



Financial Security among UCSD Undergraduates, 2025: Qualitative and Mixed Methods Studies

PH BH BSPH honors Practicum students

June 3 and 5, 2025

Background

- In February 2025, Public Health Honors Practicum students conducted a survey of 770 public health and economics students
- 5-student teams examined the following topics:
 - Student financial literacy
 - How students are paying for their education, attitudes about student loans, and where they turn when facing financial difficulties
 - Prevalence of student employment and its impact on finances, career development, and well-being
 - Risk factors for financial insecurity and its impact on academic performance and physical and mental health
 - [Results available here](#)

In-depth Qualitative and Mixed Methods Studies

- Based on results of the quantitative study, five topics identified for additional in-depth qualitative or mixed methods study
- Four qualitative studies, presented on 6/3 and 6/5
 - [Understanding student financial insecurity through student voices \(key informant interviews\)](#)
 - [UCSD student food choice and spending \(photovoice\)](#)
 - [Loan debt impact among UCSD alumni \(key informant interviews\)](#)
 - [Advice graduating seniors would give to incoming students about surviving financially at UCSD \(listing techniques, key informant interviews\)](#)
 - [Validity of self-reported financial literacy \(mixed methods, quantitative analysis\)](#)

You can click on links to go to the individual topic within these slides

From Struggle to Strategy: Understanding Student Financial Insecurity through Campus Voices

Michelle Griffith, Jessica Jatiram, Leanne Liaw, Lindsey Ruiz



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Background



- Financial insecurity is a growing concern among U.S. college campuses, impacting academic success, mental health, and overall well-being
 - **Over 50% of college students reported financial distress in 2024**
(National College Health Assessment)
- Key contributing factors include **rising tuition, limited affordable housing, and basic needs expenses**
- Financial aid and student employment **often fail** to adequately cover the cost of attendance

Rationale



- Limited research on how students navigate financial insecurity, access support, and manage competing academic and financial pressures
 - Quantitative studies **highlight prevalence but overlook students' lived experiences**
- Key informant interview approach allows for **insight into compounding influences** for financial insecurity among students
- Understanding UCSD students' personal stories will help guide **student-centered support services** and campus policies

Key Findings from Quantitative Study on Undergraduate Financial Insecurity

- Of 770 students surveyed, 36% were considered financially insecure
- Financially-insecure students were:
 - 6.5 times more likely to experience housing insecurity
 - 15 times more likely to experience very low food security
- 80% of financially insecure students knew of the Basic Needs Center
 - 32% of those students reported using its resources
- Prompted a qualitative study to explore the deeper, lived experiences and underlying causes of financial insecurity among UCSD students



Driving Questions For Qualitative Study

- What extent is financial insecurity an ongoing issue rather than an acute issue?
- What specific factors contribute to student financial insecurity?
- What resources do financially students commonly rely on and what are their barriers for access?
- What recommendations do students have for UC San Diego stakeholders to better address student financial insecurity?



Methodology



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Screening Process for Student Financial Insecurity Status



UC San Diego Undergraduates

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We want to hear from you!

Help improve student financial security by participating in a 30 minute confidential interview and earning a **\$5 Visa gift card!**

Who do we need?

- Current UCSD undergraduates who are 18 years or older and;
- Have experienced difficulties paying for food, housing, tuition, or other school-related expenses and/or;
- Have used government support to meet basic needs (e.g., CalFresh)



Scan here to participate!



CONTACT US FOR FURTHER INFORMATION AT LJRUIZ@UCSD.EDU

Qualtrics financial insecurity screening survey:

Have you ever experienced difficulties paying for food, housing, tuition, other school related expenses, or required government intervention to meet basic needs (ex. Calfresh)?

71

student responses to preliminary screening survey



18

students screened for financial insecurity consented to interview



10

students interviewed

Data Collection Methods



Participant Recruitment Process

Interview Guide

- Semi-structured with open-ended questions
- Questions formed based on objectives

Participant Identification

- Screening survey for UCSD undergraduates who have experienced financial strain during academic year
- Recruited via social media and screening survey/interviews ran from May 12 - May 25

Interview Conduct

- 30 minute 1-on-1 Zoom interviews
- Audio-recorded with participant consent
- Gift card incentive provided for participation

Data Collection Methods



Theme Development Process

Transcription & Preparation

- Interviews transcribed via Zoom with personally identifiable info removed for confidentiality
- Interview question example:
 - “When you’re experiencing financial strain, what steps do you usually take to manage or cope with the situation?”

Coding Process

- Participant responses compiled into one document and grouped by interview question
- Answers compared across participants

Theme Development

- Themes derived from patterns across interviews

Results

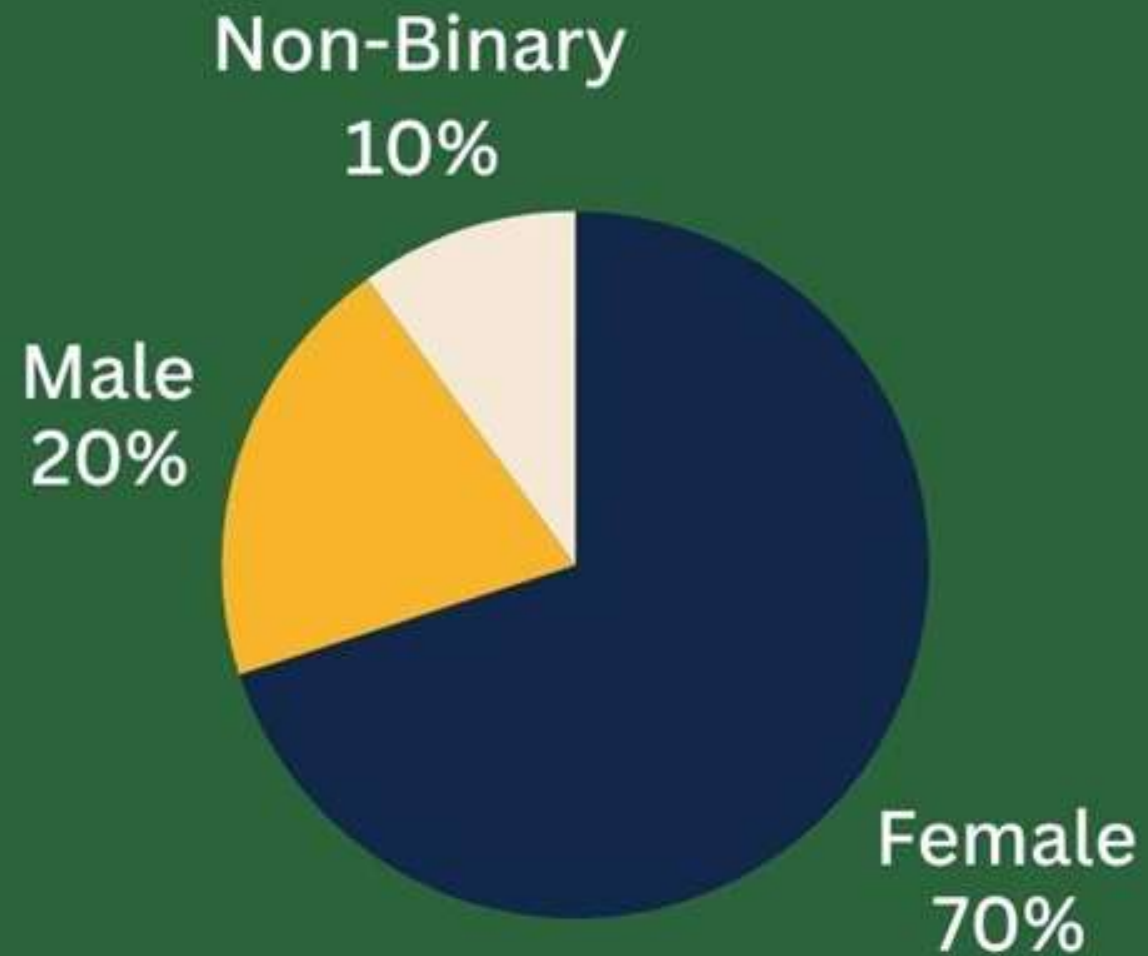


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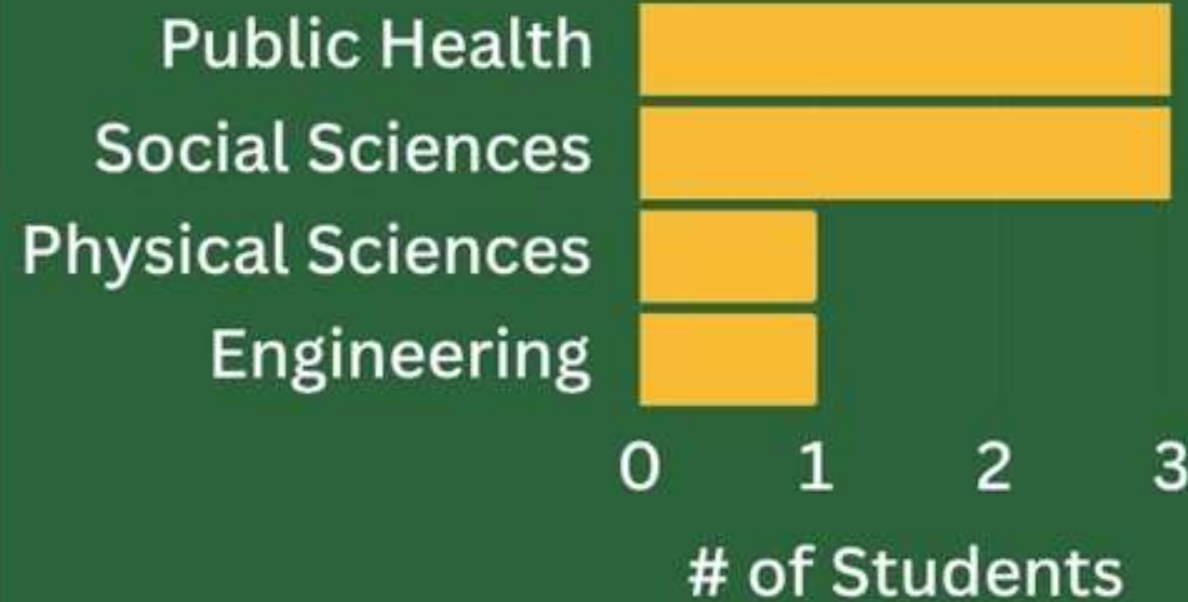
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Demographic Data

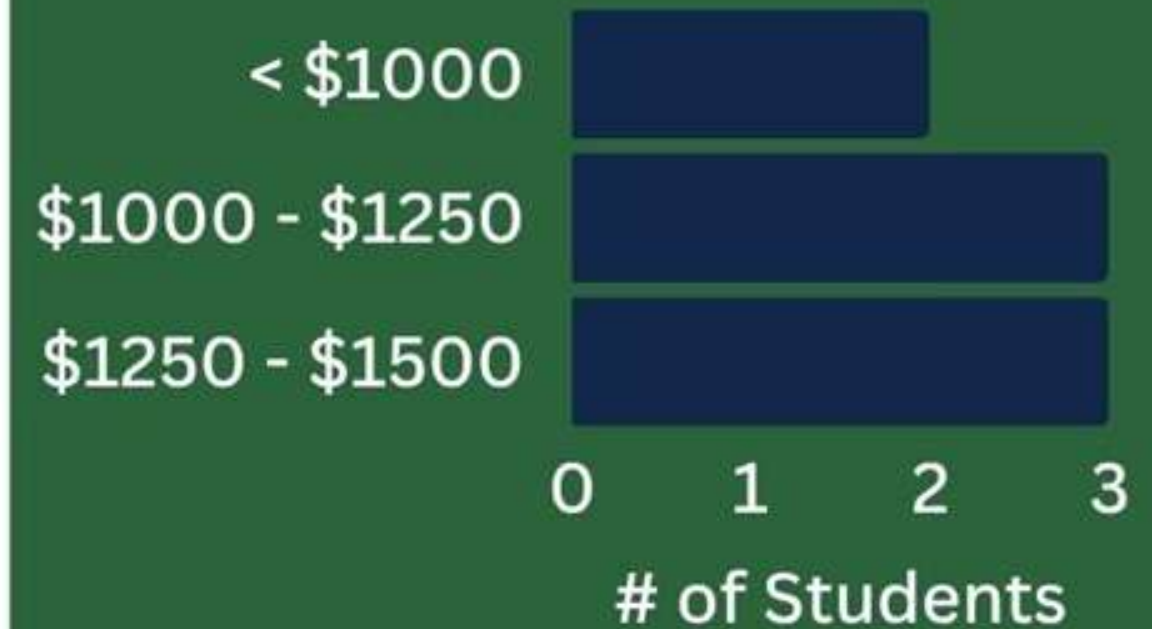
Gender identity distribution (N=10)



Major distribution (N=10)



Monthly rent distribution (N=8)



- 80% of students received financial aid
- 50% of students identified as transfer students
- All students identified as between the ages of 20-22, middle and/or working class, having housemates

Codebook

Theme 1:

Frequency of student financial insecurity



Theme 2:

Managing student income sources



Theme 3:

Unexpected financial stressors



Theme 4:

Student coping strategies when dealing with financial strain



Theme 5:

Student awareness and usage of campus resources



Theme 6:

Barriers to accessing resources



Theme 7:

Impact of financial insecurity on student wellbeing



Theme 8:

Student recommendations for improving finances



Theme 1: Frequency of student financial insecurity



Theme 1: Ongoing vs. short term experiences of financial insecurity

“I've struggled to make ends meet [for at least] one or two weeks every quarter, not just once or twice throughout the school year.”



Theme 2: Managing student income sources



Theme 2: Primary sources of income received

“My main source would probably be family contributions, and I also work.”

“I rely on my financial aid to help me pay my tuition and a little bit of parental support.”

“I get EBT food stamps [CalFresh]. I use that for my food, so I don't typically spend my personal money on food and stuff.”



Theme 2: Timing of receiving income sources

“I think [the timing] is pretty good. If I'm getting low in funds, then I know that I need to like slow down, and then usually I can budget it out a little bit better being paid bi-weekly. I think if I was paid once a month, it might be a little bit harder to make it last, but the bi-weekly is good.”



Theme 2: Budgeting and financial management

“I definitely need to keep track better [of my finances]. My only strategy is to look at my bank account and see when it hits a certain number ... I feel like there should be a [informational] course that’s mandatory and teaches you how to manage your finances.”



Theme 3: Unexpected financial stressors



Theme 3: Unexpected expenses

“I had to pay a lot more in taxes than I thought I would have to [due to the amount of financial aid I’ve taken out].”

“I have to pay for things differently than [when I was living] on-campus, like water, trash, and Wi-Fi, which is more expensive than it should be. Hygiene stuff ends up costing a lot [too].”



Theme 4: Student coping strategies when dealing with financial strain



Theme 4: Cutting personal costs

“Sometimes I would stretch out meals over a few days to avoid buying or spending money on food.”

“Honestly, probably just like restraining myself a little bit more with spending habits like cooking and making my coffee at home [instead of buying them somewhere].”



Theme 4: Increasing work hours

“I'll pick up more hours at work if I can,
but not always.”



Theme 5: Student awareness and use of campus resources



Theme 5: Lack of use and awareness of campus support services

“I've heard of the Basic Needs Hub, but I've never visited it, and I don't know that much about it. I've been to the Triton Food Pantry. I used to go there a lot when I lived on campus.”



Theme 5: Experience with CalFresh

“I use CalFresh. It was very easy. The sign-up process went by pretty quick. And then the interview went by fast and I was able to get accepted pretty quickly as well. So it's been a positive experience all throughout.”



Theme 6: Barriers to accessing resources



Theme 6: Stigma or discomfort in seeking help

“I just personally don't like being a ‘burden’ to other people ... when talking about certain things like that [financial troubles].”

“I have never gotten the impression that my parents wouldn't help me out financially but I don't want to put that pressure on them...”



Theme 6: Confusion about eligibility or application processes

“I've had a lot of other friends who got denied from CalFresh, even though they were rightfully very deserving of the benefits that CalFresh offered. So I think that's a challenge in terms of accessing CalFresh.”



Theme 6: Limited accessibility of resources

“I think it would be a little bit more convenient if the Food Pantry had consistent hours, or like, had the same opening hours every day ... just because sometimes it doesn't work with my schedule.”



Theme 7: Impact of financial insecurity on student wellbeing



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Theme 7: Stress about paying fees on time

“There has been times where I've been overly stressed regarding payments ... in terms of paying tuition late or rent late.”



Theme 7: Skipping or stretching out meals

“I would have to do more rationing with meals because I'd be a little bit low on [funds] ... so I'd have to stretch the meals that I already have into more days.”

“I have decided to skip meals because I didn't have enough money to go out or go grocery shopping.”



Theme 8: Student recommendations for improving financial wellness



Theme 8: Financial advising on campus

“I think financial literacy [should be highlighted], but not just like not just about you know what is budgeting, but more so like ... financial literacy counselors who work with you one-on-one to support your budget, and [ask] how that's going.”



Theme 8: Context on increasing financial insecurity awareness

“In our survey, we defined financial insecurity as not having enough money by the end of the month to cover basic needs such as food, housing, and other essential living expenses. Do you think this definition captures the full picture? Why or why not?”



Theme 8: Increasing financial insecurity awareness

“This [definition] definitely could be more detailed. I think it would help more people realize, ‘oh, maybe I'm actually not in a proper financial situation’ because it's so normalized to be like ‘oh, I'm broke after paying rent,’ or ‘I can't afford my meals at the end of the month and all that.’”



Limitations



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Limitations



- **Limited sample size**
- **Representativeness of students** who were willing to participate
- Issues of recall affected by recency or personal importance of events
- **Willingness of students to talk about sensitive topics**
- **Interviewer inconsistency in probing depth and breadth**

Conclusions



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Key Takeaways



- Financial stress is **ongoing**, not just occasional
- Students prefer to **adjust their spending habits** rather than **rely on campus resources**
- **Awareness** of campus resources or supplemental programs **does not guarantee** consistent use
- **Greater awareness and recognition** of student financial insecurity is needed to **encourage help-seeking behavior and peer support**
- Financial insecurity impacts student well-being by **increasing stress and food insecurity**
- Students seek practical and accessible solutions that directly address their needs

Final Recommendations

- Provide incoming students with **realistic cost information**
- Provide **adequate financial aid and paid work opportunities**
- Offer **1:1 financial guidance** through **financial peer counseling**
- Increase availability of financial wellness workshops and courses
- **Improve visibility and access to campus resources** (e.g., Triton Food Pantry, Basic Needs Center, etc.)

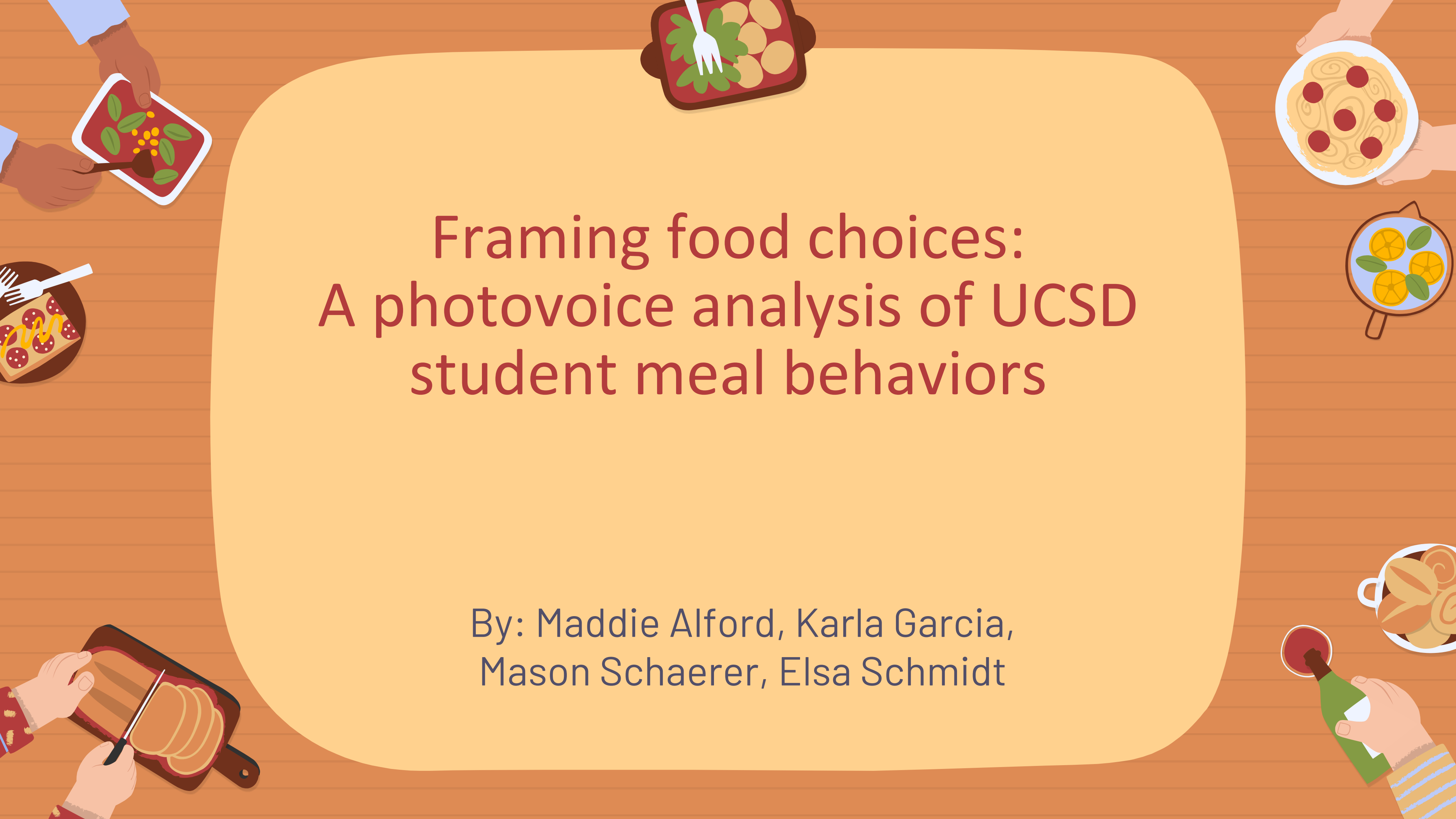


Thank you!



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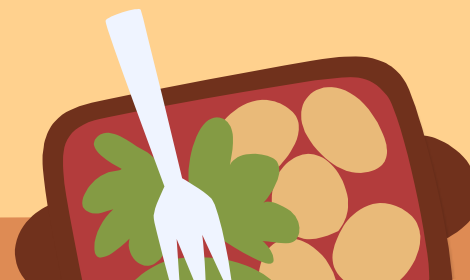
The background is a top-down illustration of a wooden table. In the top left, hands are shown preparing a dish in a white square dish with red sauce, green leaves, and yellow dots. In the top center, a hand uses a white fork to pick up a green leaf from a red tray containing yellow circles. In the top right, hands hold a white plate with a swirl of yellow sauce and five red dots. Below that, a small blue bowl contains yellow slices and green leaves. In the bottom left, hands are slicing a loaf of bread on a wooden cutting board. In the bottom right, a hand holds a green bottle next to a small red cup, with a white bowl of yellow food nearby.

Framing food choices: A photovoice analysis of UCSD student meal behaviors

By: Maddie Alford, Karla Garcia,
Mason Schaerer, Elsa Schmidt

Background

- 2025 BSPH financial insecurity survey
 - **32%** of UCSD students experienced food insecurity, which is many times greater than the general population
 - **29%** of students with a dining plan were food insecure
 - Food-insecure students showed higher rates of anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance
- UCSD Residential, Retail, and Supply Chain Services (RRSS) interested in understanding how students choose their meals



Research question and rationale

Research question:

- What are the main factors undergraduate students who live on-campus and have dining plans take into consideration when purchasing meals?

Rationale:

- RRSS reports that students ask for more affordable meals but don't often purchase them when offered
- If meal behaviors can be better understood, RRSS can create menus that students can afford and will engage with

Methods

Recruitment: UCSD undergraduate students

- Convenience sample of acquaintances contacted through SMS messaging
- Inclusion criteria: Lives on campus and has a dining plan
- Offered \$10 thank you gift card for participation

Study design: Photovoice survey

- Qualtrics survey with photo upload
- 48-hour data collection

Methods

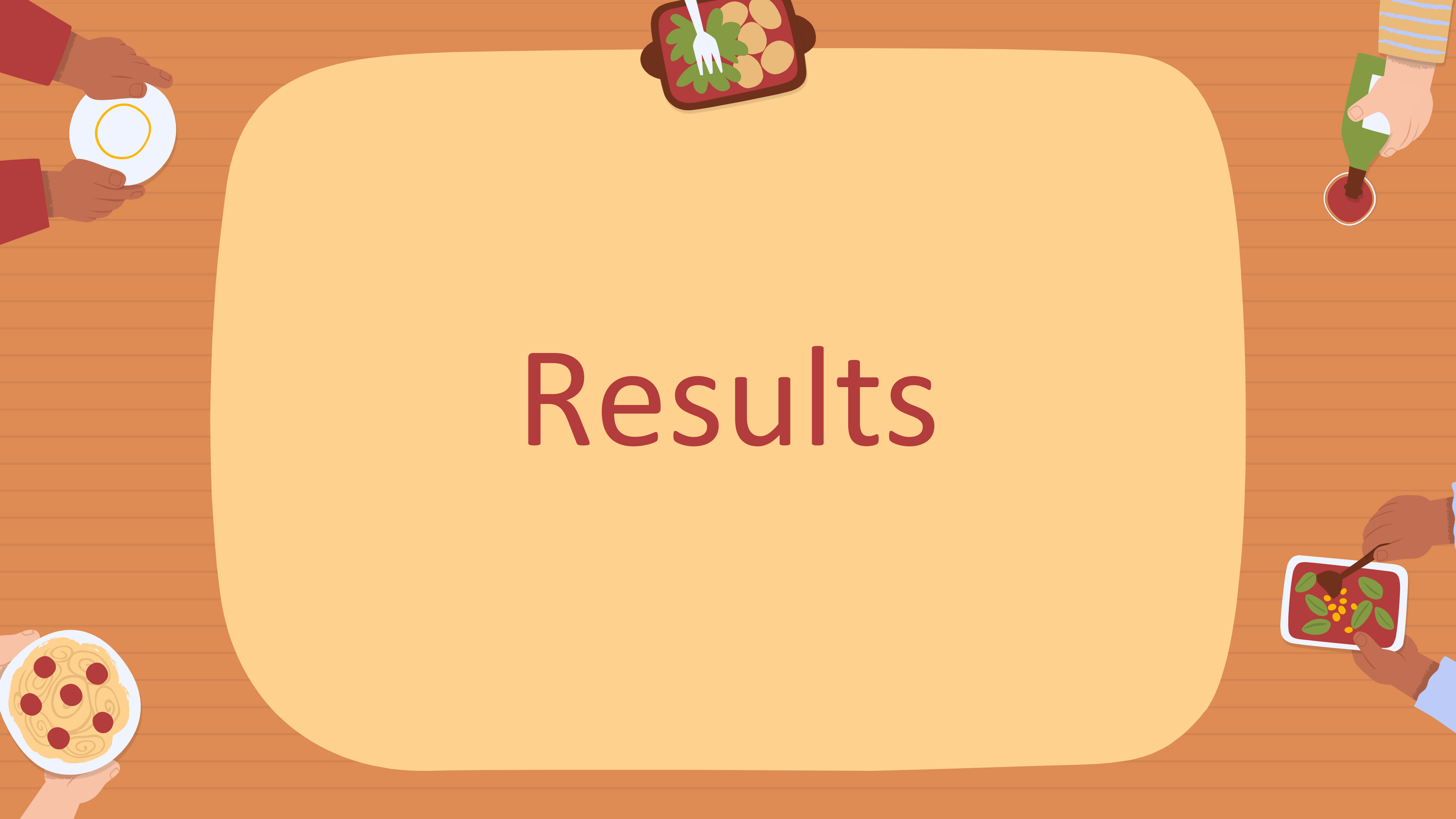
Procedure: Participants reminded 4 times via SMS over 2 days to:

- Upload photos of every meal
- Record price
- Write a few sentences describing why they chose the meal

Data analysis:

- 8 themes identified
- Descriptions manually coded into one or more of the 8 themes based on key phrases used
- Daily spending calculated for each student and examined overall and by meal plan

Results



Participant characteristics

Year at UCSD

17 respondents

Fourth

6%

Third

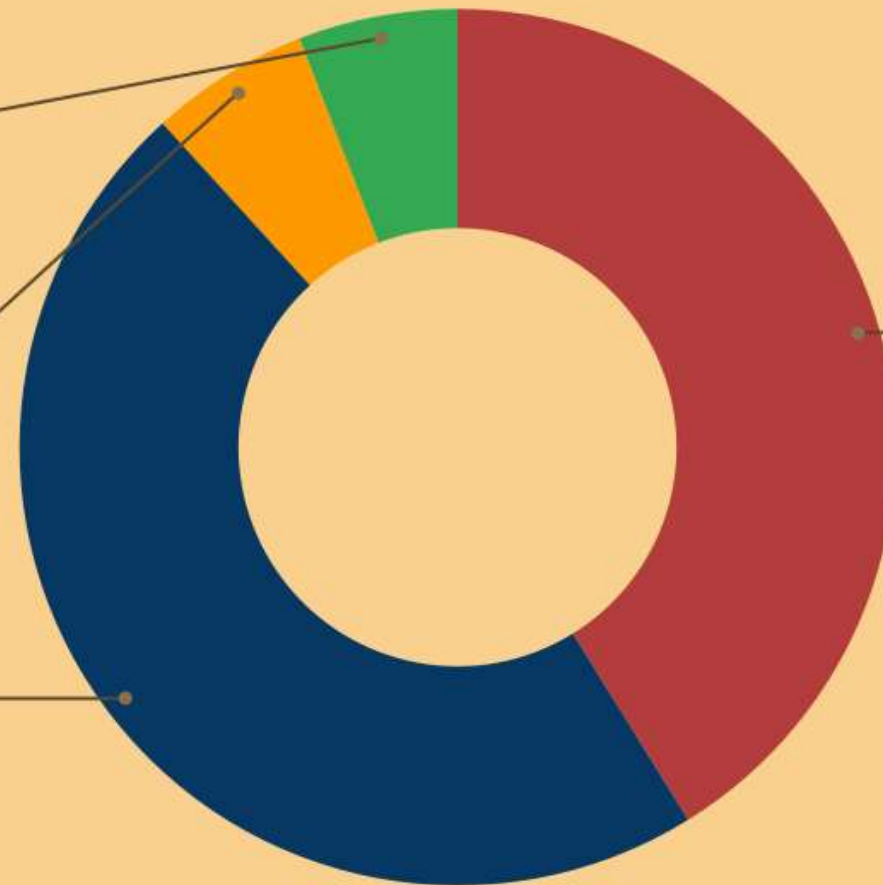
6%

Second

47%

First

42%



29%
Financially insecure



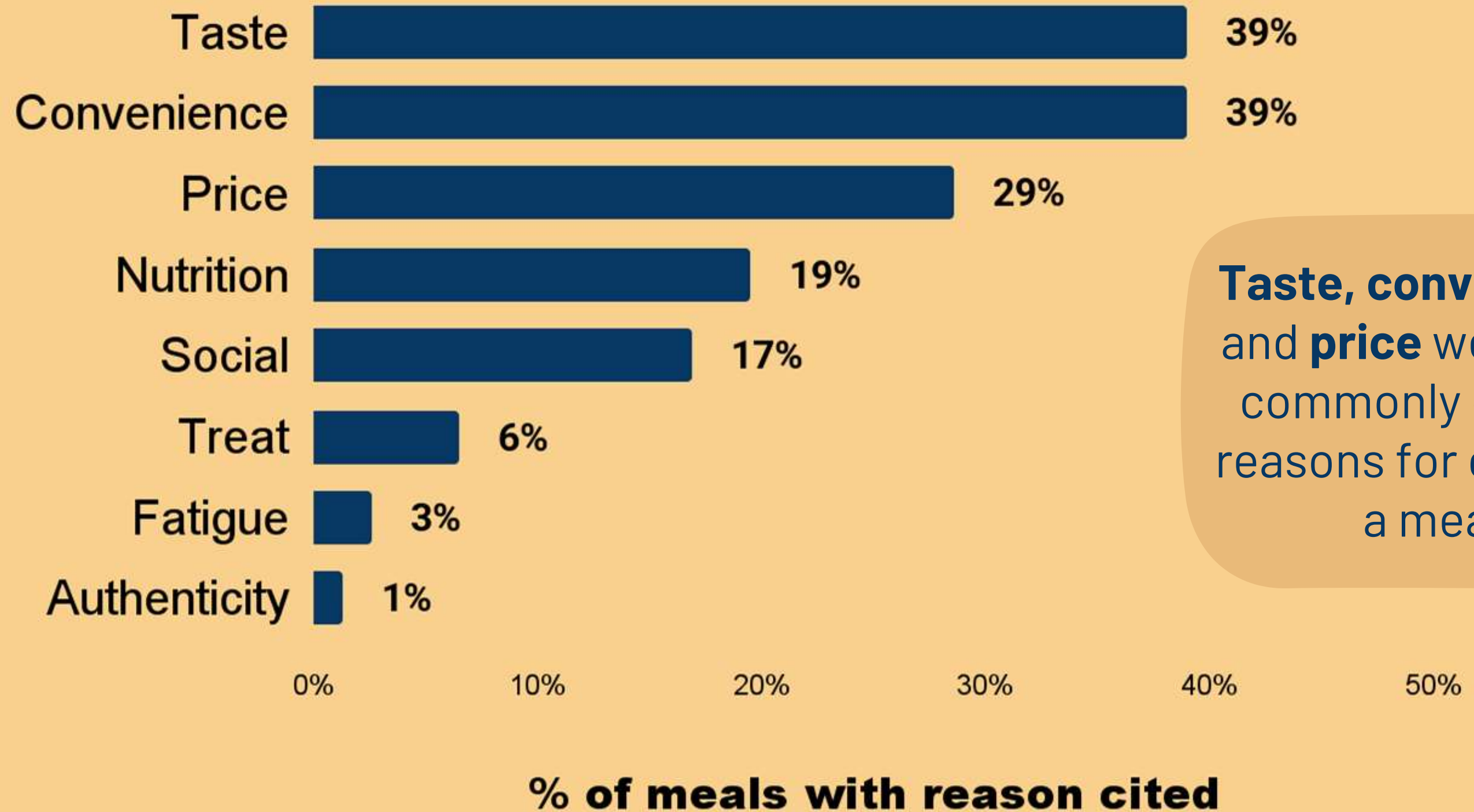
71%
Skipped meals

Participant characteristics



Meal selection factors
(77 meals)

Reason for choosing meal



Taste, convenience,
and **price** were most
commonly cited as
reasons for choosing
a meal.



39%

Of meals cited taste as
a contributing factor

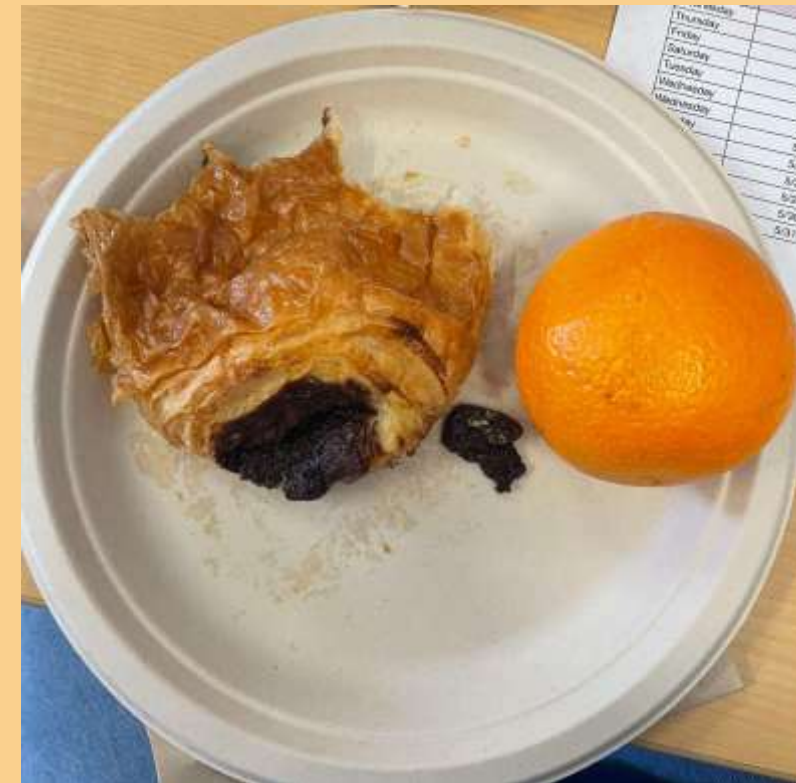




"It looked like the **best tasting option...**" - Sixth Market



"Pines pizza is **reaaaaally good.**"



"The chocolate croissants are **so fire...**"
- Birch Aquarium Cafe



"It looked like the **best tasting option** for the price point"
- Vallarta Express



39%

Of meals cited convenience
as a contributing factor





"I have a test tomorrow morning and this was the **quickest option**"



"It was **convenient for me to get there** from my previous class..."
- Taco Villa



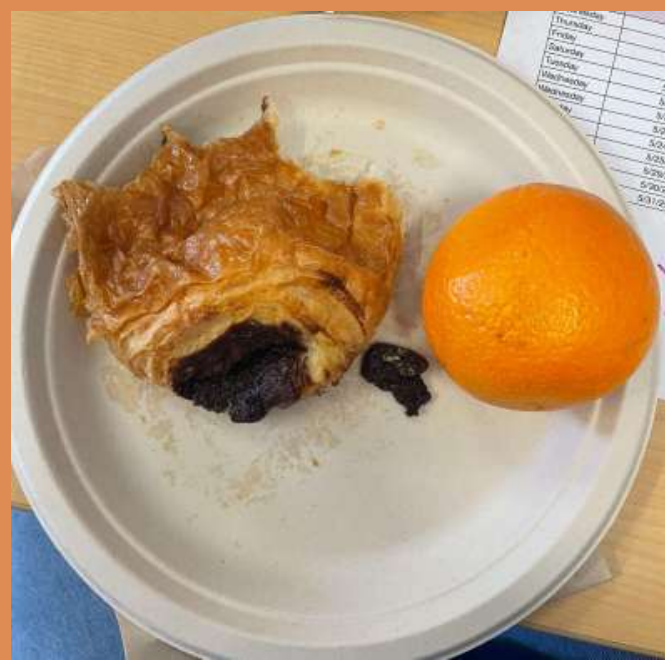
"The restaurant was **right outside of one of my classes.**"
- Crafted at Minerva's Cafe



"**Location was close** to my afternoon class. The **service was pretty fast** and the taste wasn't too bad." - 64 Degrees



29%
Of meals cited price as a
contributing factor





"...I still have Triton Cash and [Dirty Birds] have a **Wednesday boneless wings special.**"



"It was the **cheapest thing on the menu** at Spice and also I wanted fries."



"The yogurt expires in 4 days and **I'm out of dining dollars**"
- Costco

"**Cheap** and quick breakfast"
- Vons





19%
Of meals cited nutritional
value as a contributing factor

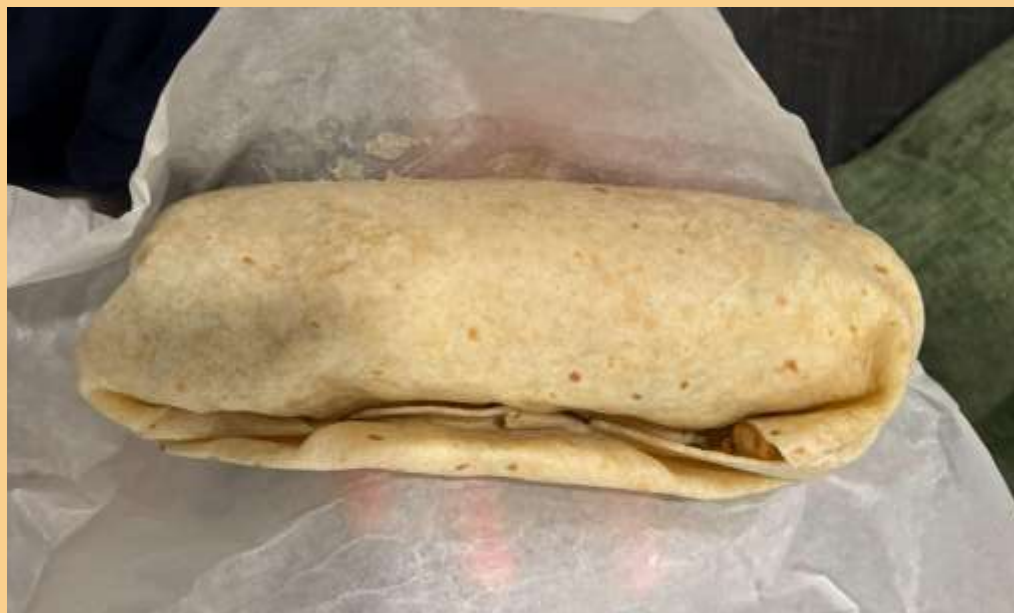




"Pastry is very filling and I want to be full so that I **worry less about being hungry** throughout the day"
- Triton Food Pantry



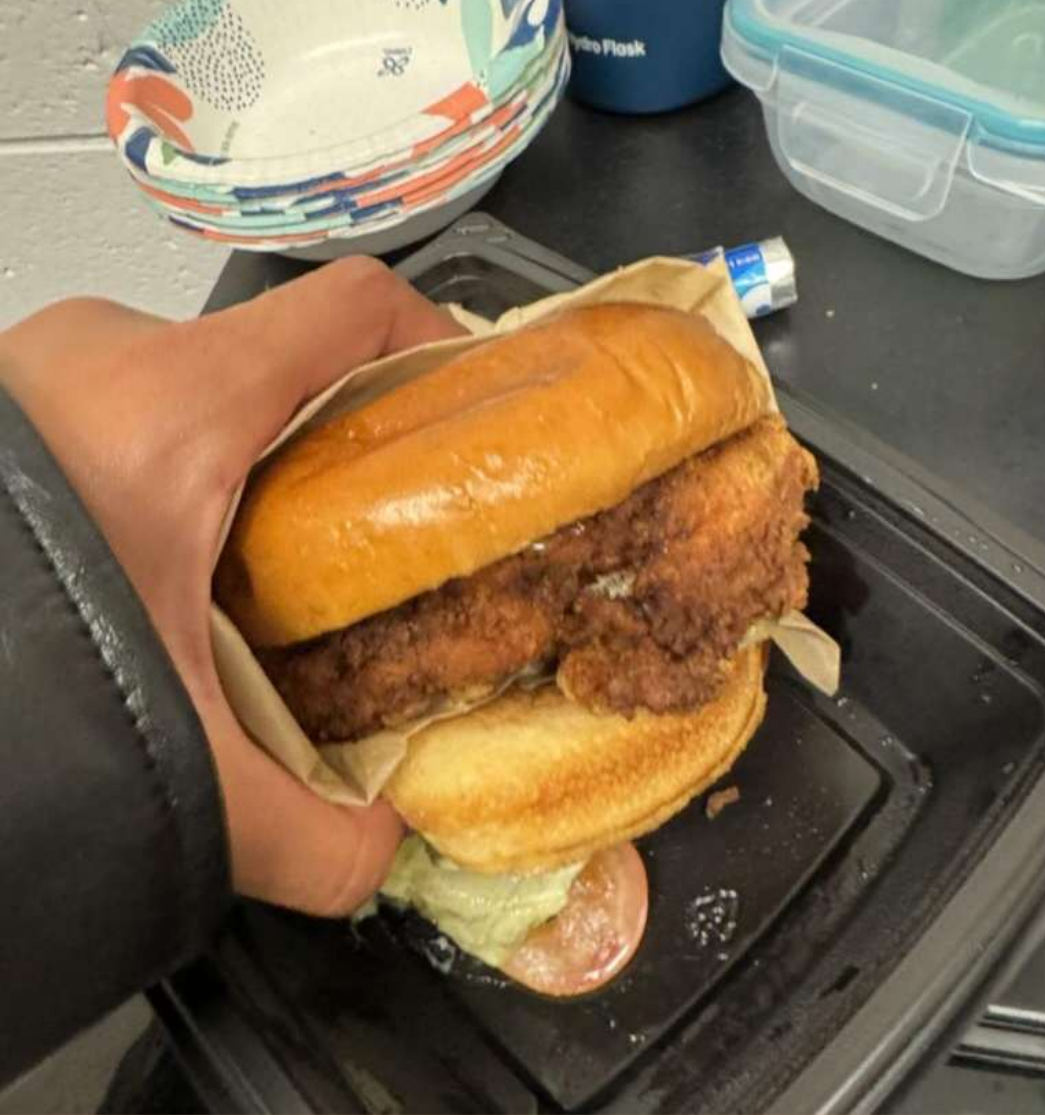
"Yogurt **seems pretty healthy** and it has **high protein** I think so I eat it if I go to the gym."
- Target



"Nutritious because it has **all the food groups.**"
- Wolftown

"I wanted cereal and honey bunches of oats **looked healthy.**"
- Sixth Market





17%
Of meals cited peer influence
as a contributing factor





"This is **the dining hall my friends wanted to go to.**"
- Rooftop



"My friends were going out to dirty birds and **i wanted to hang out with them.**"



"Because **my friends wanted to go** to Pines for lunch..."



"**I was with friends and they were getting it.**"
- Birch Aquarium Cafe

Treats and special occasions

"...I felt the need to **reward myself** with fat, despite paying a little extra for the sandwich."
- Pines



"Had **dinner with my girlfriend.**"
- Restaurant in Convoy



"Well I **wanted to make banana bread** the previous night **just for fun.** Ate the bread for breakfast."
- Ralphs



"...I also **wanted to reward my hard work** with something slightly more expensive and filling."
- Ocean View Terrace

Adjusting behaviors due to meal fatigue



"I was craving a burrito and **I didnt want to get taqueria again :(**"
- Chipotle with Triton Cash

Choosing for cultural authenticity

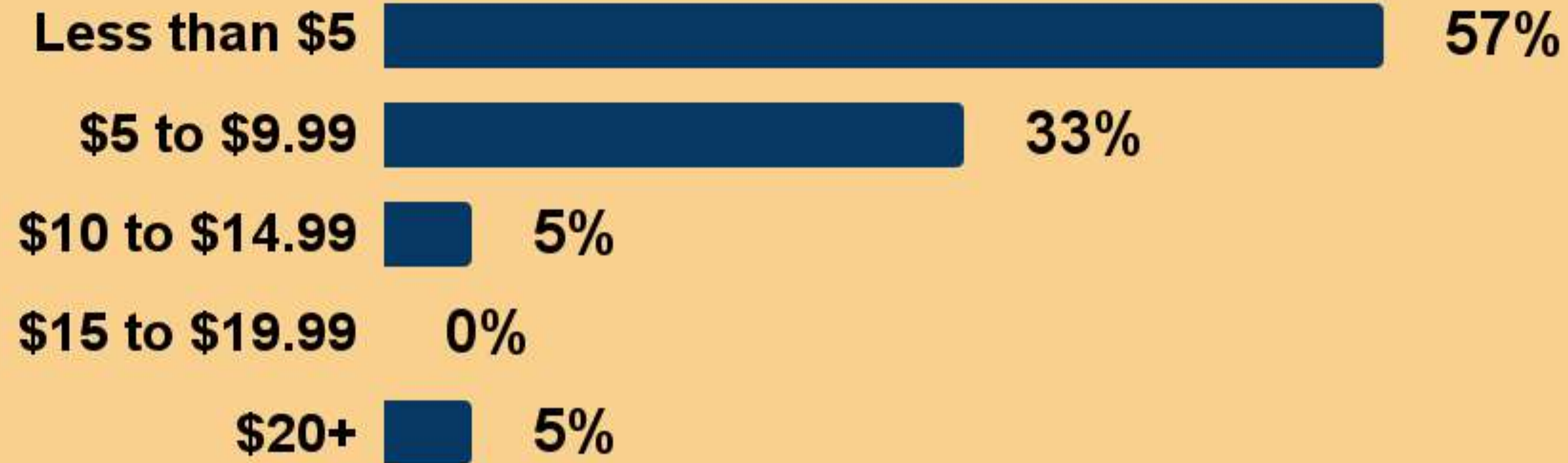
"...I usually get a sandwich but I got that earlier in the week so **I wanted something different.**"
- Pines



"Most authentic Chinese food on campus..."
- FanFan

Prices of breakfasts (n=21)

Price range



0%

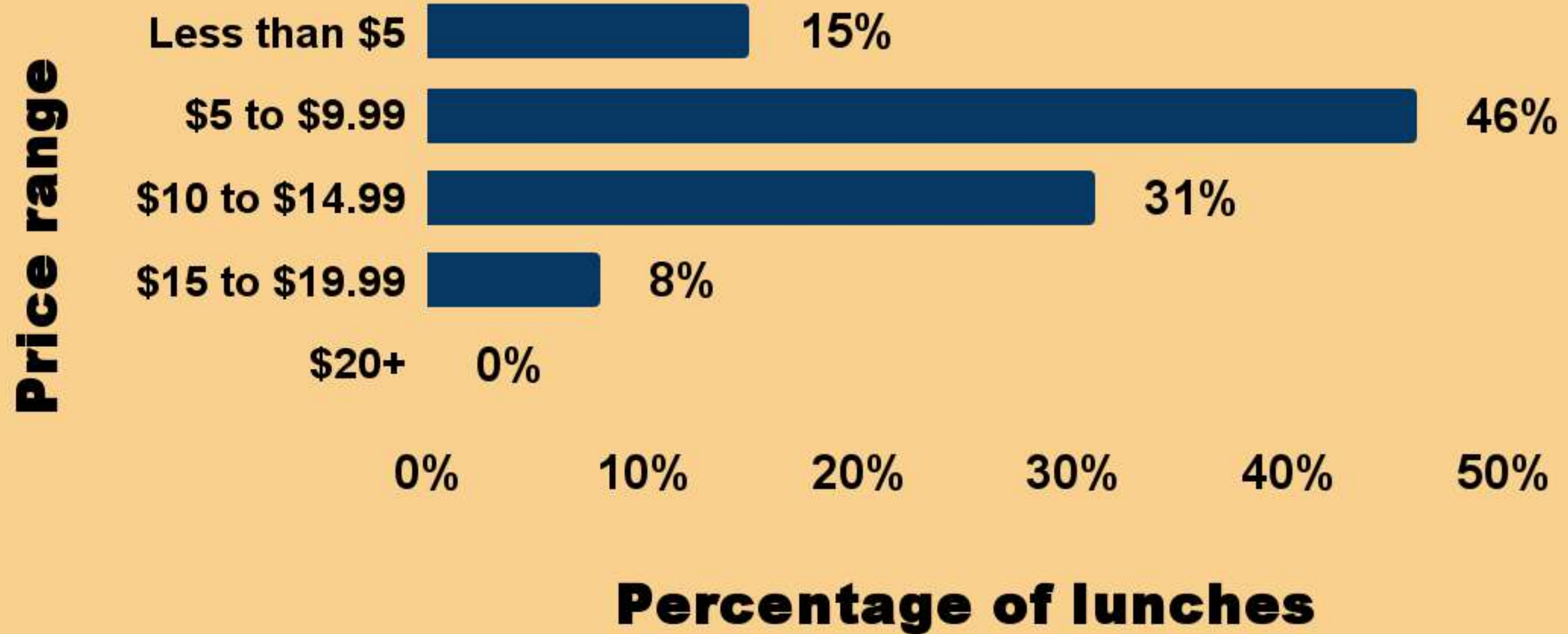
20%

40%

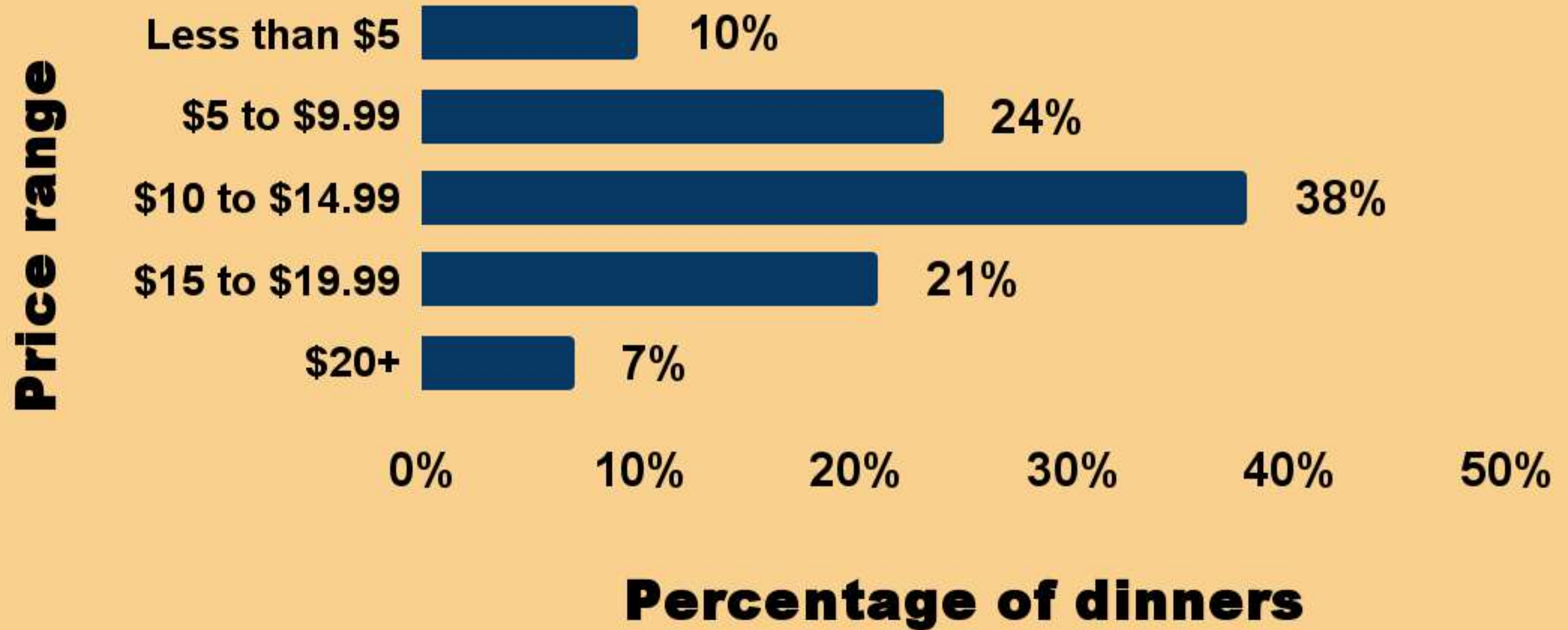
60%

Percentage of breakfasts

Prices of lunches (n=26)

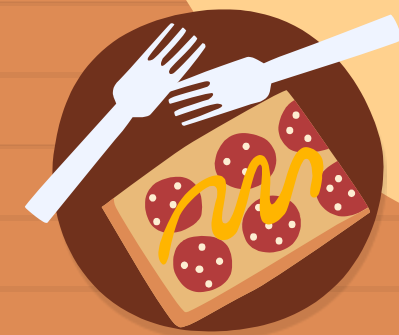


Prices of dinners (n=30)



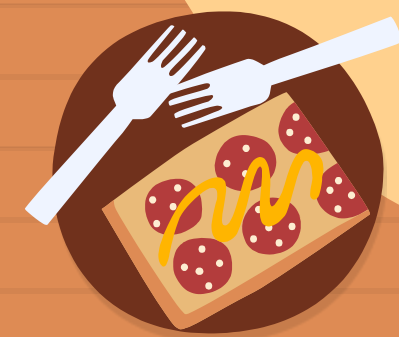
Spending patterns

- No observed correlation between meal plan and daily spending
- Most common price range for each meal
 - **Breakfast:** Less than \$5
 - **Lunch:** \$5 to \$9.99
 - **Dinner:** \$10 to \$14.99
- Most expensive meal was dinner
- Median daily spending was \$23.75
- Average daily spending range of \$5 - \$30



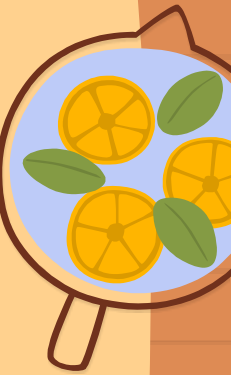
Skipped meals

- Breakfast was the most commonly skipped meal (accounts for 60% of skipped meals)
 - Lunch: 30% of skipped meals
 - Dinner: 10% of skipped meals
- Participants with Sun God Blue plans were **1.6 times** more likely to skip meals than those with any Triton plan



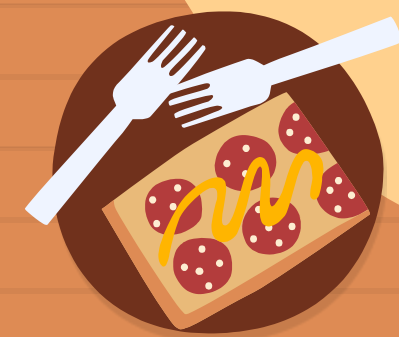
Limitations

- Small sample size
- Study captured meals for only 2 days
- Convenience sample, clustering of social relationships
- Did not collect data on gender, race or first-generation status
- Timing of study: Students may either be running low on dining dollars or spending a lot to avoid rollover



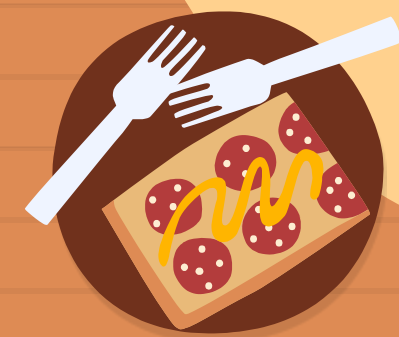
Unanswered questions

- How do students determine what a good price is?
- How do students determine nutritional value?
- Why do students skip meals?
- Why are students purchasing dining hall meals more than groceries?



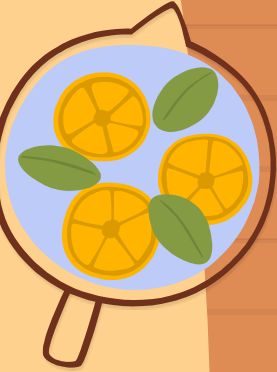
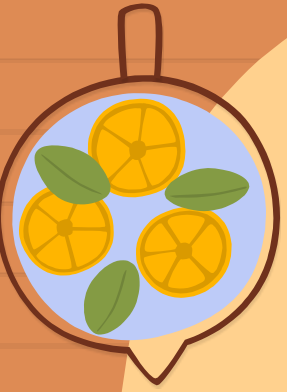
Conclusions

- Students consider taste and convenience to be the most important factors when choosing meals
- Students typically consider more than one factor when choosing a meal
 - Most common were with taste, convenience, and price.
- Students are regularly skipping meals
- Very few vegetables documented
- Triton Food Pantry only mentioned by one participant

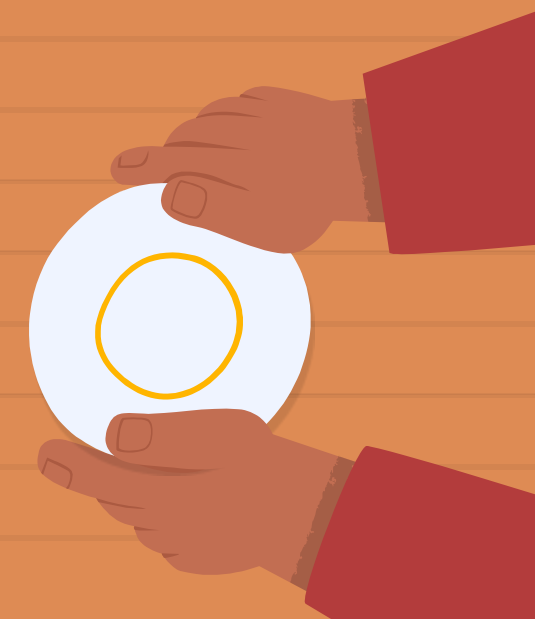
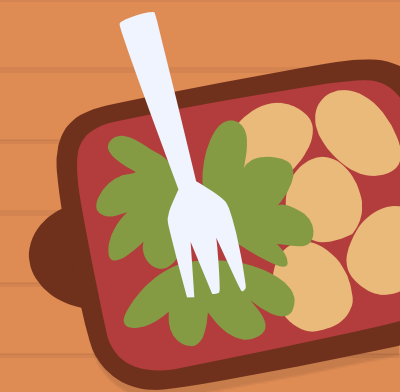
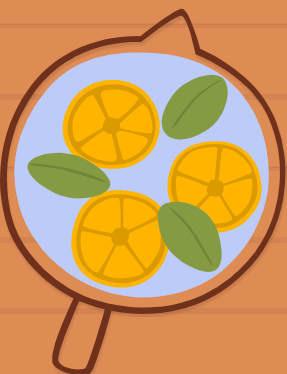


Recommendations

- Conduct qualitative interviews to determine if these patterns represent the UCSD student body
- Conduct research on how students assess price quality
- Investigate the reasons student skip meals
- Evaluate fruit and vegetable availability on campus and student perceptions of them
- Evaluate Swipe Out Hunger program visibility



THANKS!



Post-graduation pressure: A qualitative study on loan debt impact among UC San Diego alumni

The Interest Group

Jackie Aviles, Raigan Johnson, Mark Lee, McKayla Dasha Sarmiento

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Background

- In 2024, 85% of UCSD students (UCUES 2024) reported **feeling worried** at least some of the time **about debt and financial circumstances**.
- 2022-2023 academic year: approximately **37%** of UCSD undergraduate **graduated with student loan debt**.
- The **average student loan debt** among those students was **\$17,400**.

Background

Concerns about loan debt among undergraduate UCSD students

- Finding a job that covers loan repayments (89%)
- Choosing a career for money over passion (81%)
- Delaying life milestones (79%)
- Delaying or skipping graduate school (68%)

Goals

- Explore the impacts that loan repayments have on **UCSD Alumni**
- Assess the reality of these **concerns after leaving UCSD**

Objectives

1. How are alumni **managing their debt after graduation** and how does it affect their **career, well-being, and financial security**?
2. How does **loan debt impact alumnis' futures** such as their decision to **pursue graduate school and/or certain career pathways**?
3. Do you feel that **pursuing higher education** is worth the loan burden (if any), and how are **current policy changes** affecting your outlook?
4. How does the burden of loans in **undergrad** affect choices and opinions on **graduate** students?

Study population and criteria

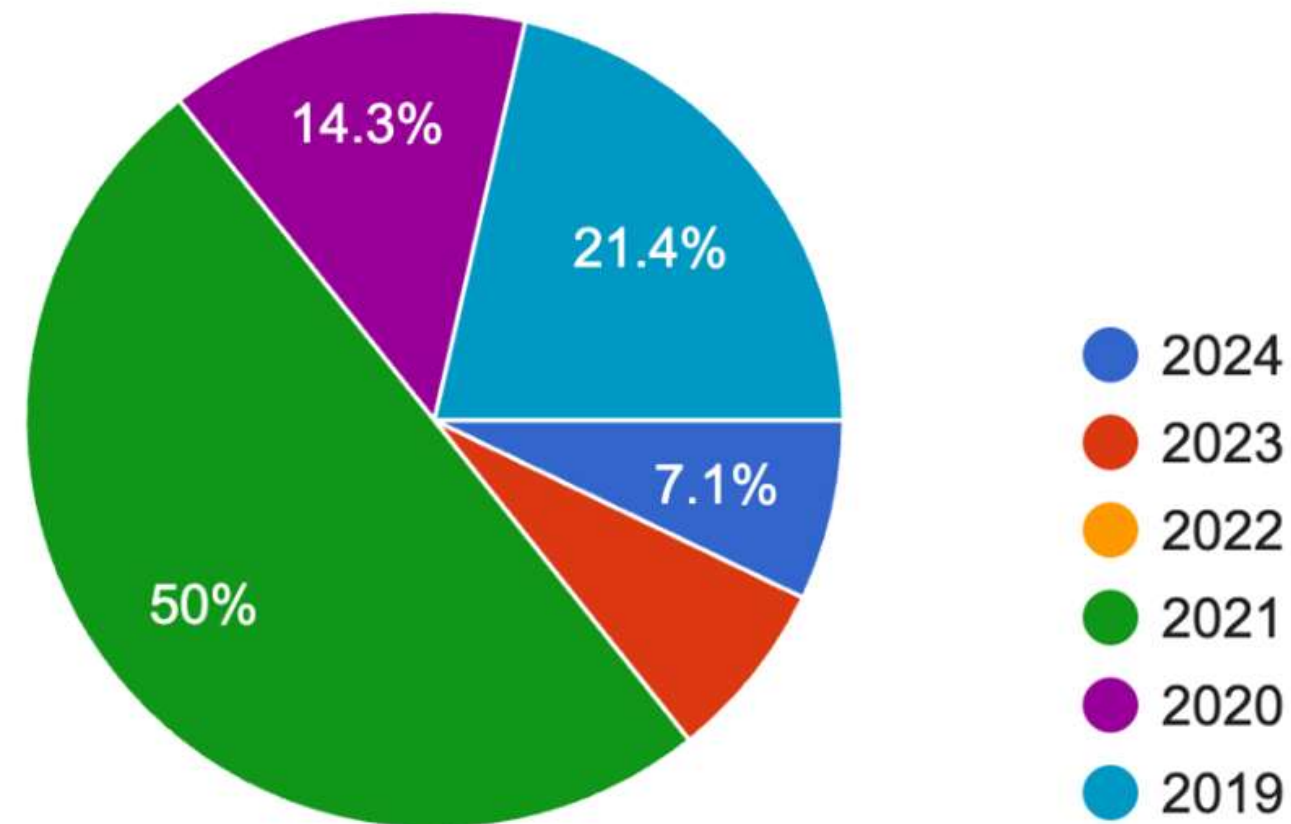
Participants were determined and expected to meet the following criteria:

1. Attended and graduated from **UC San Diego as an undergraduate or graduate student**
2. Graduated **after the year 2019**
3. **Took out loans** to pay for their higher education (undergraduate or graduate)

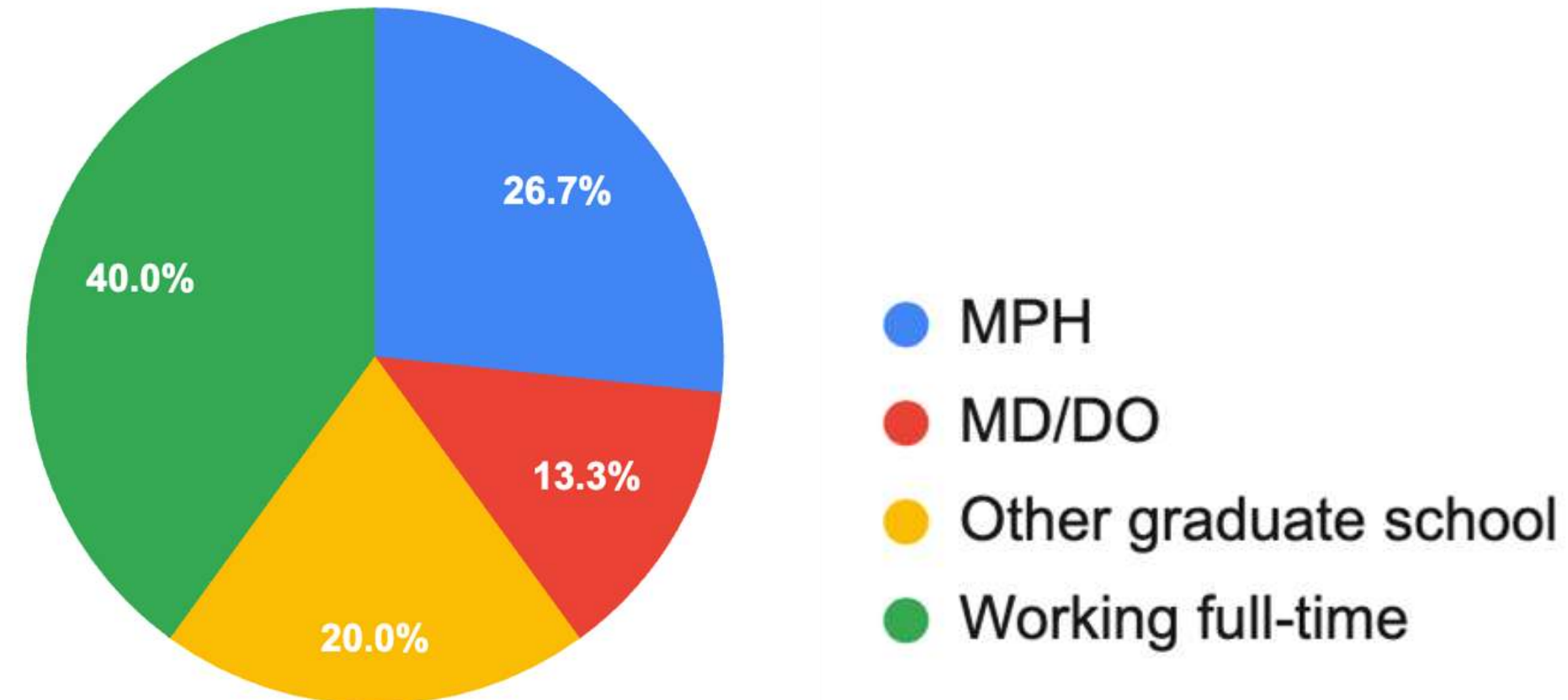
The population we pulled from consisted of past Public Health Honors Practicum students.

Interviewee demographic data (n=14)

What year did you graduate from UCSD?



What is your most recent job title/graduate program?



Methods

Data Collection Methods:

- Emailed PH Honors Practicum alumni describing our criteria and included an interest form to participate
- 30-minute interviews were conducted remotely over Zoom and recorded

Data Analysis Methods

- Recordings were anonymized to protect the identity of participants
- Interview transcripts were compiled to construct a codebook
- Codes were used to identify themes across all interviews

Results

Of the 38 students that received our outreach questionnaire, 14 consented to participate in our study.

Similar trends found within our interviews include:

- How graduates manage their debt post-graduation
- How loans affect students decision making processes
- Varying alumni perspectives on loans
- Different loan experiences in undergraduate and graduate school
- Financial wellness support at UCSD

Theme 1

Managing debt post-grad



Sub-themes

1. **Impacts on Well-Being**

- How debt has affected the overall well-being of those with loans?

1. **Increase in Loan Burden Based on Career Choice**

- How do students rationalize an increase in loans due to specialized programs?

1. **Loan Repayment**

- What has allowed alumni to be able to pay off their loans?

1. **The Pandemic**

- What effects did the pandemic have on student loan burden and repayment?

Impacts on well-being

Alumni reported a negative impact on their well-being, including elevated stress levels, cutting back on meals, and delaying life plans due to high loan amounts and making payments.

“You live more frugally, like you definitely make some sacrifices. Like I cut out meat for like a year because I was like, I can’t afford meat.” (ID 9)

“I think mentally it’s just kind of a constant burden in the back of my mind...added pressure.” (ID 14)

Increase in loan burden

For some alumni, their comfortability taking out loans increased based on their decisions to enter high paying career fields (healthcare, med school).

“I think Med School loans are definitely a lot more palatable... because you have a direct pipeline to a well paying job” (ID 9)

Loan repayments

Alumni reported being able to pay off their loans, or having the funds saved to completely cover the amount. Reasons why include well-paying jobs and working and saving through undergrad.

*"My goal was each quarter to like, save up at least a thousand dollars and pay back those principal loan balances...my strategy of like trying to get the amount low as possible after I graduated."
(ID 7)*

The pandemic

Alumni discussed the benefits the pandemic revealed relating to loans. Benefits ranged from loans being in forbearance to being able to save FAFSA money.

"The only reason...I was actually able to pay them off so quickly was because Covid had hit 6 months after I graduated. So all the Federal Government put a interest freeze on all Federal loans..."
(ID 4)

Theme 2

Impact of loans on decision-making processes



Sub-themes

1. **Career Pathways**

- How taking out loans affect alumni's decisions in post-graduate plans, such as choosing a specific job.

1. **Pursuing Graduate School**

- How did the prospect of obtaining student loans for graduate education influence the timing or decision to pursue a graduate degree?

Career pathways

Student loan debt influences post-graduate plans by limiting flexibility in career choices, pushing graduates toward higher-paying roles regardless of interest or alignment.

*"I think I've definitely steered towards looking for opportunities that I feel will be sufficient to provide me with the necessary income to pay back the loans..."
(ID 15)*

Pursuing graduate school

Many students delay or avoid graduate school altogether, choose less expensive or local programs, or prioritize funding over program quality or fit.

"Yeah, for me, I think the 1st thing was choosing a graduate program that was less expensive. And the second step was really thinking about what jobs am I working, and how will that be enough to avoid me having to take out loans." (ID 5)

Theme 3

Alumni perspectives on taking out loans



Sub-themes

1. **Investment in Education**

- Does the benefit of attending UCSD and/or a graduate program outweigh the burdens of loan debt?

2. **Job Prospects**

- Did the job prospects a recipient experience reflect the education they received at UCSD and/or their graduate institution

3. **Policy Changes**

- How are potential changes proposed by the current Trump administration impacting alumni's experience with loans and loan repayments

Investment in education

For those who have taken out loans to finance their education, most alumni felt the benefits of attending UCSD and/or a graduate program outweighed loan debt burden.

“I think it did. I'm still in San Diego. Going to UCSD, I learned a lot, even, I mean, not even just like the public health classes. But just like all the electives I was in and being involved, I feel like, I learned a lot of skills. And it helped me.” (ID 1)

Job prospects

While most alumni were satisfied with their job prospects upon graduation, some concerns were raised about the realities of finding employment upon graduation.

“My whole life, I was told, like, you know, you get a college degree. You're gonna get a good job paying job after that's the payout, and then only getting paid, like maybe, like \$5-6 over minimum wage for an entry level job that needs a bachelor's degree that is expertise based in public health is sad. It's very sad.” (ID 6)

Policy changes

The proposed changes to loans repayments and potential eradication of the Department of Education have brought on a slew of concerns for alumni still paying off or preparing to pay off their loans.

“The biggest issue is not knowing whether PSLF would be around for [graduates with student loan debt] and that deeply affects where we work, what salaries we're trying to pursue.” (ID 3)

Theme 4

**Managing debt and impact of
undergraduate loan burdens
on graduate students**

Sub-themes

1. **Graduate loan prevention**
 - How do graduates manage to graduate without student loans?
1. **Savings + budgeting**
 - What methods do graduates use to save money to reduce student loan debt amount?
1. **Impact of undergraduate loans on graduate school decisions**
 - How do undergraduate loans affect the decision-making process of graduate school for alumni?

Graduate loan prevention

Those who did not graduate with student loans in graduate school had prepared beforehand or worked multiple jobs during their graduate program to prevent taking out loans.

“I don't have debt, so that hasn't negatively impacted me. But I think the stress of trying to avoid debt is definitely what's probably been the most for me, because you're trying to find so many different supplemental avenues for financial aid and money.” (ID 5)

Savings + budgeting

Many participants reported intending to use or using their savings to help supplement their basic needs costs while in grad school or before attending.

“I was saving money for grad school ever since I graduated from UCSD, so I have had a savings account that I'm also living off of that is helping a lot with things” (ID 4)

Impact of undergraduate loans on graduate school decisions

Graduate students who took out loans for their undergraduate programs considered the burden of their loan debt when choosing which schools they went to and/or how they financed their education compared to their undergraduate loans.

Undergraduate:

"I think I just signed up for all the loans and like being 18...you don't really know what you're signing yourself up for." (ID 2)

Graduate:

"I think I just the 1st thing was choosing a graduate program that was less expensive. And the second step was really thinking about what jobs am I working, and how will that be enough to avoid me having to take out loans." (ID 5)

UC San Diego

HERBERT WERTHEIM
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND
HUMAN LONGEVITY SCIENCE

Theme 5

Financial wellness support at UCSD



Sub-themes

1. **Experience with UCSD financial aid services**
 - Do you feel that you were offered adequate support to make informed financial decisions at UCSD.
1. **Desired resources at UCSD**
 - What resources would you have liked to see during your time at UCSD or a graduate program?

Experience with UCSD financial aid services

UC San Diego's financial aid services are perceived by many students as impersonal, inaccessible, and lacking proactive guidance.

*"I think there could have been a little more support...I think that would have been nice just to have someone walk you through your different options, or give you a little handout or something like that."
(ID 2)*

Desired resources at UCSD

Students wish UCSD had provided comprehensive, accessible, and scenario-based financial literacy resources, including workshops, clear explanations of loan terms, and personalized counseling.

*"I would have definitely loved more education, or maybe just more like digestible education on loans... I guess there were resources there for me, technically. But I wish, yeah, I think it could have been delivered in a better, more accessible way."
(ID 1)*

Limitations

Recruitment methods may lead to introduction of selection bias

- Over-representation of Public Health Majors
- Over-representation of honors students
- Lack of generalizability across UCSD Alumni population

Limited population size (n = 14)

- Limits generalizability

Time Constraints

- 3-week timeline limited our ability to survey a wider population

Take home messages and suggestions

- Debt is negatively impacting the well-being of alumni
- Students may delay graduate school plans to save money, though med school students are more comfortable with taking out more loans
- Alumni consensus is that UCSD does not provide enough financial wellness resources to students
 - Suggestions for improvement include one on one counseling, creating a one-pager to illustrate loan/financial aid facts, and financial literacy workshops

Thank you!

The background is a solid green color with white line-art illustrations of financial concepts scattered around the edges. These include stacks of money, individual coins, a piggy bank, a bar chart, a dollar sign, and a hand holding coins. The main title is centered in a large, white, sans-serif font.

Financial Security: Advice for incoming UCSD students

Catalina Jones, Melissa Lupian, Melanie Gallegos Martin, Shiv Puliady

Background and Prior Objectives



Financial insecurity among college students at **UC San Diego** is **widespread**



A **study** which included Public Health and Economics undergraduate students was conducted Winter 2025 by BSPH Honors Practicum **to examine prevalence and consequences of financial insecurity**



Key Findings

- **More than 1 in 3 students are financially insecure**
- **Financially insecure students are more likely to have poorer mental health, academic outcomes, very low food security, and low housing security**

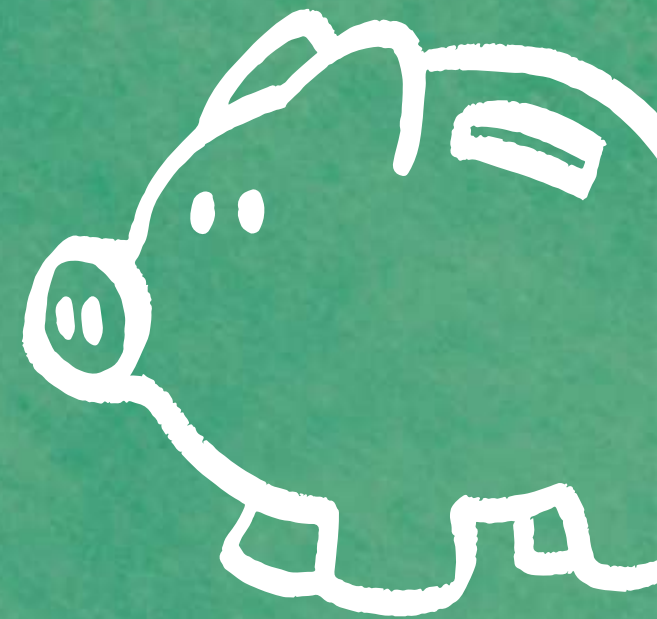



Rationale

Seniors may have insights on the best ways to **financially survive college**

Objective


How can **insights** from students who have navigated financial challenges **inform future programs and policies to support student financial security?**





Phase 1

(n=50)

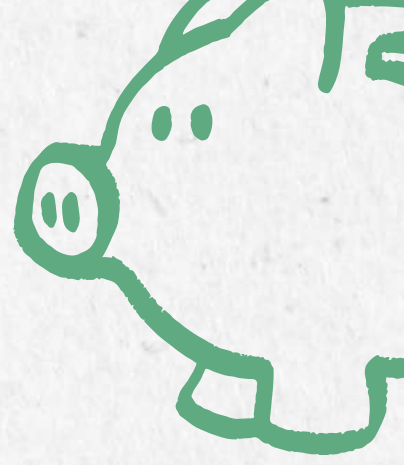


Randomly approached UCSD students on Library Walk & in Price Center until 50 students who were seniors were identified




If students were a **senior**, they were asked:

- What **three words** come to mind when thinking about financially surviving college?
- What **financial advice** do you wish you had as a freshman?




Phase 2

(n=7)



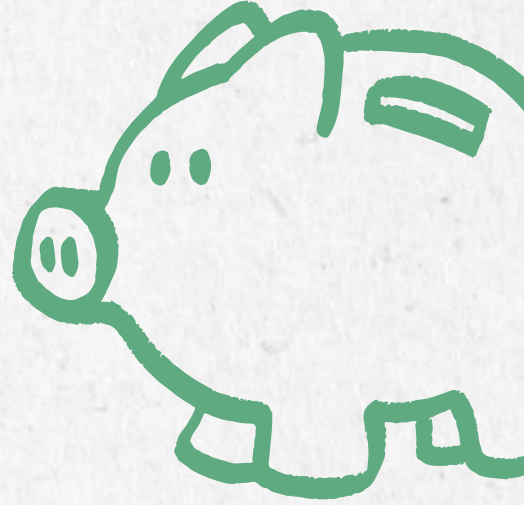
Invitation sent to 20 students from Phase 1 who **opted-in** for an in-depth interview



Of these students, 7 responded and participated in a 20-30 minute zoom interview where they were asked to share their “**real life stories**” and for **in-depth advice**

Methods





Theme Development & Coding



Analyzed each response to find the key messages

- Phase 1
 - First three words
 - Wish I knew
- Phase 2
 - Key-informant interviews



Coded themes found in responses

- Family, college expense, employment etc.



Used themes to analyze data

Phase 1 Results

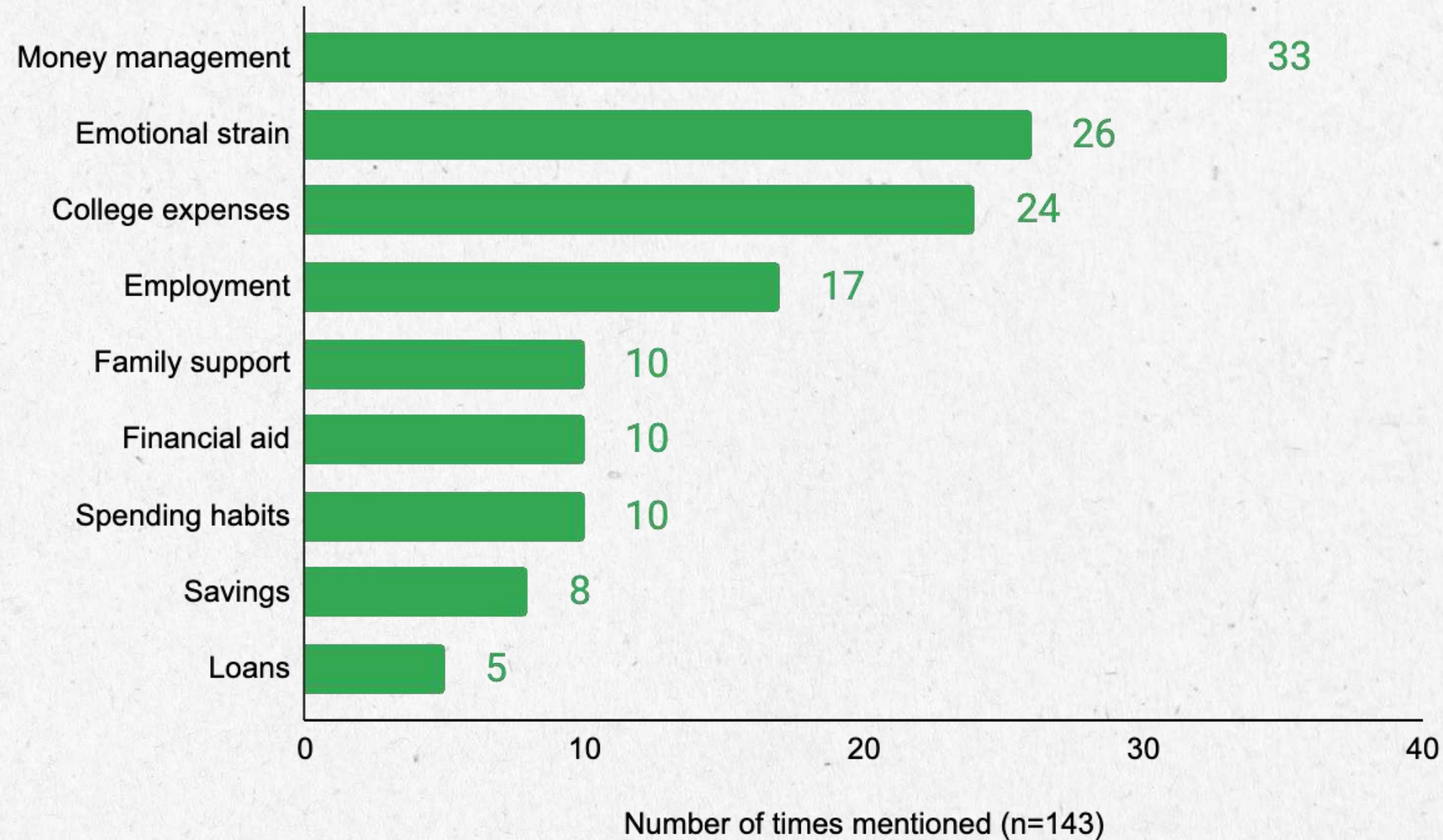
Short Questions:

3 Words &

I wish I knew

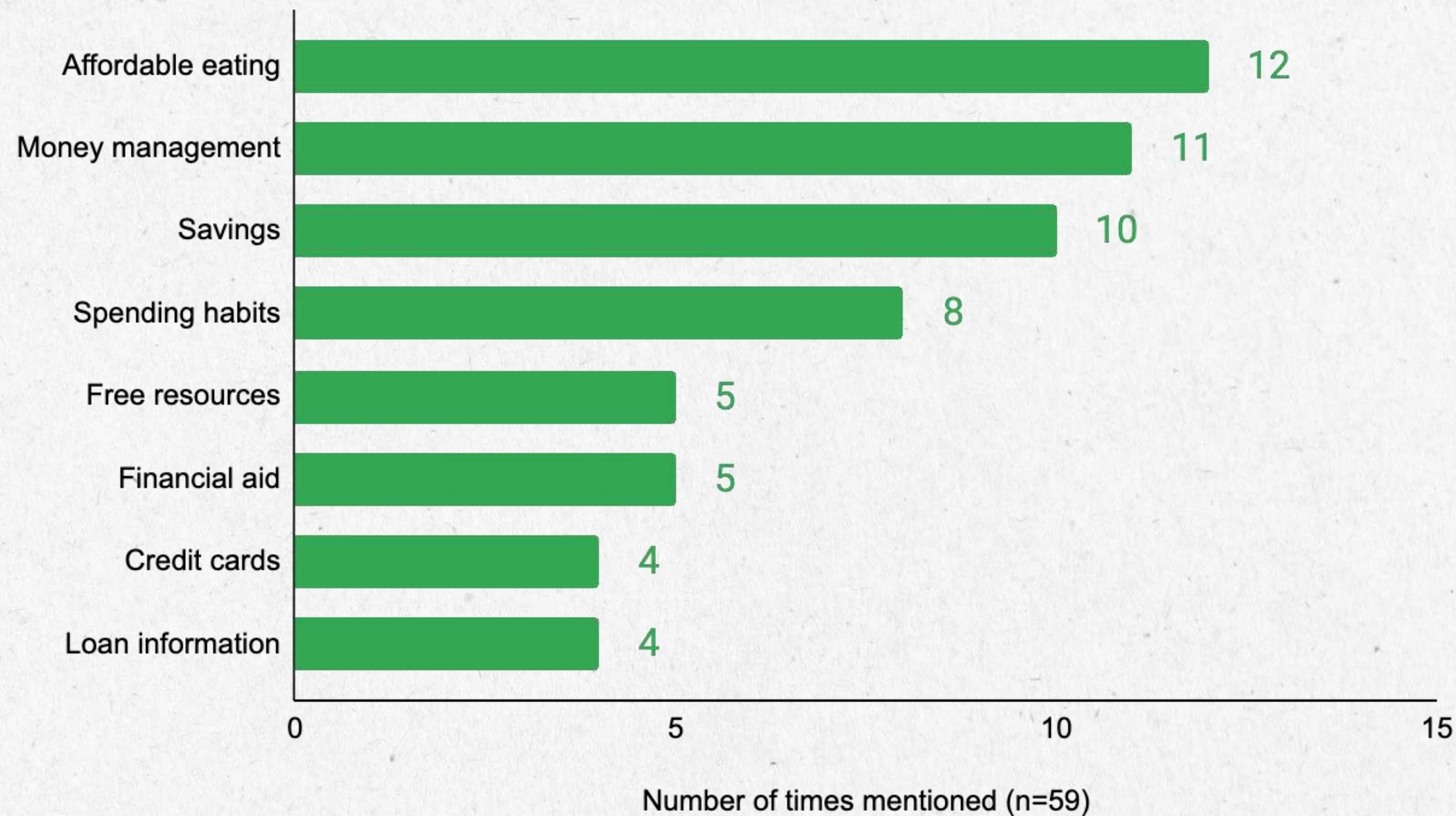


3 words that come to mind...



This graph depicts student responses when asked for **three words** that came to their mind when thinking about surviving UCSD financially

I wish I knew...



This chart shows **advice** seniors wish they would have been given during their freshman year. Starting with **affordable eating**, followed by **money management**, **saving**, and **smart spending**.

Takeaways

- Money management came up most as both a challenge and a need for advice
- Seniors mentioned emotional strain and college expenses, highlighting the stress tied to financial insecurity
- Insight on affordable eating was most commonly mentioned, followed by savings and spending wisely
- Few mentioned loans or financial aid unprompted, suggesting more guidance needed in these areas

Seniors advise incoming students to plan early, use campus resources, and build financial habits that reduce future stress

Phase 2 Results

Key Informant Interviews



Interview Guide

Biggest expense

- What is your biggest expense, and what do you recommend students do to reduce those costs?

Navigating costs

- How have you personally navigated the cost of attending UCSD, and what strategies might help incoming students plan for their own financial situation?

Employment

- In your opinion, what are the pros and cons of working and what are some considerations to keep in mind when deciding?

Best Advice

- What was the best financial advice that you received?



Interview Guide



Loans

- For freshman students taking on loans for college, what advice would you offer them?

On campus resources

- Are there any on-campus services or resources you recommend new students use to help manage their finances?

Reaching out for help

- How do you ask for help regarding finances?
- Do you find it difficult to talk about money with friends or peers? With adults or professionals? Why do you think that is?



Interview Guide



Financial literacy

- How do you recommend freshmen learn about financial literacy?
- How have you learned about finances?

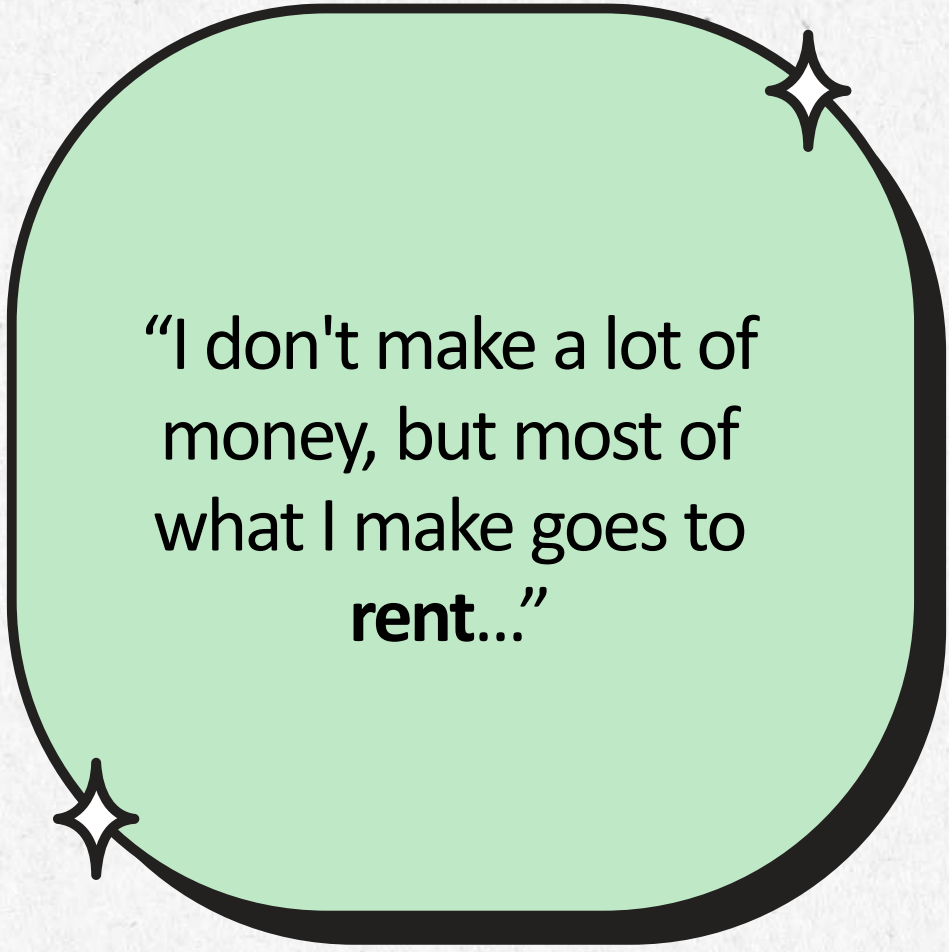
Personal sacrifice

- Have you had to sacrifice anything you enjoy due to financial reasons?
- How did you feel about that?




Biggest Expense

Rent



“I don't make a lot of money, but most of what I make goes to **rent**...”

Food

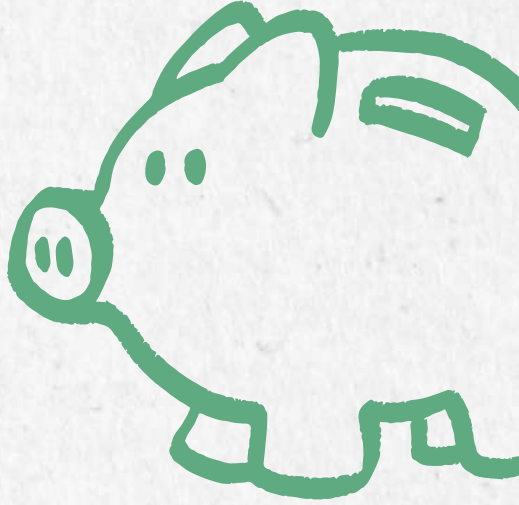


“I know most of my money goes to **food**, groceries, restaurants”

Students consistently mentioned that **rent** and **food** was their **biggest expense**.



Navigating Costs



Students recommend
**saving, budgeting, and
reducing costs.**

“I would highly
recommend starting a
savings account as
soon as possible...”

“I'm pretty frugal. I
save. I try not to
spend a lot of money
unless it's things that I
do really want.”



Employment

“The pros outweigh the cons because **you get experience and money**”

Seniors advise freshmen to **get a job** for money, friends, and experience but to find a balance.

“A big con is that obviously working **takes up time**. You can't do homework while you're at work”

“I got to make connections with first and foremost faculty, secondly students and **expand my community**”

“It's definitely a **slippery slope**, like how much can you handle”



Loans

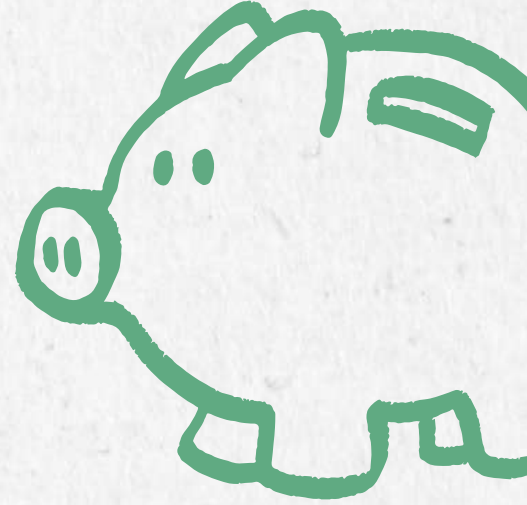
“Don’t be afraid to take out the loan...I can’t get the degree and learn to the fullest if I’m working 40 hours a week”

“If at all possible, choose a subsidized loan over an unsubsidized loan.”

“I think the **Financial Aid Office** is a really big resource on campus-for **loan information.**”

Students highlighted their **perception** on loans, how to **manage** them and understanding differences between the **types of loans** offered with financial aid.

On-Campus Resources



Students reflected on the resources **they wished that they had known** about during their freshman year.

“I recommend SPACES for students. I literally only learned about it this year, and I'm so **regretful that I didn't know about it sooner.**”

“The ... medical assistance program through UCShip... **To me, if I would have known that I would have started going to the doctor a long time ago.**”

On-Campus Resources



Some students felt as if there were few resources to help them financially

"I feel like there really aren't a lot of resources."



Some resources were criticized for wait times or poor service

"...I feel like the Financial Aid Office is always busy, like I've never heard great things..."

Reaching out for help

Some students were reluctant to rely on their **family** for financial advice and assistance

“It’s **harder** for me to tell my family I’m struggling for money because I know they’re also budgeting and **trying to make it too.**”

“My parents were not that financially literate and **my sisters** had to learn on their own, and so **they just kind of taught me as I grew up.**”

Key advice to incoming students

- Know the differences between types of **loans**
- Use the financial aid office & **resource** centers
- Consider the **pros and cons** of working
- Apply for **scholarships**
- Get a **savings** account
- **Reduce** spending on food



Limitations



Sample size:

- Key-informant interviews limited number of participants



Representation:

- Differences in financial background may shape the type of advice shared



Cognitive processing limitation:

- Survey revealed immediate thoughts, not deep reflection

Conclusions



Key Observations



Budgeting and **affordable meals** are the most financially pressing topics among college students



While **employment** is recommended, effective time management is essential



On-campus resources were beneficial but students wished they learned about them much **sooner**

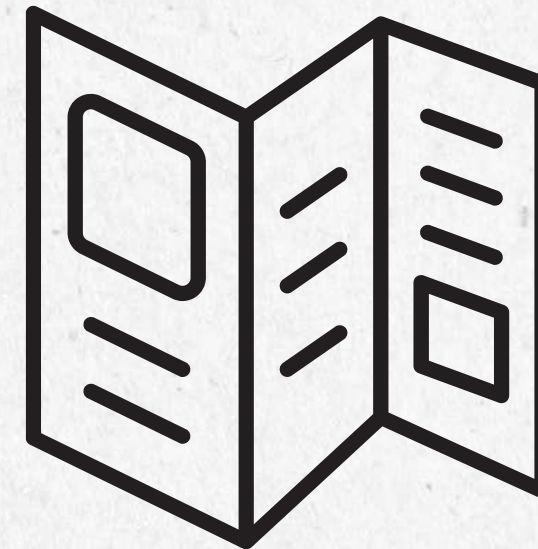


Creating a **savings account** was often recommended

Sharing tips with students



Social media posts



Pamphlets during
orientation



Workshops and peer
panels



College newsletters

The background is a solid green color with a subtle texture. It is decorated with various white line-art icons related to finance and business. These include stacks of money, individual coins, a dollar sign, a calculator, a piggy bank, a bar chart, a hand holding coins, a target with a dollar sign, a briefcase, and a document with a dollar sign.

**Thank you very
much!**



Financial Literacy among UCSD Undergraduates

by Derrick Cha, Fiona Fisher, Sarah Plummer, Jiawei Yao



Introduction

Background

- Financial literacy refers to “the understanding that includes how to earn, manage, and invest money” (DoEd)
- Crucial for college students to manage their financial resources and avoid financial pitfalls
- Little is known about financial literacy among UCSD students
- UCSD lacks a centralized financial literacy resource center




Findings from previous study

- 
- Financial insecurity survey of 774 students enrolled in selected public health and economics classes conducted in February 2025
 - Contained single question on self-perception of overall financial literacy with 5-point scale + questions on perceived knowledge of 6 specific topics (budgeting, savings, interest, debt, stock market, cryptocurrency) with 3-point scale (low, moderate, high)
 - For purposes of the analyses, students who ranked their overall financial literacy as “very low” or “low” were defined as having low overall financial literacy
- 




Findings from previous study

- 1/3 of students had overall **low** overall financial literacy
 - Statistically significant risk factors: **female** gender, **low income** family background, and **non-economics** students
 - High perceived knowledge of **budgeting** and **saving**; **low perceived knowledge of stocks** and **cryptocurrency**
 - 78% expressed interest in financial literacy education, especially in **savings** and **credit**
 - Preferred learning methods: online modules, electives, 1-on-1 counseling
- 



Background of current study

- Common critique of previous survey is that respondents **self-reported** financial literacy level
 - Benefits of self-assessment include that questions were simple to answer and did not require extensive amount of time
 - Survey intended to identify students who would likely utilize financial literacy resources
 - Unsure if self-reporting format reflects true financial literacy knowledge
- 



Unanswered questions

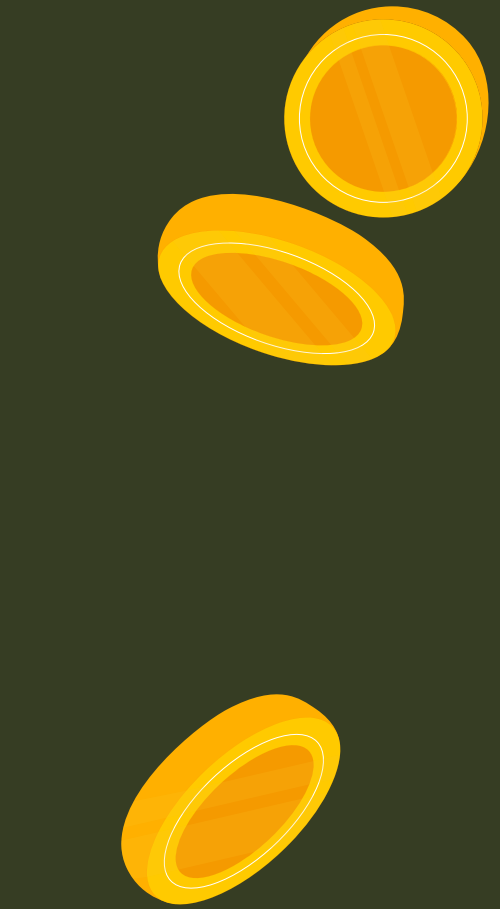

1. How do students perform on a test of their knowledge of key financial topics?

2. Does self-reporting of financial literacy level differ from an objective measure, overall and by topic?

Methods





Big 5 financial literacy topics

- 
- 
1. Interest
 2. Inflation
 3. Risk diversification
 4. Budgeting
 5. Credit



Cognitive pretesting

- 
- Pre-test survey and make any changes before sending it out to the field
 - Interviewed 5 UCSD undergraduates:
 1. Complete draft survey
 2. Use probes to ask how they interpreted and answered questions
 3. Altered survey based on feedback
 - Students felt most confident in interest and inflation
 - Credit and savings were most relevant to college students
 - Risk diversification was least relevant
- 




Cognitive pretesting questions

We asked the following probing questions for each literacy topic


1. What does this term mean to you?
2. How did you learn about x (specific financial literacy topic), where did you draw your answer from?
3. Did you feel confident in your answer or did you have to guess?

Overall probing questions

1. Were there any questions that were confusing or made you uncomfortable
 2. Which questions felt most relevant or irrelevant to you?
 3. If you could change anything about this survey-questions, wording, format-what would it be?
- 



Cognitive pretesting results

1. Students felt most confident in interest and inflation
 2. Credit and savings were most relevant to college students
 3. Risk diversification was least relevant
 - a. Kept question in survey since it was part of “Big 5 financial literacy topics”
 4. Adjusted confidence rating system
 - a. Defined what constitutes as low/medium/high
- 



Questionnaire: self-perception

How would you rate your overall financial literacy?

- a. Very low: I have little to no understanding of financial concept
- b. Low: I know some basics but feel uncertain about many financial concepts
- c. Moderate: I have a general understanding but could use more guidance
- d. High: I feel confident managing my finances with minimal help
- e. Very high: I am highly knowledgeable and manage my finances independently





Questionnaire: self-perception cont.

How would you rate your understanding of each of the following financial concepts? Please use the following scale:

Low = little to no understanding of the concept

Moderate = some understanding, but difficulty explaining it to others


High = strong understanding and could explain it to others

	Low	Moderate	High
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Interest	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Inflation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Risk	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>





Questionnaire: knowledge



Q1. Suppose you put \$100 in a savings account earning 5% interest annually. After 4 years, how much would you have (assuming no withdrawals)?

- A) Less than \$120
- B) Exactly \$120
- C) More than \$120
- D) Don't know

Q2. If your savings earn 1% interest per year and inflation is 2%, after one year, will you be able to buy:

- A) More than today
- B) The same as today
- C) Less than today
- D) Don't know

Q3. True or False: Investing in a single company's stock is usually safer than investing in a mutual fund.

- A) True
 - B) False
 - C) Don't know
- 




Questionnaire: knowledge cont.

Q4. Which of the following is the *best* first step when creating a personal monthly budget?


- A) Set a target for your monthly savings
- B) Guess your spending based on last year
- C) Write down your income and recurring expenses
- D) Calculate your total debt
- E) Don't know

Q5: If you make only the minimum payment on your credit card each month, what is the likely result?

- A) Your balance will be paid off quickly
 - B) You will build a strong credit score
 - C) You will pay more total in interest over time
 - D) You will avoid all interest charges
 - E) Don't know
- 



Questionnaire administration

- Questionnaire was administered via Qualtrics to UCSD Dr. David Arnold's ECON 5 students (Data Analytics/Social Sciences)
 - Students offered extra credit for participation
 - Survey open for 5 days (May 21-26)
 - Response rate = $260/372$ (70%)
 - Responses analyzed using Epi Info 7.2.6
 - Sensitivity, predictive value positive, and accuracy calculated using the MedCalc online statistical software
- 



Scoring system

- Self assessment

- Converted their reported understanding of each financial literacy topic into a score: low = 1, moderate = 2, high = 3
 - Defined their overall self reported financial literacy as
 - 5 - 11 total points= low financial literacy
 - 12 - 15 total points= high financial literacy

- Quiz

- For each correct answer, the participants were given 1 point
 - 0 - 3 total points = low financial literacy
 - 4 - 5 total points = high financial literacy





Dichotomizing variables

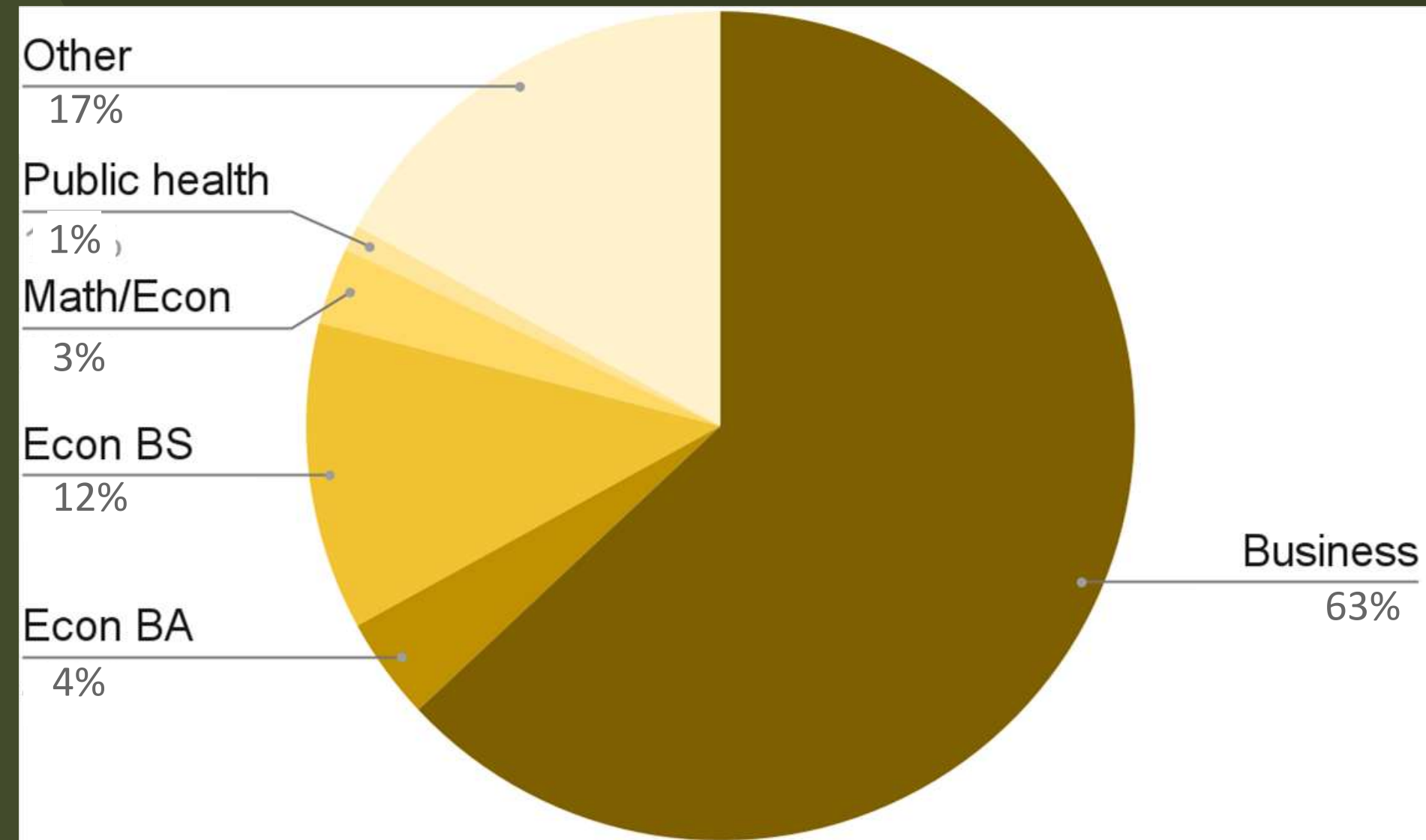
- Dichotomized variables to just include “high” and “low” as categories for analyses
 - For overall literacy with 5 categories of rank, “very high” and “high” rankings were recoded into the “high” variable, and “moderate”, “low”, and “very low” into the “low” category
 - For the remaining (single) categories with 3 ranking options, “high” was included in the “high” category and “moderate” and “low” in the “low” category



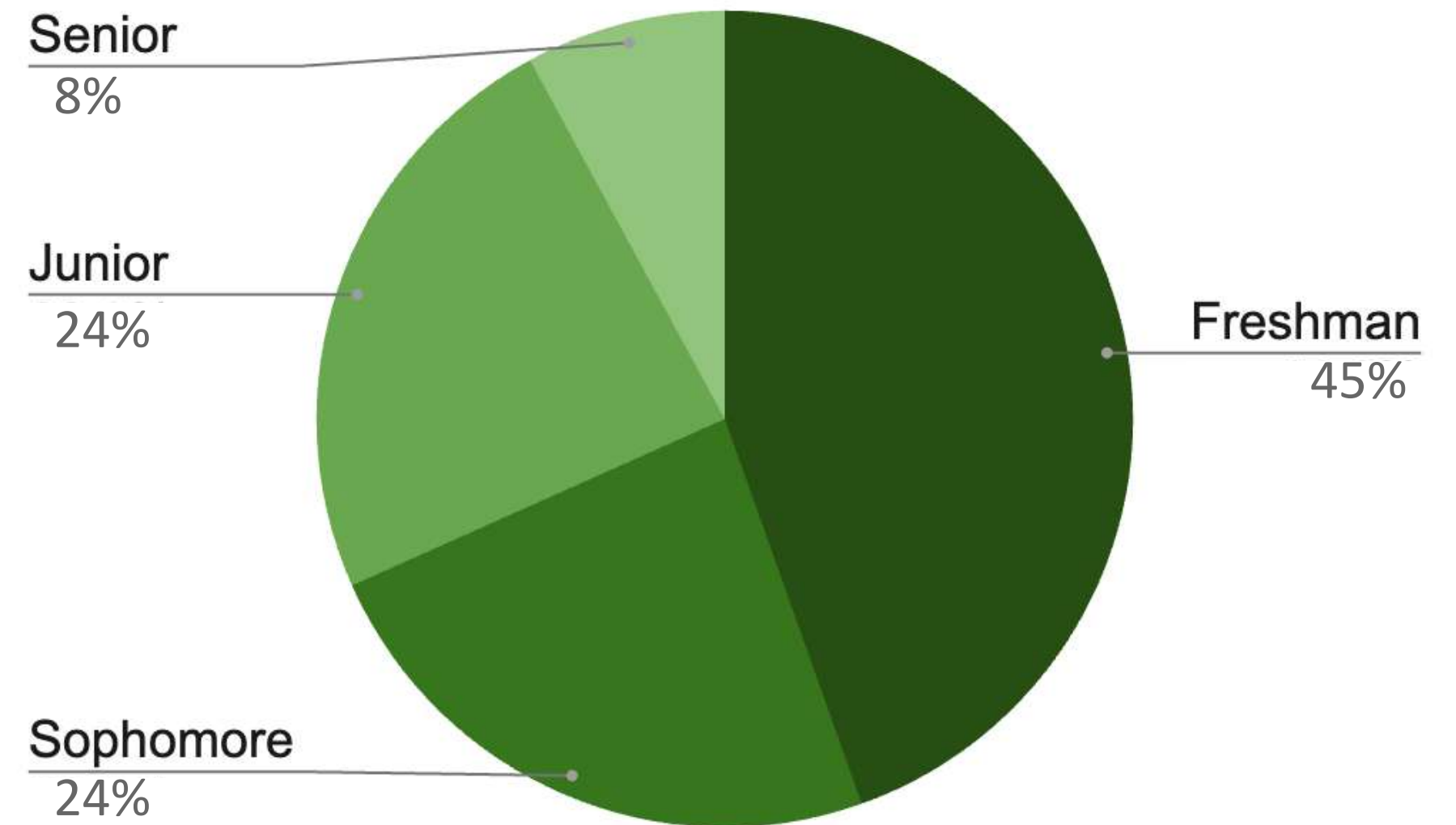
Results

Participant characteristics

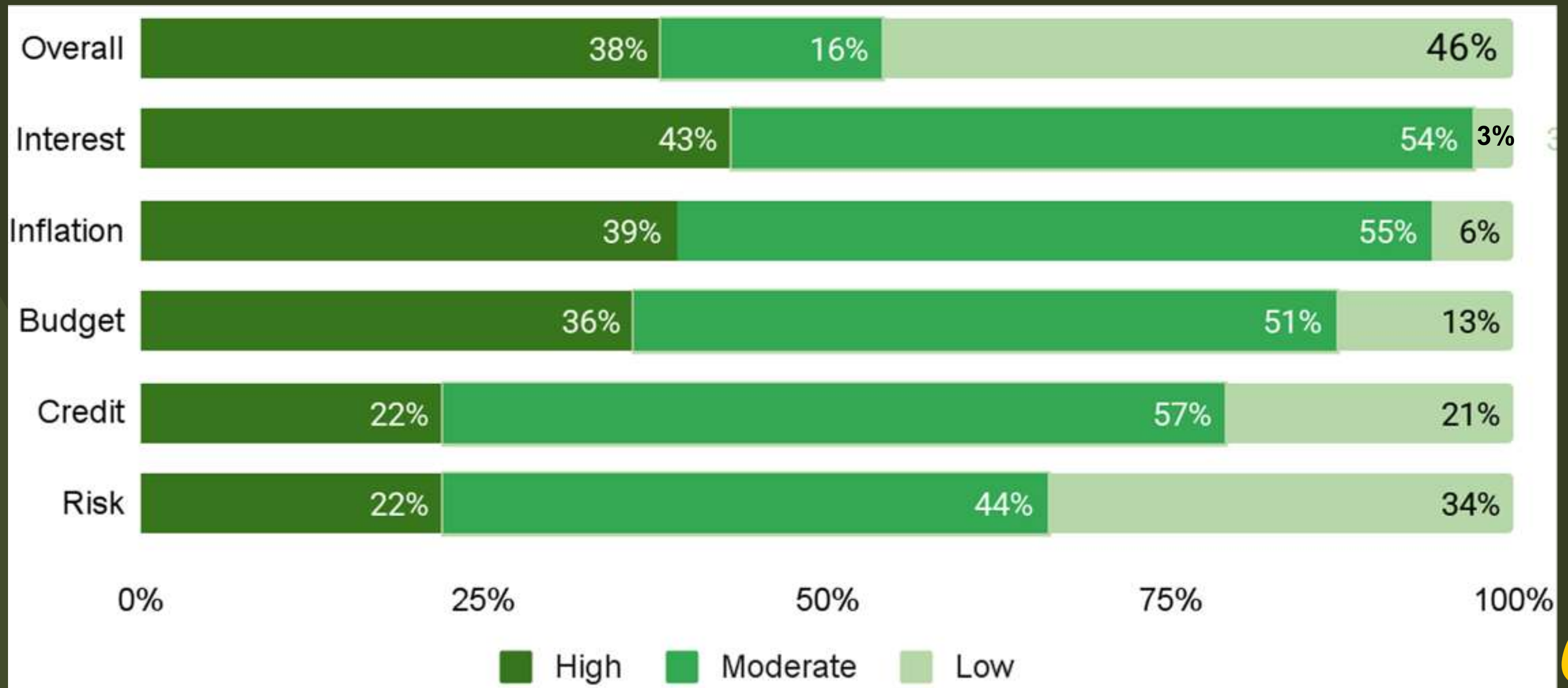
Major (N = 245)



Grade level (N = 260)

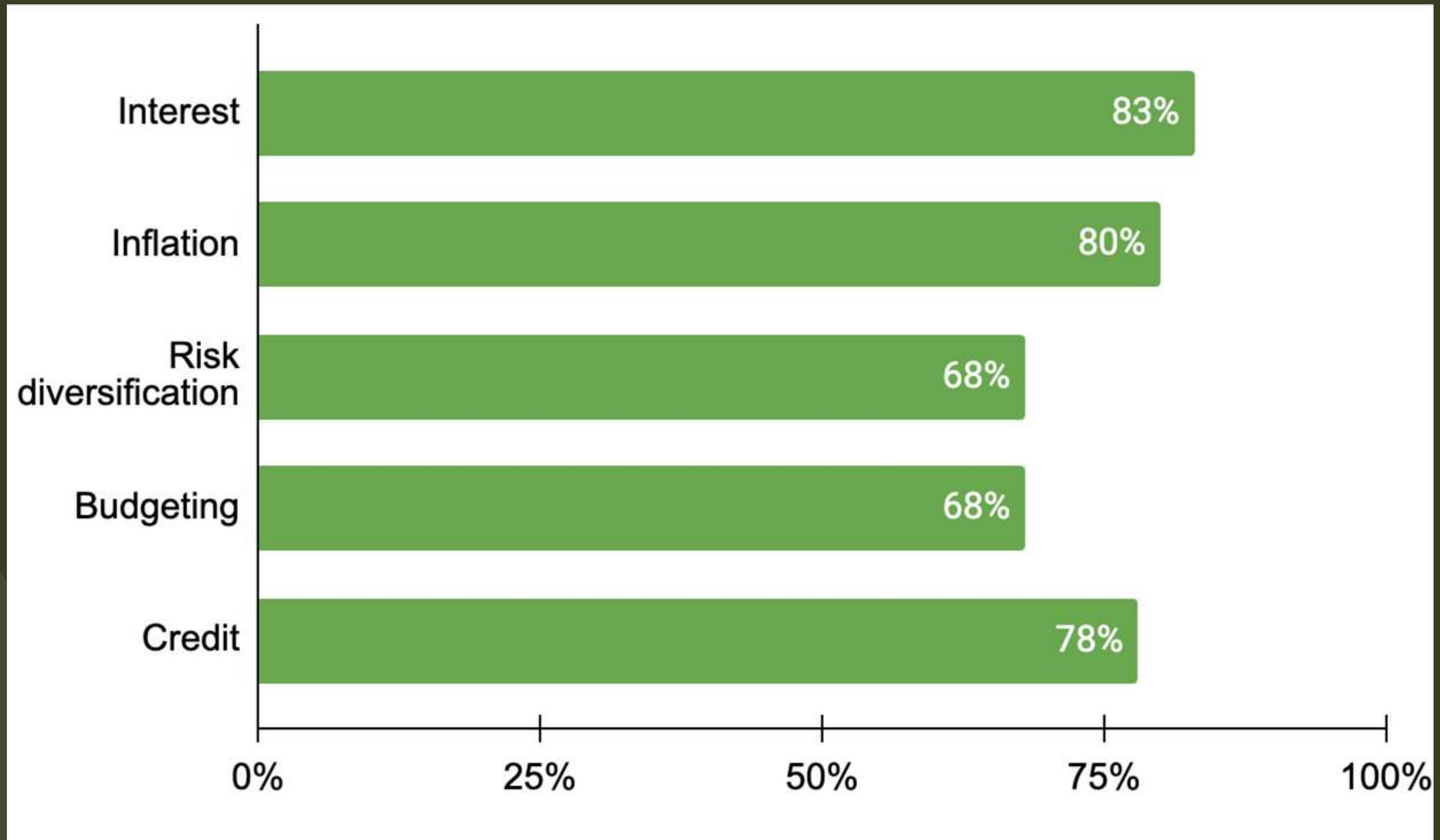


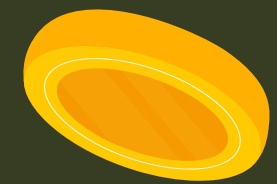
Self-assessed knowledge overall and by topic (N = 245)





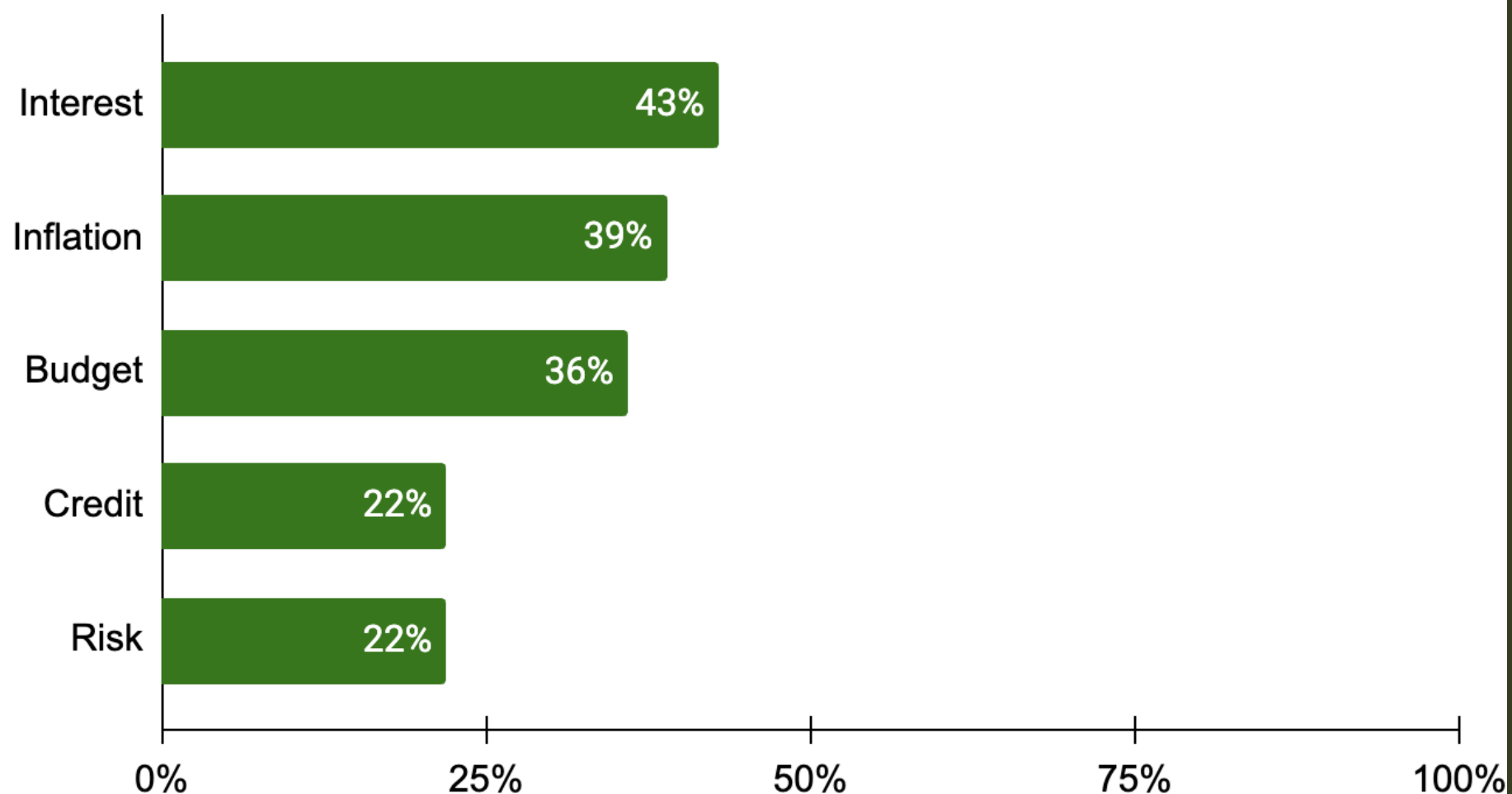
Correct quiz response rate per topic



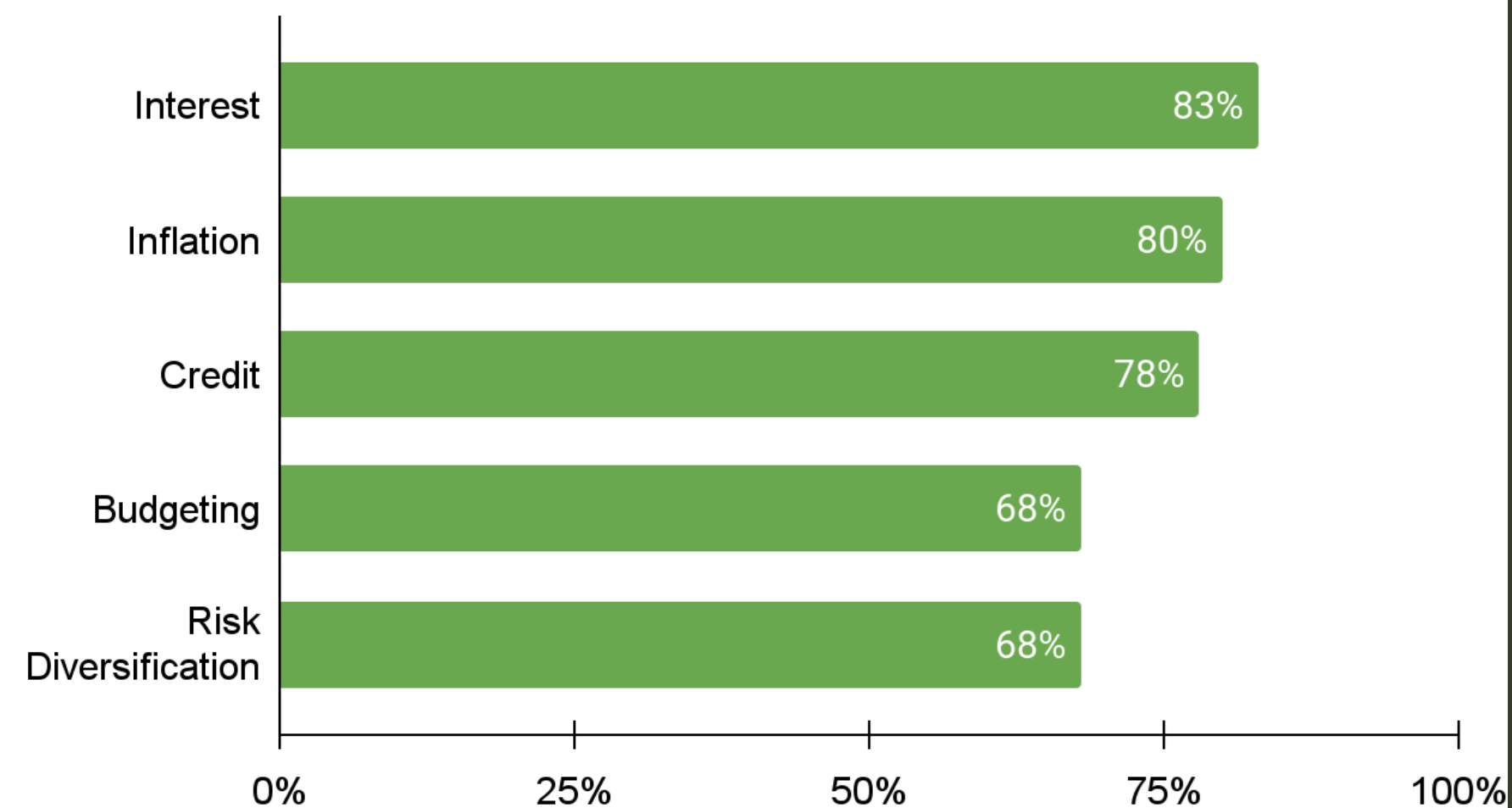


Comparison of self-assessed by correct quiz responses (N=245)

Self assessed knowledge by topic (high)



Percentage of correct responses





Accuracy for individual topics

Accuracy = (number with low self-assessment scores who had low quiz scores + number with high self-assessment scores who also had high quiz scores)/total population

Topic	Accuracy, %
Interest	51%
Inflation	40%
Budget	47%
Credit	44%
Risk	32%





How did the self-assessment scores compare with the quiz scores?

Self-assessment score	Test score		
		Low	High
	Low	a	b
	High	c	d

- **Sensitivity** = of those who had a low test score, how many correctly perceived their literacy status as being low? ($a/a+c$)
- **Predictive value positive** = of those who had a low perceived literacy score, how many had low test scores? ($a/a+b$)
- **Accuracy** = how many with low literacy scores had low test scores + how many with high literacy scores also had high test scores? ($a+d/a+b+c+d$)



Results: self-assessment score vs. quiz score

79%

Sensitivity

Percentage of students who have low measured literacy who self-ID as low

63%

Predictive value
positive

Percentage of students who self-ID as low who have low measured literacy

61%

Accuracy

Percentage of students who correctly self-ID literacy level





But...single question overall literacy
performs just as well!

80%

Sensitivity

Percentage of students who
have low measured literacy
who self-ID as low

63%

Predictive value
positive

Percentage of students who
self-ID as low who have low
measured literacy

59%


Accuracy

Percentage of students who
correctly self-ID literacy level






Limitations

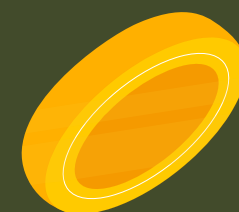
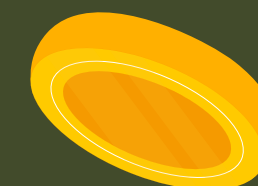
- Pre-test participants were **not representative** of the broader student population
 - Analysis was limited to economics students, who may reflect a **best-case scenario** for financial literacy and do not represent the overall student body
 - The high proportion of correct responses suggests the quiz may have been **too easy** to effectively assess varying levels of understanding
- 



Conclusions

- Questions used to assess knowledge should undergo further **validation and pre-testing**, especially if test-based format is desired
 - Single question on perceived overall financial literacy seems to be a **reasonably reliable** way to classify student financial literacy levels in multi-purpose surveys and for ongoing monitoring purposes
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THANK YOU



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