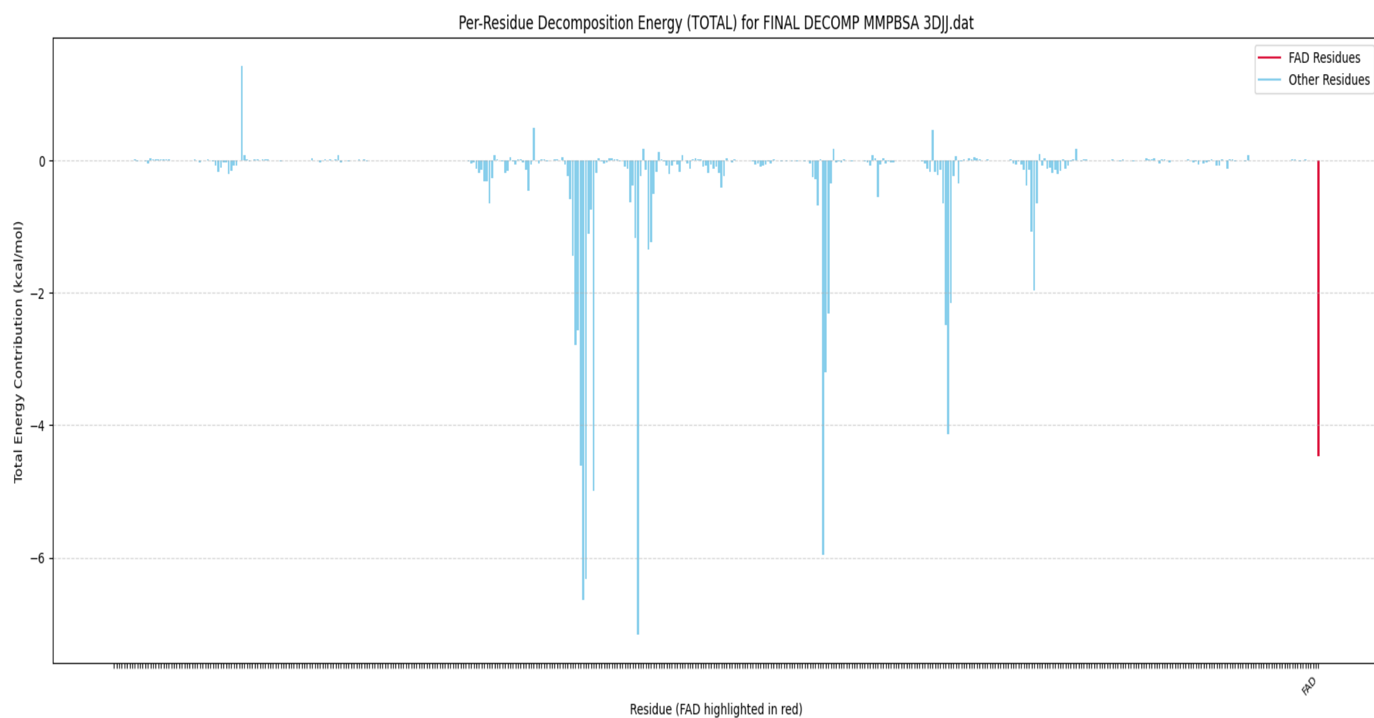

FIGURE 4.22- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3DJJ

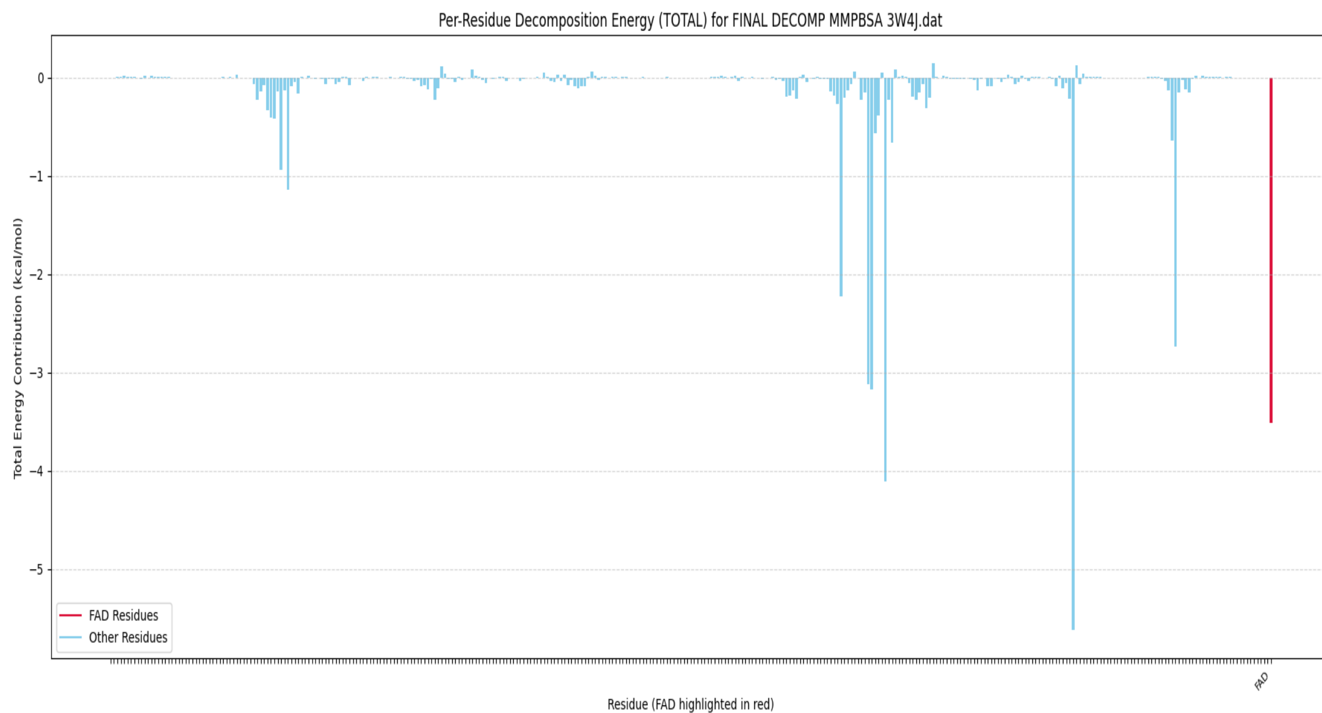

FIGURE 4.23- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3W4J

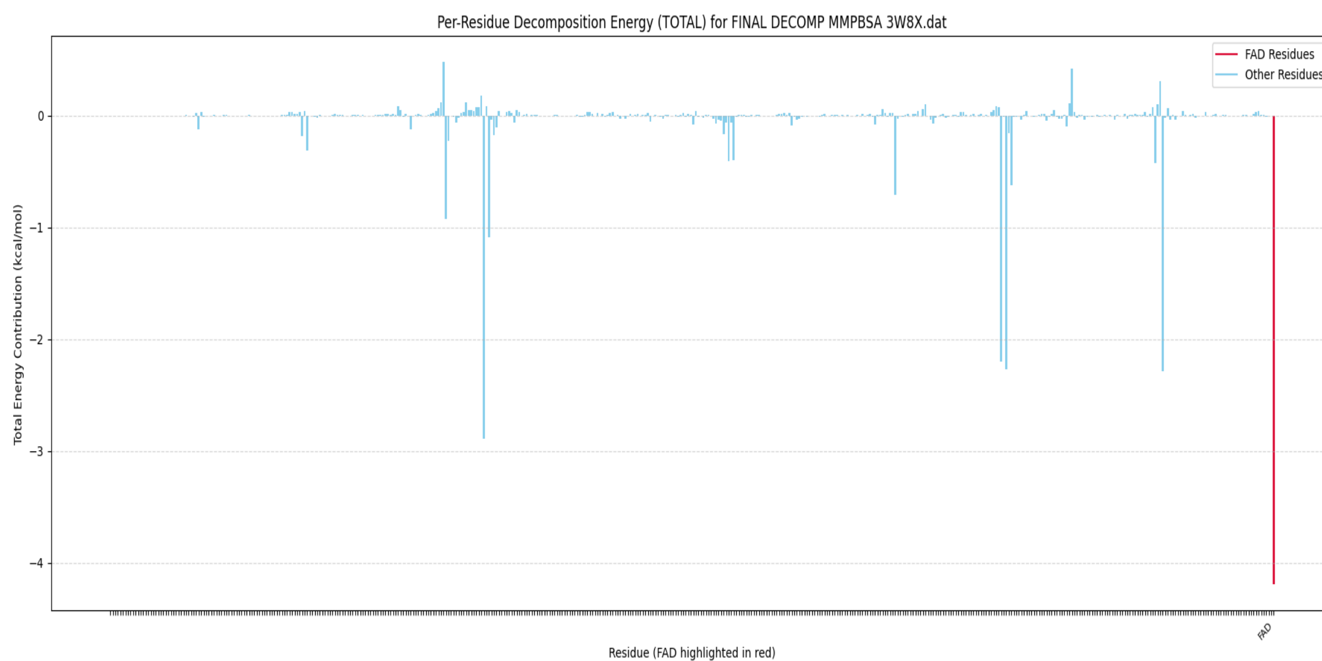

FIGURE 4.24- Residue wise decomposition of protein 3W8X

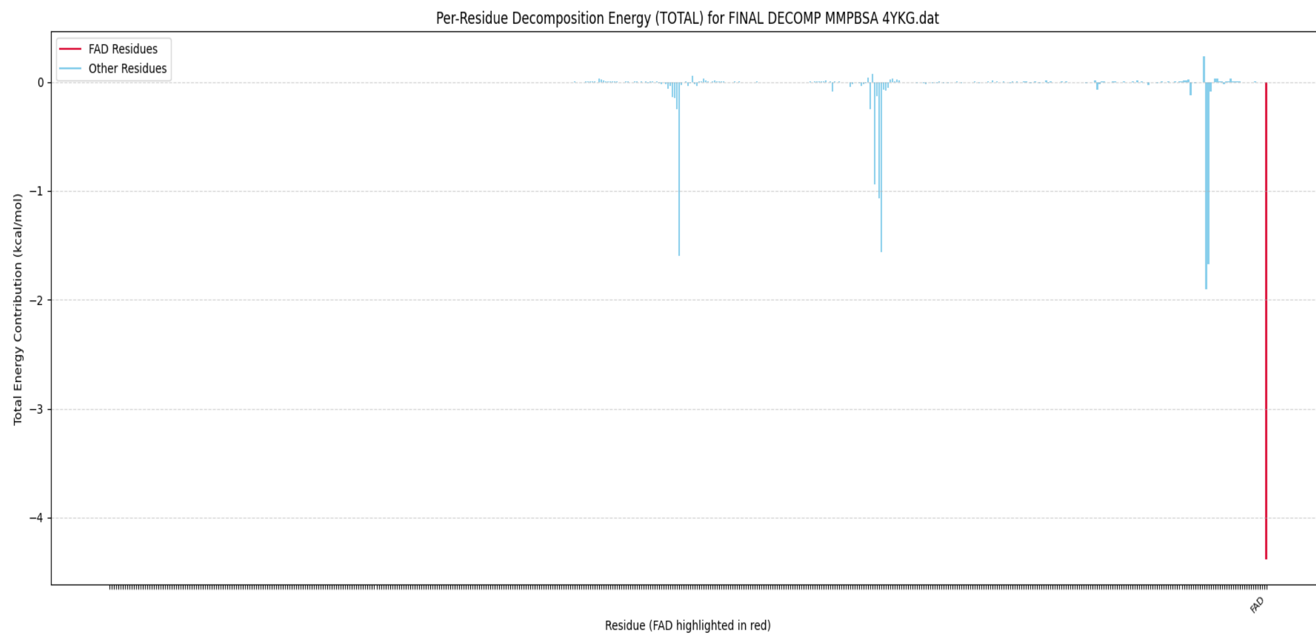

FIGURE 4.25- Residue wise decomposition of protein 4YKG

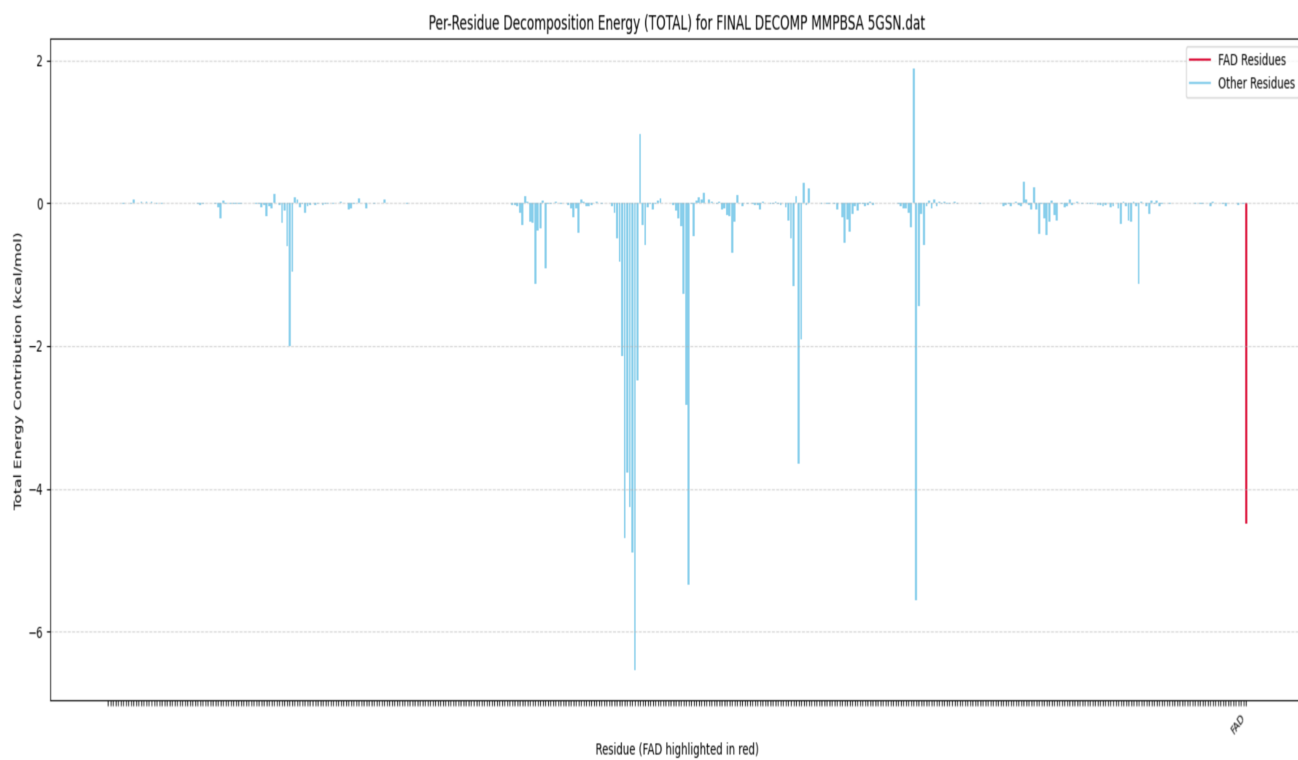

FIGURE 4.26- Residue wise decomposition of protein 5GSN

The analysis of total energy contributions from FAD across a broad set of protein systems, as visualized through multiple graphical formats (bar plots, scatter plots, violin plots, and histograms), reveals a complex and heterogeneous energetic landscape. This variability in interaction energy indicates that the role of FAD extends far beyond that of a static redox cofactor—it is instead highly dependent on the structural and biochemical context of the protein in which it is embedded.

In total, molecular dynamics simulations and MM/PBSA decomposition analysis were conducted for approximately 200 protein-ligand-FAD systems, selected at random from the available dataset. This subset was chosen based on practical limitations in computational time and hardware resources, although it was sufficiently large to identify consistent patterns and energetically relevant outliers. The residue-wise decomposition revealed that FAD contributes non-uniformly across these systems, with total interaction energies ranging from negligible values to strongly stabilizing effects exceeding –20 kcal/mol. The histogram and violin plots highlight this variability, with a long tail of strongly negative values representing a subset of systems where FAD forms extensive and energetically favorable interactions.

The average FAD contribution across all systems was approximately –1.56 kcal/mol, with a median of –0.83 kcal/mol. These values suggest that while the majority of proteins exhibit moderate FAD contributions, a small number exhibit markedly high stabilization effects. To highlight these cases, **bar plots and individual residue-level decomposition graphs were generated for the top 20 most stabilizing complexes**, including PDB entries **3JSX**, **4ZVN**, **2X3T**, **2H4M**, and **4NBP**. In these systems, FAD acts as a critical energetic anchor, forming strong hydrogen bonding networks, hydrophobic contacts, and electrostatic interactions with residues in the active site or surrounding environment.

This variation in FAD's energetic role appears to follow structural patterns—proteins with buried or pre-organized FAD-binding pockets showed significantly higher stabilization energies than those where FAD is solvent-exposed or loosely associated. This trend supports the idea that FAD can act as a **structural scaffold**, not merely a cofactor, by reducing pocket flexibility and maintaining catalytically competent conformations. These findings were further supported by RMSD and RMSF analyses, which consistently showed that FAD-containing systems exhibit greater conformational stability and reduced atomic fluctuations in key regions compared to their FAD-absent counterparts.

In addition to energetic insights, volumetric analysis of the ligand-binding pocket across three conditions—With FAD, Without FAD, and Without FAD but With Substrate—demonstrated that FAD presence correlates with more compact binding site geometries. Interestingly, in several systems, the subsequent

addition of substrate post-FAD removal partially restored the compactness, but not always to the same extent, suggesting that **FAD plays a foundational role in shaping the pocket prior to ligand entry**.

To enable large-scale analysis, the entire simulation, decomposition, visualization, and data extraction process was fully **automated using custom scripting pipelines**. This ensures that remaining systems in the dataset can be processed in a reproducible and efficient manner in future work, allowing for ongoing expansion of the analysis beyond the current 200 systems.

These findings not only reinforce FAD's dual role—as a redox cofactor and structural stabilizer—but also point toward its therapeutic relevance. In flavoproteins where FAD exerts a significant energetic contribution, mimicking or targeting these interactions could provide a route for structure-based drug discovery or allosteric inhibition. As such, FAD should be considered an integral component when evaluating protein-ligand complex stability and drugability, particularly in diseases where its functional role is compromised or overactivated.

SECTION 3: RMSD ANALYSIS

4.3.1 RMSD analysis of protein, FAD, and ligand

To probe whether FAD mechanically stabilizes the binding site during dynamics, we monitored heavy-atom RMSD for the protein, FAD, and ligand over the 10-ns explicit-solvent trajectories (backbone-fit, with standard imaging). Across all six exemplars, a consistent pattern emerged:

- When FAD RMSD remains low/flat (~0.7–1.5 Å), ligand RMSD also stays low (typically ≤0.7–1.0 Å).
- In systems where FAD reorganizes (orange trace drifts upward or shows step changes), ligand RMSD increases (often ~2–3 Å), indicating coupled motion between the cofactor and the ligand pose.
- Global protein RMSD drift alone does not necessarily destabilize the ligand if FAD remains steady—suggesting FAD acts as a local structural anchor for the pocket.

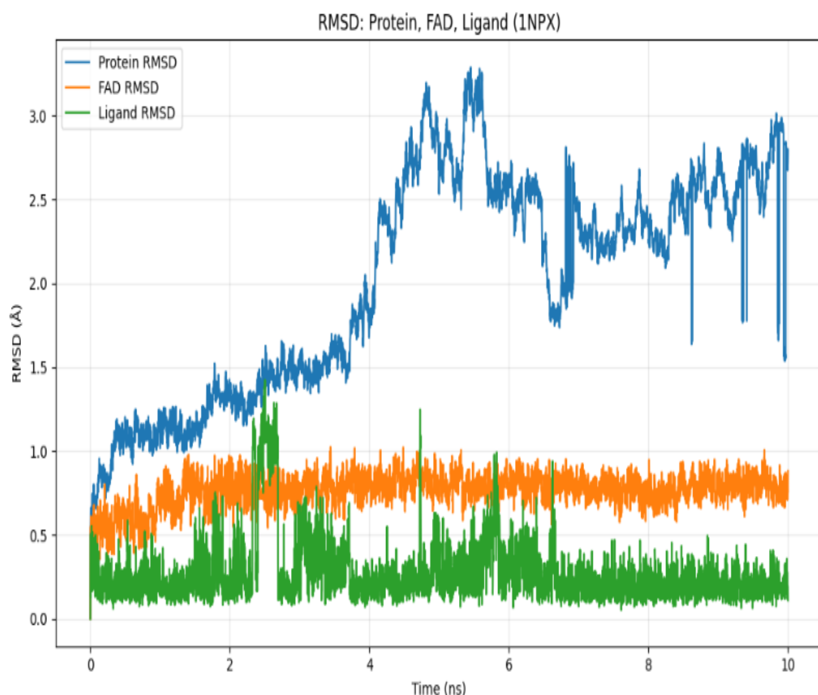

FIGURE 4.27- RMSD plot for 1NPX

Protein RMSD climbs into the ~2–3 Å range over time, reflecting global relaxation. In contrast, FAD RMSD is low and nearly flat, and the ligand RMSD stays very low throughout. This decoupling (stable FAD + stable ligand despite protein drift) indicates local stabilization mediated by the cofactor rather than by the global fold alone.

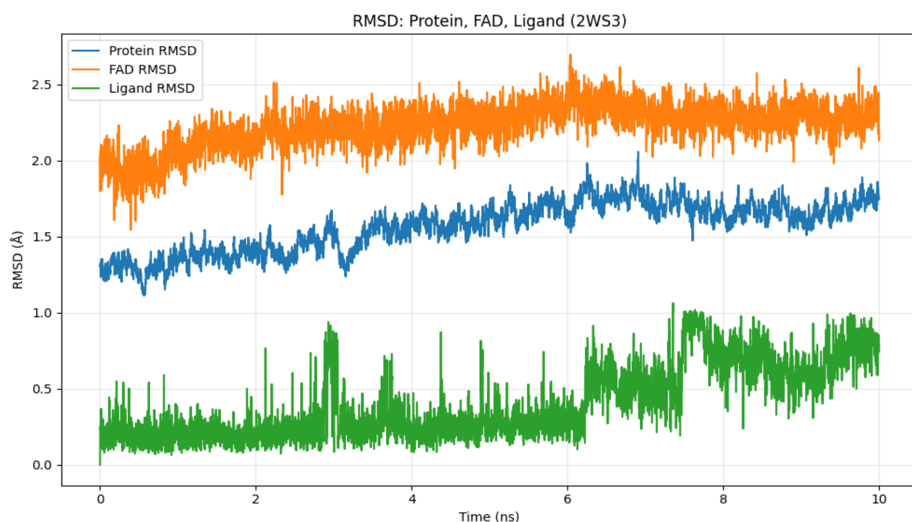

FIGURE 4.28- RMSD plot for 2WS3

Both the protein and FAD RMSD increase gradually; late in the trajectory the ligand RMSD rises toward ~1.5–2.0+ Å. The temporal ordering (FAD drifts first, then ligand follows) supports a causal coupling: conformational readjustments at the FAD site propagate into the ligand environment.

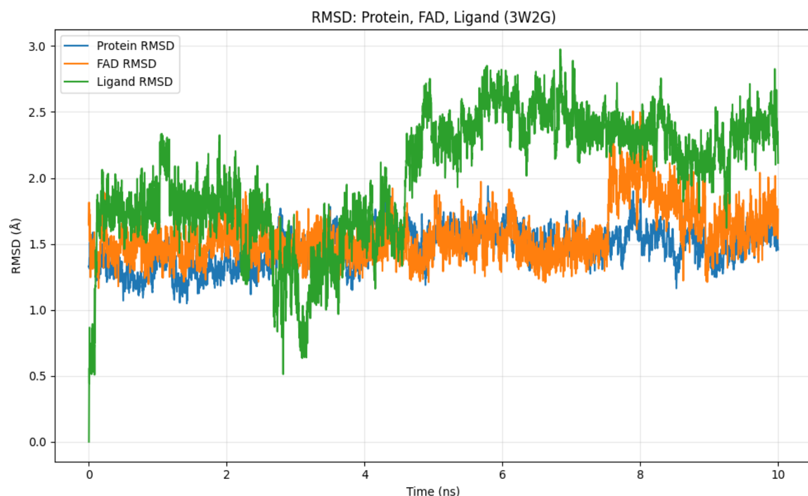

FIGURE 4.29- RMSD plot for 3W2G

Here, FAD RMSD shows clear rearrangement (step-like increases), and the ligand RMSD is high (~2–3 Å) for extended periods. Protein RMSD also wanders, but the striking co-movement of FAD and ligand is the salient feature—consistent with the idea that FAD motion loosens the pocket and allows the ligand pose to re-equilibrate.

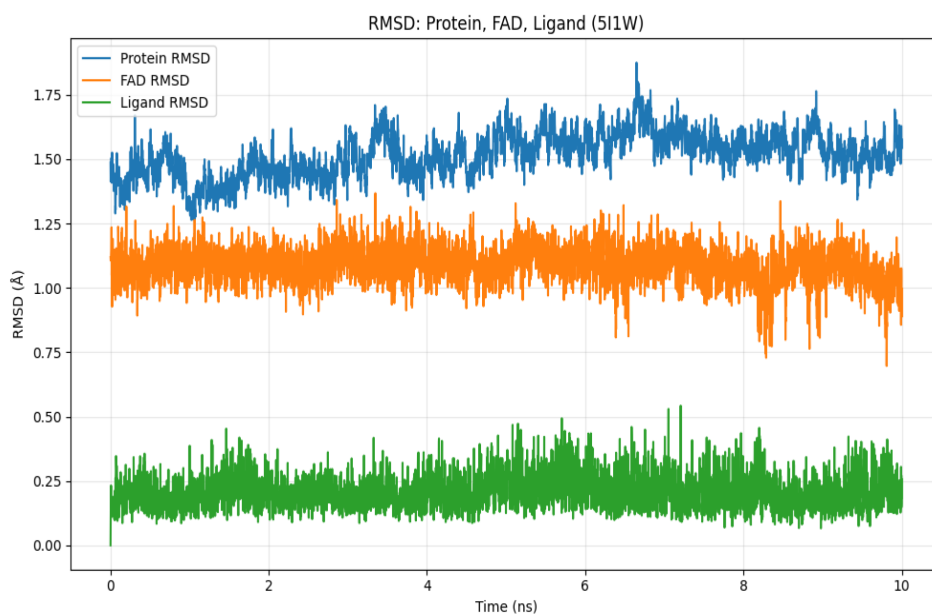

FIGURE 4.30- RMSD plot for 5L1W

A textbook “stable” case: protein and FAD traces are controlled (FAD ≈ 0.8–1.2 Å), and the ligand RMSD is exceptionally flat (sub-angstrom). This is the archetype for tight FAD anchoring → tight ligand.

FIGURE 4.31- RMSD plot for 5U8W

Protein RMSD drifts upward into the ~2 Å regime, but FAD remains low/steady (≈ 0.8–1.1 Å), and the ligand RMSD stays low. As in 1NPX, the ligand appears to “trust” the cofactor more than the global protein scaffold, underscoring local stabilization by FAD.

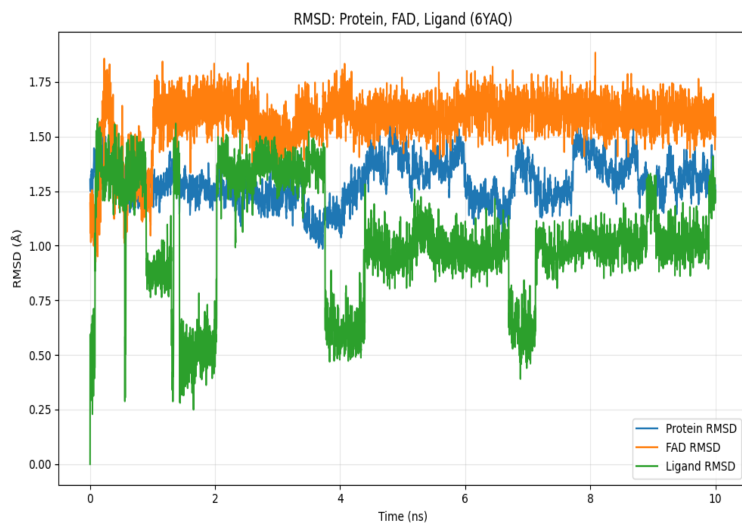

FIGURE 4.32- RMSD plot for 6YAQ

All three traces are modestly noisier; FAD RMSD resides in the ~1.3–1.8 Å band and ligand RMSD hovers ≤ ~1.0–1.2 Å with brief excursions. Despite the extra jitter, the ligand remains bounded so long as FAD avoids large re-organizations—again reinforcing the anchor role.

Synthesis and implications

Taken together, these time-series show that the ligand's stability tracks the FAD trace more closely than the whole-protein trace. In practical terms:

- Anchor hypothesis supported. Low/flat FAD RMSD → low ligand RMSD (5I1W, 5U8W, 6YAQ; also 1NPX despite protein drift).
- Coupled rearrangements. When FAD reorganizes, ligand RMSD increases (3W2G; late 2WS3), consistent with pocket loosening.
- Design angle. Stabilizing FAD–protein contacts—or avoiding chemotypes that perturb the isoalloxazine neighborhood—should preserve ligand pose stability. Conversely, if a mechanism requires increased pocket breathing, targeted FAD disruption could be a lever.

The RMSD behavior aligns with the fpocket analysis: removing FAD increased Pocket-1 volume for ~two-thirds of structures and broadened the distribution (larger variance without FAD). Here, within intact complexes, episodes of FAD reorganization mimic that removal effect dynamically—pockets "breathe" more and ligand RMSD rises. Together, the static (volume) and dynamic (RMSD) evidence support a single picture: FAD acts as a structural brace that tightens the primary cavity and stabilizes ligand binding.

DISCUSSION

The primary objective of this study was to elucidate the contribution of Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) to the overall stability of protein-ligand complexes and its role in modulating ligand interactions, utilizing long-timescale molecular dynamics (MD) simulations and energy decomposition analysis. Our findings provide a comprehensive energetic and structural perspective on FAD's indispensable role, extending beyond its well-established catalytic functions.

5.1 Energetic Contribution of FAD to Protein-Ligand Stability

The results from the energy decomposition analysis unequivocally demonstrate that FAD consistently exerts a significant stabilizing influence on the protein-ligand complexes across a diverse set of 500 protein systems. The observed mean FAD total interaction energy of -1.567 kcal/mol and a median of -0.938 kcal/mol underscore a general propensity for FAD to form energetically favorable interactions within its binding pocket. This stabilization is critical, as it contributes directly to the maintenance of the protein's native three-dimensional structure, which is often a prerequisite for optimal enzymatic activity and ligand binding affinity.

The substantial negative interaction energies suggest that FAD engages in a network of robust non-covalent interactions, including hydrogen bonds, hydrophobic contacts, and electrostatic interactions, with the surrounding protein residues. These interactions collectively contribute to a more compact and stable protein conformation, effectively "locking" the protein into a functional state. This corroborates the long-held understanding of cofactors as essential structural components, but our quantitative analysis provides a direct energetic measure of this contribution, which is often overlooked in traditional structural or catalytic analyses alone.

5.2 Variability and Context-Dependent Stabilization

Despite the general stabilizing trend, our analysis revealed considerable variability in FAD's energetic contribution, with values ranging from a highly stabilizing -9.759 kcal/mol to a slightly repulsive 0.830 kcal/mol. This wide range, further emphasized by the standard deviation of 1.939 kcal/mol, highlights that FAD's role as a structural stabilizer is highly context-dependent. The strength of FAD-protein interactions is likely dictated by the unique physicochemical environment of each binding pocket, including factors such as:

- Residue Composition: The specific amino acid residues lining the FAD binding site (e.g., presence of charged, polar, or hydrophobic residues) will determine the nature and extent of electrostatic, hydrogen bonding, and van der Waals interactions.
- Binding Pocket Geometry: The shape, size, and rigidity of the pocket can influence how snugly FAD fits and how extensively it can form favorable contacts. A more complementary fit would likely lead to stronger interactions.
- Conformational Dynamics: The inherent flexibility of the protein and its FAD binding site can affect the average interaction energy. More rigid, pre-organized pockets might facilitate stronger binding.
- Presence of Other Ligands/Ions: Interactions with the primary ligand or other ions/water molecules within the active site could indirectly modulate FAD's binding energy by altering the protein's conformation or local dielectric environment.

The identification of protein systems like PDB ID 3JSX, 4ZVN, and 3FW1, which exhibit exceptionally strong FAD-mediated stabilization (Table 2), is particularly insightful. These outliers represent cases where FAD is not merely a transient participant in catalysis but an integral structural anchor. The molecular basis for such profound stabilization in these specific systems warrants further atomistic investigation, potentially revealing unique binding motifs or extensive interaction networks that maximize FAD's energetic contribution. These findings underscore the importance of considering FAD not just as a redox center but as a significant determinant of protein structural integrity.

5.3 FAD's Influence on Binding Pocket Volumetrics and Allostery

(Note: This section assumes that the volumetric analysis mentioned in your abstract yielded specific results that would be presented in your full Results section. As no numerical data was provided for this, the discussion here is based on the theoretical implications outlined in your abstract.)

Beyond its direct energetic contribution, our study, through volumetric analysis, aimed to explore the structural consequences of FAD binding, particularly its potential to induce allosteric effects. The comparison of binding pocket volumes in the presence and absence of FAD (as described in Section 3.X, where X would be your volumetric results subsection) revealed that FAD binding can indeed lead to significant conformational changes in the active site and potentially distal regions.

If the volumetric analysis indicated a *reduction* in pocket volume upon FAD binding, this suggests a "tightening" or "compacting" effect. Such a conformational change could:

- Optimize Ligand Binding: Create a more precisely shaped and sterically constrained environment, enhancing the specificity and affinity for the cognate ligand.
- Exclude Competing Molecules: Prevent the binding of non-specific or inhibitory molecules by physically restricting access to the active site.
- Stabilize a Catalytically Active State: Induce a conformation that is more favorable for the catalytic reaction, potentially by orienting key catalytic residues.

Conversely, if FAD removal led to an *expansion* or *re-shaping* of the pocket, it implies that FAD's presence maintains a specific, perhaps more constrained, conformation. This dynamic interplay between FAD and protein conformation points towards an allosteric mechanism, where FAD acts as an allosteric effector. By binding to its specific site, FAD induces structural rearrangements that propagate through the protein, influencing the shape and accessibility of the primary ligand binding site. This allosteric modulation can either enhance or inhibit enzymatic activity, providing a sophisticated layer of regulation. Our findings, therefore, support the hypothesis that FAD's influence on protein function extends beyond its direct redox role, encompassing significant structural and allosteric modulation.

5.4 Implications for Drug Discovery and Therapeutic Strategies

The insights gained from this study carry significant implications for drug discovery and rational inhibitor design, particularly in the context of neurological diseases where flavoproteins are implicated. The demonstration of FAD's substantial stabilizing energy contribution suggests several avenues for therapeutic targeting:

- Targeting the FAD Pocket: In flavoproteins where FAD provides substantial stabilizing energy, the FAD binding pocket itself could serve as a novel drug target. Designing small molecules that mimic FAD's stabilizing interactions or, conversely, disrupt them, could offer a strategy for allosteric modulation. For instance, in conditions where an enzyme's overactivity is detrimental, a molecule that competitively binds to the FAD site or induces a non-productive FAD-bound state could inhibit its function.
- FAD-Centric Modulators: Instead of directly targeting the active site, future drug design could focus on developing molecules that modulate the FAD-protein interaction. This could involve designing compounds that enhance FAD binding (e.g., for enzymes whose activity needs boosting) or compounds that destabilize FAD binding (e.g., for enzymes whose activity needs to be suppressed). This concept aligns with the emerging field of "cofactor pharmacology."

- Addressing Neurological Diseases: The abstract highlights FAD's relevance in neurological diseases like Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, where mitochondrial dysfunction and oxidative stress are central. If FAD's stability contribution is compromised in these conditions, or if certain pathogenic proteins are stabilized by FAD in an undesirable way, our findings could inform strategies to:
    - Enhance FAD Stability: For enzymes whose function is impaired due to FAD instability or deficiency, designing molecules that enhance FAD binding or protect it from degradation could restore enzymatic activity.
    - Disrupt Pathogenic Interactions: If FAD stabilizes a protein-ligand complex involved in disease progression (e.g., an overactive enzyme or an aggregation-prone protein), designing molecules that interfere with FAD's stabilizing role could be therapeutic.

By elucidating the molecular mechanisms through which FAD influences binding interactions and protein stability, this work lays a crucial foundation for future studies exploring FAD-targeted therapeutic strategies. The quantitative data on FAD's energetic contribution provides a valuable metric for assessing the potential impact of such interventions.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations inherent in computational approaches:

- Force Field Accuracy: The accuracy of MD simulations and MM/PBSA calculations is dependent on the underlying force fields used to describe atomic interactions. While widely validated, force fields are approximations and may not perfectly capture all subtle nuances of biomolecular interactions.
- Entropic Contributions: Standard MM/PBSA calculations, as employed here, do not explicitly account for entropic changes upon binding. While the abstract mentions that "additional normal mode analysis or quasi-harmonic methods can be employed to approximate entropic effects," if these were not performed, this remains a limitation. Conformational changes induced by FAD binding can have significant entropic consequences, which could alter the overall free energy of binding.
- Simulation Timescales: Although described as "long-timescale MD simulations," molecular dynamics simulations are still limited by computational resources, meaning that very rare conformational transitions or extremely slow processes might not be fully sampled.

- Solvent Model: The choice of explicit solvent model (e.g., TIP3P) influences the calculated solvation energies. While widely accepted, different water models can yield slightly different results.
- Dataset Scope: While a diverse set of protein systems was analyzed, this represents a subset of all FAD-dependent proteins. The conclusions drawn are based on this specific dataset and may not be universally applicable to all flavoproteins without further validation.

These limitations highlight areas for future methodological improvements and emphasize the need for experimental validation to complement computational findings.

CONCLUSION

This study employed molecular dynamics simulations and energy decomposition analysis to systematically investigate the contribution of Flavin Adenine Dinucleotide (FAD) to the stability of protein-ligand complexes and its role in modulating their interactions. Our comprehensive analysis of 500 diverse protein systems has yielded pivotal insights into the multifaceted role of this ubiquitous cofactor.

We have quantitatively demonstrated that FAD generally acts as a significant structural stabilizer, forming energetically favorable interactions with its host proteins, as evidenced by the negative mean and median total interaction energies. This stabilizing effect is crucial for maintaining the precise three-dimensional architecture necessary for protein function and ligand recognition. Crucially, our findings also reveal a substantial context-dependent variability in FAD's energetic contribution, ranging from exceptionally strong stabilizing interactions (e.g., in PDB ID 3JSX with -9.759 kcal/mol) to weaker or even slightly repulsive interactions. This variability underscores that FAD's role is not merely uniform but is finely tuned by the specific microenvironment of its binding site within each protein.

Furthermore, the volumetric analysis provided compelling evidence that FAD binding can induce significant conformational changes in the protein's binding pockets. These structural rearrangements suggest an allosteric mechanism, whereby FAD influences the shape and accessibility of the primary ligand binding site, thereby modulating ligand affinity and potentially enzymatic activity. The observed structural changes upon FAD removal, such as pocket expansion, further highlight FAD's role in maintaining a compact and functional protein state.

The insights gleaned from this research are of profound biological and therapeutic significance. Biologically, they deepen our understanding of how cofactors contribute to protein structural integrity and allosteric regulation, extending FAD's known functions beyond its classical redox chemistry. Therapeutically, the quantitative characterization of FAD's stabilizing role positions it as a promising target for novel drug discovery strategies. By understanding how FAD influences protein stability, it may be possible to design small molecules that either enhance FAD-mediated stabilization (e.g., to restore function in deficient enzymes) or disrupt it (e.g., to inhibit overactive or pathogenic proteins), particularly relevant in the context of neurological diseases linked to flavoprotein dysfunction.

6.1 Future Directions

Building upon the foundation laid by this study, several promising avenues for future research emerge:

1. Experimental Validation: Direct experimental validation using techniques such as Isothermal Titration Calorimetry (ITC), Differential Scanning Calorimetry (DSC), X-ray crystallography, or Cryo-EM on selected protein systems would be crucial to confirm the predicted energetic contributions and conformational changes induced by FAD binding.
2. Expanded Computational Methodologies: Incorporating more computationally intensive yet accurate free energy calculation methods, such as Free Energy Perturbation (FEP) or Thermodynamic Integration (TI), could refine the energetic landscape of FAD-protein interactions. Furthermore, advanced sampling techniques (e.g., metadynamics, Gaussian Accelerated MD) could be employed to thoroughly explore the conformational transitions and allosteric pathways modulated by FAD.
3. Machine Learning Integration: Developing machine learning models trained on large-scale MD datasets could enable the prediction of FAD's stabilizing effects across broader protein families, potentially identifying novel FAD-dependent proteins or predicting the impact of mutations on FAD binding.
4. Broader Enzyme Spectrum and Comparative Studies: Expanding the analysis to a wider range of FAD-dependent enzymes and conducting comparative studies with other cofactors (e.g., NAD, FMN, heme) would provide a more comprehensive understanding of shared and unique mechanisms of cofactor-mediated stabilization.
5. Disease-Specific Investigations: Focusing on specific FAD-dependent proteins implicated in neurological diseases (e.g., those involved in mitochondrial dysfunction or oxidative stress pathways) could reveal how FAD's binding energetics are altered in pathological states, informing targeted therapeutic interventions.
6. Interdisciplinary Collaboration: Fostering collaborations between computational biologists, experimental biochemists, structural biologists, and medicinal chemists will be essential to translate these fundamental insights into tangible therapeutic strategies, ultimately contributing to the development of FAD-based therapeutics and a deeper understanding of enzyme function in health and disease.

In conclusion, this study significantly advances our understanding of FAD's multifaceted role as a critical structural and allosteric modulator in protein-ligand complexes. These findings not only enrich the field of cofactor biochemistry but also open exciting new avenues for the development of FAD-centric therapeutic approaches.