

COVID-19 Pandemic and its Effects on Food Accessibility and Eating Habits Among UCSD Students

Amanda Keng and Ileen Rodriguez

Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science, UC San Diego



Introduction

- Between 32.9% and 50.9% of college students experience food insecurity in the U.S. (Nazmi, et al., 2018).
- College students are disproportionately affected by food insecurity due to rising costs of tuition, food, housing, and limited financial aid resources (El Zein, et al., 2019).

Objectives

- To examine characteristics of college students and whether they influence students' perceptions of food accessibility and eating habits during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

- A cross-sectional online survey was conducted for 3 weeks between April 2021 and May 2021.
- The survey was sent out through email and posted on UCSD affiliated class Facebook pages and Discord servers.
- 77 responses were recorded
- Students were asked about their demographics as well as questions regarding the pandemic exposure and its effects on food accessibility and eating habits.

Results

Table 1. Participant Demographics (N=77)

	%
Year	
1st Year	21%
2nd Year	24%
3rd Year	19%
4th Year	35%
5th Year or more	1%
Age	
18-20	61%
≥ 21	39%
Gender	
Male	19%
Female	78%
Non-Binary	3%
Living Situation	
On-campus	21%
Off-campus alone	4%
Off-campus w/ roommates	29%
Off-campus w/ parents/family	47%

Figure 1: 59% of participants thought that college students sometimes experienced food insecurity

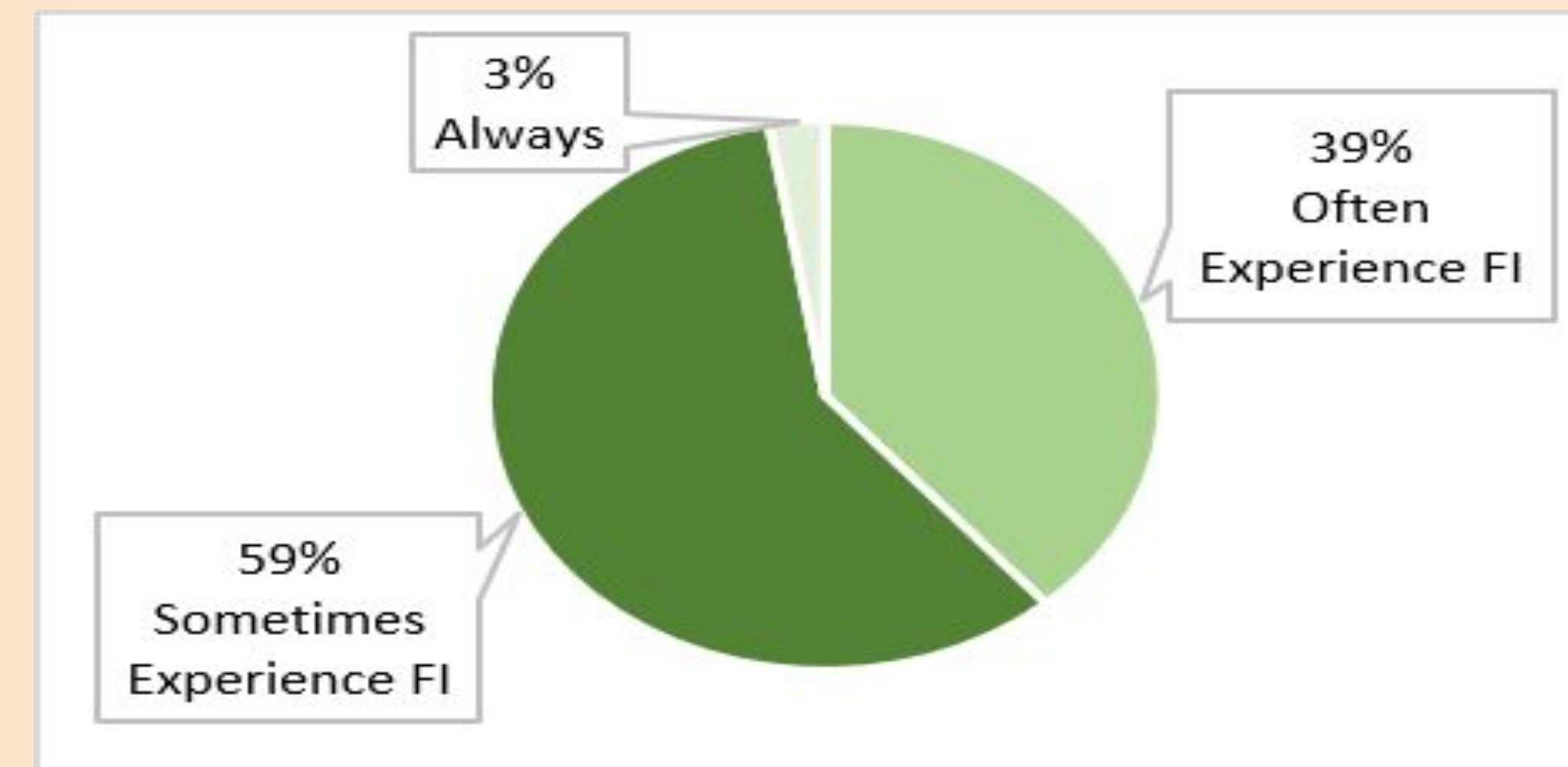
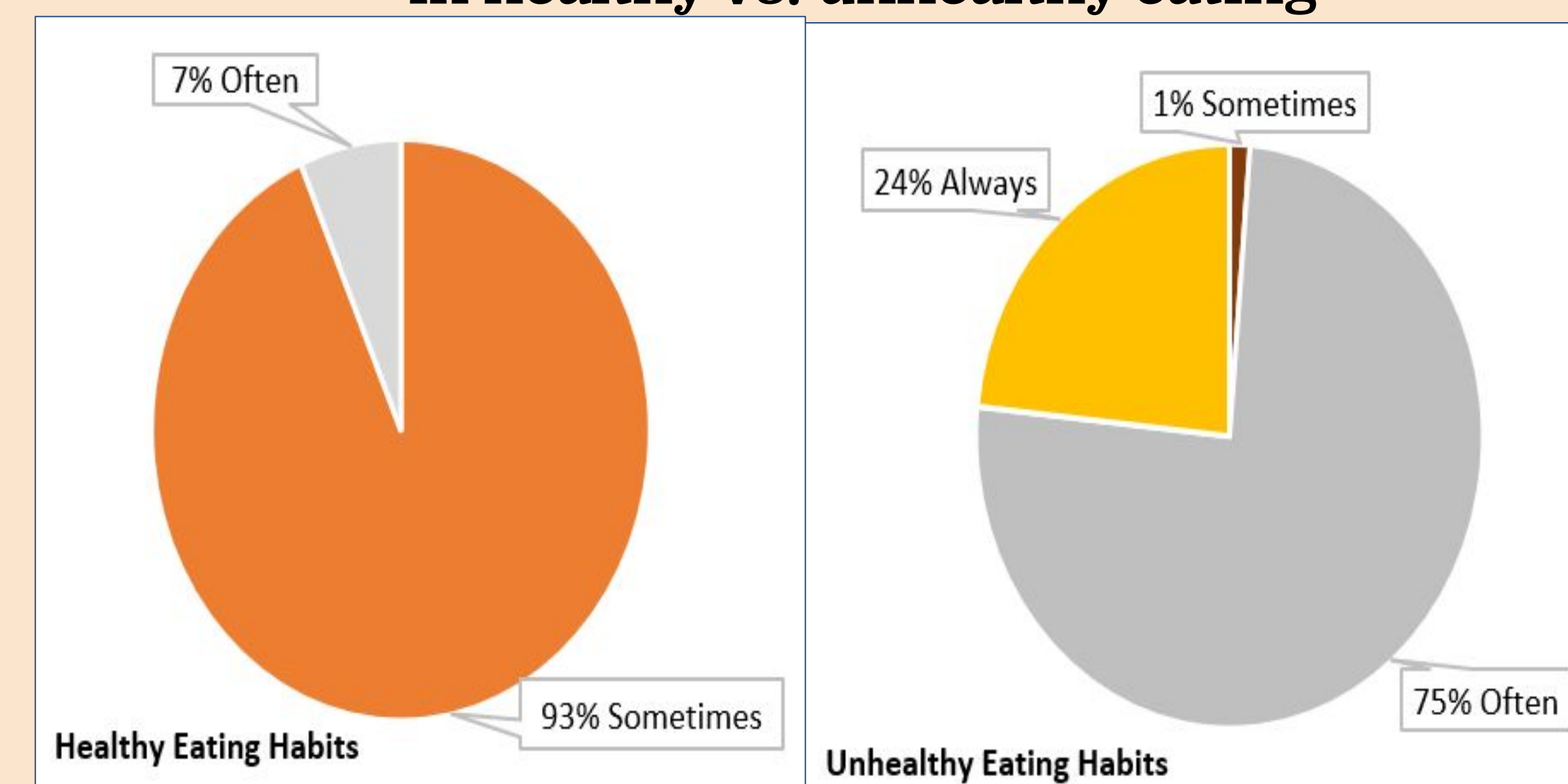
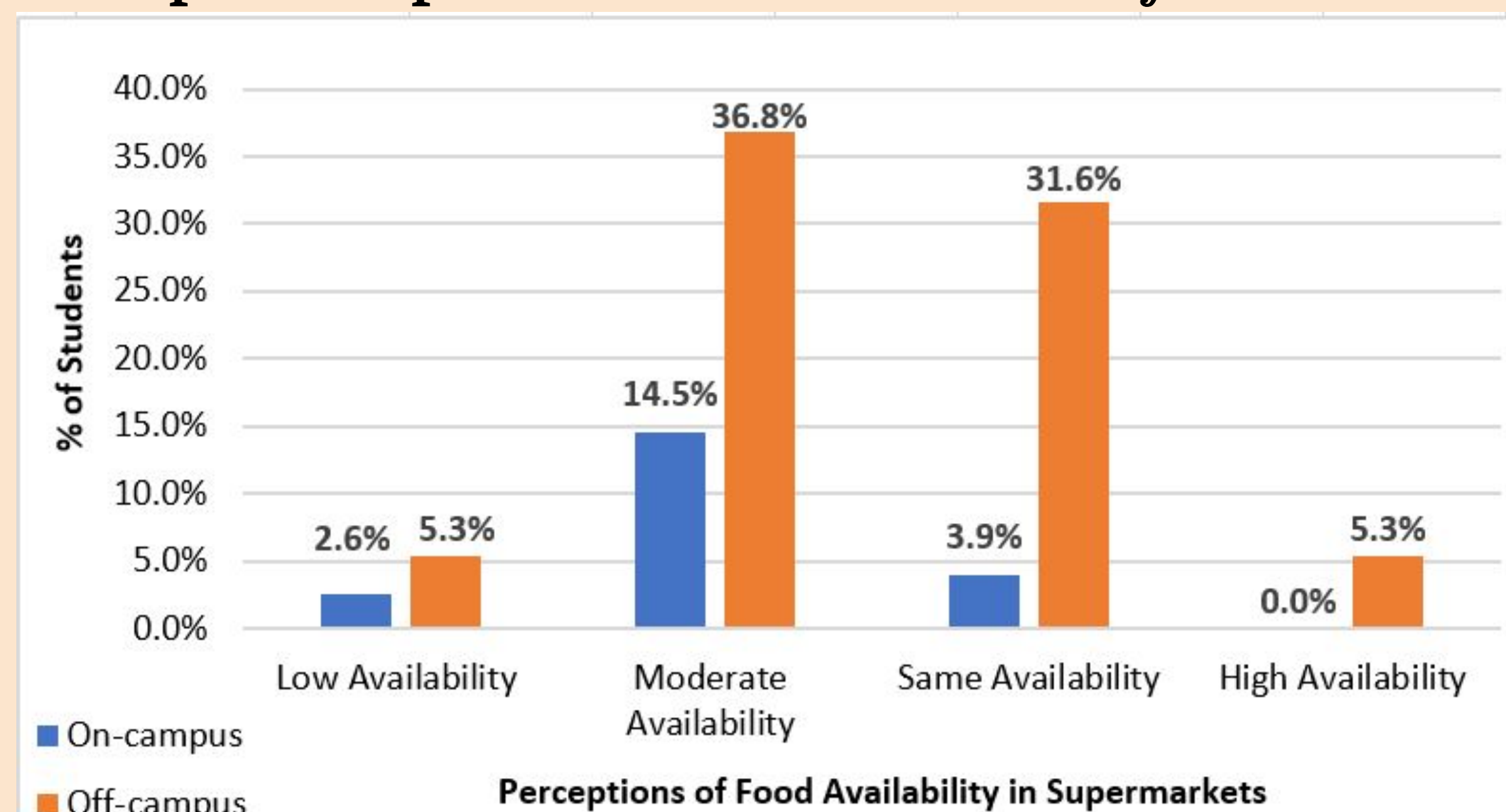


Figure 2: Comparison of how often students engage in healthy vs. unhealthy eating



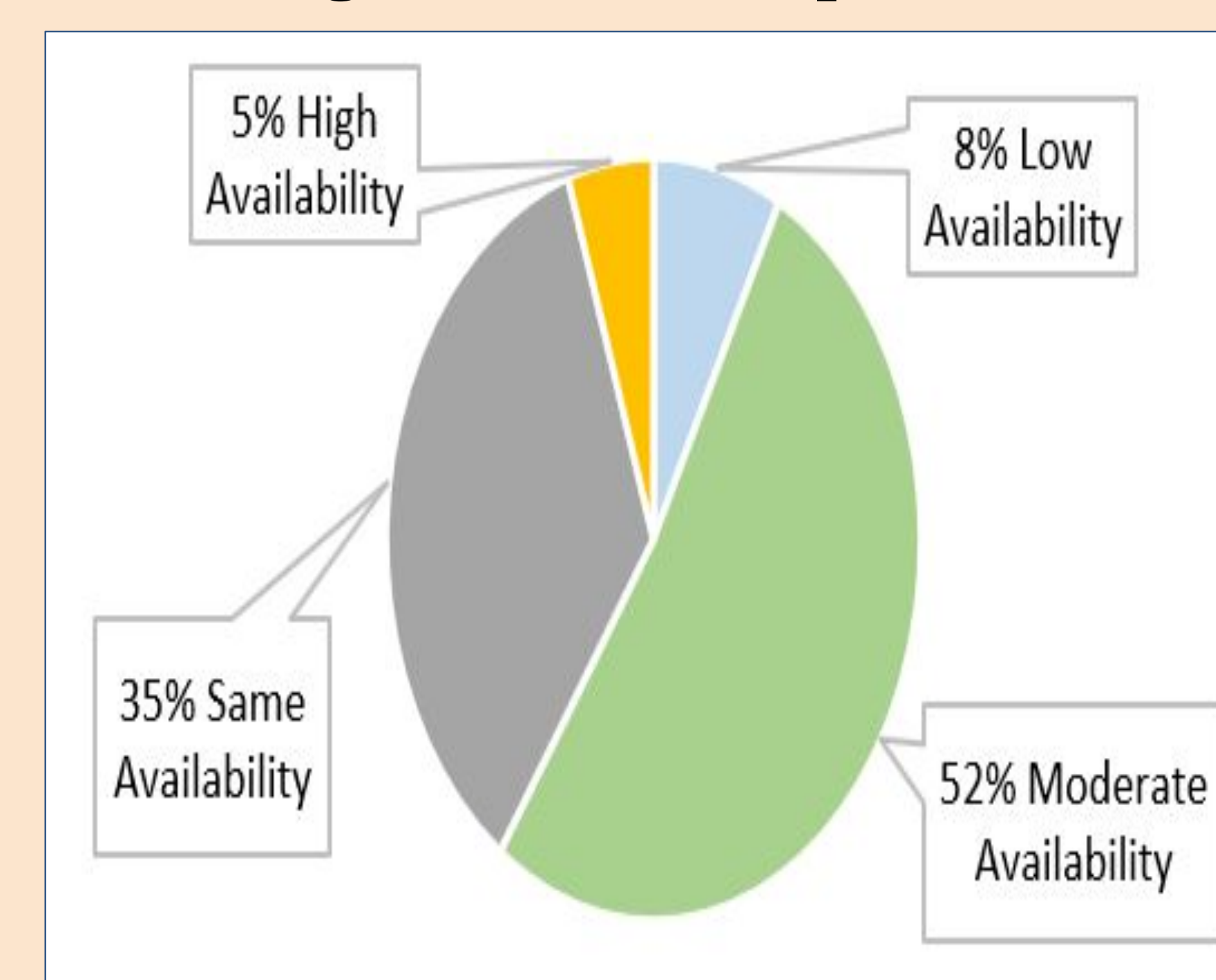
Perceptions of food accessibility as well as healthy and unhealthy eating habits were not associated with students' living status, age, or current year in school ($p > 0.05$).

Figure 3: Students living on or off campus and perceived food availability



No association was found between living status (on or off campus) and food availability in supermarkets during the COVID-19 pandemic ($p = 0.220$)

Figure 4: Perceived food availability during the COVID-19 pandemic



Conclusion

- Students perceived that food insecurity and eating habits became a heightened issue during the pandemic but no significant associations were found between student characteristics (demographics) and food accessibility or eating habits.
- Further research should be done to look at the effects of the pandemic on food accessibility.

Policy Implications

- The university should increase advertising and media campaigns to promote existing food pantries on campus to students.

Acknowledgements

- We would like to thank all students who took the time to participate and complete the survey.
- We'd also like to thank Professor Romero and her TAs, Rita Hedo and Ricardo Flores, for all their help and support throughout this project.

References

- Nazmi, A., Martinez, S., Byrd, A., Robinson, D., Bianco, S., Maguire, J., Crutchfield, R. M., Condon, K., & Ritchie, L., (2018). A systematic review of food insecurity among US students in higher education. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*, 13(1); 1-16. DOI: 10.1080/19320248.2018.1484316
- El Zein, A., Shelnut, K. P., Colby, S., Vilaro, M. J., Zhou, W., Greene, G., Olfert, M. D., Riggsbee, K., Morrell, J. S., & Mathews, A. E. (2019). Prevalence and correlates of food insecurity among U.S. college students: a multi-institutional study. *BMC public health*, 19(1), 660. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-6943-6>