

## Summary of Student Perspectives Series Meeting, November 5, 2020

Trustees in Attendance: Michael J. Klingensmith, John Liew, Gregory W. Wendt

Students in Attendance: Itzel Velázquez (4<sup>th</sup> Year, College, Undergraduate Liaison), Steven Wendeborn (2<sup>nd</sup> Year MBA student, Chicago Booth, Graduate Liaison), Mohsen Ehab Amiri (2<sup>nd</sup> Year MBA student, Chicago Booth), Ryan Choi (3<sup>rd</sup> Year, College), Max Freedman (3<sup>rd</sup> Year, Law School), Joseph Haydt (7<sup>th</sup> Year PhD student, Humanities Division and Divinity), Kimberly Liu (3<sup>rd</sup> Year PhD student, Physical Sciences Division), Summer Long (2<sup>nd</sup> Year, College), Anton Outkine (1<sup>st</sup> Year, College), Alessandra Veinbachs (4<sup>th</sup> Year, College)

The topic of the November 5 meeting was the virtual learning experience of UChicago students during the global COVID-19 pandemic and its lasting impact on the University. In advance of the meeting, which was held over Zoom, the Trustees received a memorandum from the student liaisons that included a summary of data obtained through related surveys administered by Student Government and Graduate Council earlier this year. The memo also proposed the following subjects for discussion:

- 1. Advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning:** The nature of the pandemic required the University to take urgent action and implement Zoom-based classes on an extremely compressed timeframe. Now that we have the advantage of direct experience with virtual learning, what has worked well, what challenges have we faced, and what will endure once the current crisis has passed?
- 2. Long-term effects regarding on- and off-campus life:** The pandemic has called long-established assumptions into question, such as the emphasis placed on centrally locating the student body in a physical campus. How have the University's plans and objectives for undergraduate and graduate housing in Hyde Park shifted as a result of the pandemic? What other aspects of the higher education model will be reexamined as a result of COVID-19?
- 3. Mental and physical health:** Data collected from both undergraduate and graduate students have shown a significant impact on mental health since the beginning of the pandemic, although in varied ways (e.g., feelings of isolation, increased stressors associated with family duties or financial hardship, etc.). What additional measures would be helpful to support students, both during the current crisis and beyond?

Mr. Klingensmith opened the meeting by noting the very unusual nature of 2020 and the trustees' interest in hearing about how the year's circumstances have affected student life. He then briefly described the role of the Board versus that of University administrators: Trustees

provide institutional oversight, help make strategic decisions and are important in philanthropic efforts, but are not involved in the day-to-day campus operations and management of the University. He also stressed that the trustees present at today's meeting may offer their own opinions and perspectives, but do not speak on behalf of the Board or University. Mr. Klingensmith then invited the students and trustees present to introduce themselves.

Following these introductions, the student liaisons remarked on the diverse experiences of the assembled students over the past nine months and asked how the virtual learning setting has been received? Several of the students agreed that, overall, academic life has not suffered. For some courses, especially foreign language classes, Zoom and its features (e.g., breakout rooms) function particularly well from both the instructors' and students' perspectives. The pivot to open notes and recorded lectures was touted as helpful to many students, giving them more freedom to learn at their own pace and schedule. The proliferation of online recordings for courses and co-curricular events was also mentioned as an advantage, especially as it opens up access to academic life for those students who are currently abroad or far from Chicago. Faculty and other instructors are often willing to stay on Zoom after class meetings and other sessions to chat informally with students, which can be very helpful for professional development.

Academic life has not been without its challenges, however. Courses in STEM have been less satisfying because of the absence of hands-on learning in the laboratory. For those graduate students with instructional roles, access to the right digital tools, such as iPads and other devices, is essential for effective teaching but may not be uniformly available. Student research in the sciences has also been affected; some students have been cut off entirely from research opportunities or have seen a decline in overall camaraderie in lab settings because so few researchers are able to work simultaneously.

One student noted that a full day of classes on Zoom is exhausting in ways that a similar schedule in-person is not. Another commented that successful learning on Zoom depends on the quality of the physical space students have around them. Some students lack quiet, distraction-free spaces to fully engage online, and may also be hindered by poor Wi-Fi or a sub-optimal computer. Synchronous courses on Zoom can place students who are in different time zones at a real disadvantage if their classes and professors' office hours take place very late at night (or very early in the morning).

Many of the students present have at least one in-person class in their autumn schedule. The College, Law School and Chicago Booth School of Business have been particularly keen to offer in-person learning experiences for their students, and all courses in the Pritzker School of Medicine are in-person. Nevertheless, the health and safety precautions necessary to make in-person learning possible are not conducive to students socializing in the minutes before and after class meetings, and in "hybrid" classes where some students attend in-person and the others via Zoom, the other students in the classroom may not be individuals you know. For these reasons, socializing is completely removed from the classroom for many students this quarter.

The students described a variety of perspectives on the advantages of being on campus versus learning from afar. For some, not seeing their friends or even spending much actual time on campus made being in Hyde Park not so different from being back at home. Others said that it was still preferable to live off-campus with friends than to be alone at home, which can be very isolating. For those students who have permission to return to their P.I.'s lab, the advantages of being able to stay on track with their research outweigh the social challenges imposed by the pandemic. Unlike continuing students, who already have a network of friends to rely on and with whom to potentially share an off-campus "Zoom House," first-year students have had to make special efforts to meet new people and make friends this fall. In the first few warm-weather weeks of the Autumn Quarter, campus grounds have served as their "common room," with the actual congregation spaces in the residence halls being largely off-limits. Shared meals with a close friend circle and walks to class have been important social outlets for new students. In some degree programs, it is extremely important to network and get to know classmates who could be important contacts for future professional endeavors; for these students, the potential health risks of moving to Chicago and taking advantage of whatever in-person options are available are worth it.

When asked about the University's libraries, the students were generally satisfied with access and services. Law students can reserve space in the Law School library to study and also have access to the Green Lounge and auditorium in the Law School building. The Mansueto Reading Room, Regenstein Library and Harper Memorial Library Reading Room all offer students three-hour reservation slots. Students reported that because these spaces are heavily de-densified and supplied with self-service cleaning carts, they feel safe. The Libraries have expanded their digital resources and pick-up options, so accessing needed materials has not been an issue. While there are fewer on-campus spaces for students than in typical quarters, the temporary tents that have been erected in key locations (e.g., Quad Club tennis courts, Hutchinson Courtyard, Bartlett Quad, Ratner) have been popular and are generally easier to access since they do not require an advance reservation.

With respect to RSO and other co-curricular student activities, the trustees heard that some student groups have been hard to sustain remotely if their mission and activities do not translate easily to a virtual platform. Others have been more successful; one RSO held a consulting webinar for its members and used its funding allocation to provide guest speakers with honoraria, and the UChicago Grill Club organized a virtual grilling demo with a master griller. Generally, many RSO budgets are going unspent as they cannot hold their regular activities, many of which involve providing meals and refreshments to members and event participants. Current University restrictions on permitting student groups to provide food delivery subsidies or restaurant gift cards to members has dampened involvement in many cases. The students noted that peer institutions have figured out ways around the tax implications of subsidizing food purchases for students who participate in virtual events, so why UChicago cannot also do this is a source of some frustration.

To the question of whether students would still choose to come to campus or take a gap year (or similar break in their studies) if they could do it all again, responses were mixed and appeared to depend on the students' class year. First- and second-year students have faced the greatest dislocation in terms of their anticipated (pre-pandemic) versus actual experience. For these students, social life and extra-curricular opportunities have been so limited that it has been really tough to form relationships. In retrospect, a gap year would have been the better option. Students in their final years are more likely to want to graduate and move on with their lives. They also have the benefit of established social networks, so meeting new people and making friends is less of an issue. However, they are very cognizant of what they (and new students) are missing out on – including annual traditions like Summer Breeze and June convocation.

The students expressed satisfaction with the University's implementation of health and safety measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 exposure and spread. Students feel physically safe on campus and both the mandatory and voluntary testing programs are working well with fast turnaround times for results. Resident assistants in the residence halls report high confidence in the isolation housing and contact tracing set up to respond to positive student cases. However, Chicago Booth students would like to see a voluntary testing depot at the Gleacher Center, citing the inconvenience of the currently available Hyde Park locations for students who live and take classes downtown.

When prompted, the students shared several observations and suggestions for the University moving forward. Some of these focused on the importance of transparency in communications and providing more details in campus-wide announcements; the recent decision to alter key dates in the academic calendar and the outbreak of COVID-19 cases among Chicago Booth students were cited as two examples. The College's decision to bundle Autumn Quarter Humanities core classes with housing assignments apparently led to angst and unhappiness among some first-year students, many of whom felt their concerns were not adequately addressed. The University was also urged to take steps to level the playing field for students learning remotely given that virtual instruction exacerbates differences and inequities. Instructors should follow standardized processes for effective online pedagogy and all students should have access to adequate Wi-Fi and learning technology. Finally, both graduate and undergraduate students present commented on the extremely challenging job market for graduates and the need for those offices that provide professional development and career support to take the steps necessary to alleviate the stress caused by job insecurity and economic uncertainty.

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES SERIES: AUTUMN 2020 MEMORANDUM

TO: Student Perspectives Series Trustees  
FROM: Itzel Velázquez, Undergraduate Liaison to the Board of Trustees  
Steven Wendeborn, Graduate Liaison to the Board of Trustees  
DATE: October 29, 2020  
SUBJECT: Strategic Themes and Question Prompts for [November X] SPS Meeting

We look forward to meeting with you soon to discuss **the virtual learning experience and its lasting effects on the University at large**. Having experienced first-hand the challenges and opportunities associated with remote and hybrid classes, the students in attendance are excited to share our views and hear your perspectives on the long-term ramifications. In advance of our meeting, we are proposing the following themes and question prompts for your consideration, which we hope can instigate a robust and productive conversation:

1. **Advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning:** The nature of the pandemic required the University to take urgent action and implement Zoom-based classes on an extremely compressed timeframe. Now that we have the advantage of direct experience with virtual learning, what has worked well, what challenges have we faced, and what will endure once the current crisis has passed?
2. **Long-term effects regarding on- and off-campus life:** The pandemic has called long-established assumptions into question, such as the emphasis placed on centrally locating the student body in a physical campus. How have the University's plans and objectives for undergraduate and graduate housing in Hyde Park shifted as a result of the pandemic? What other aspects of the higher education model will be reexamined as a result of COVID-19?
3. **Mental and physical health:** Data collected from both undergraduate and graduate students have shown a significant impact on mental health since the beginning of the pandemic, although in varied ways (e.g., feelings of isolation, increased stressors associated with family duties or financial hardship, etc.). What additional measures would be helpful to support students, both during the current crisis and beyond?

As we move through our conversation, we look forward to learning how the Trustees' experience in their respective fields of expertise inform their opinions on these questions. The students selected to attend the meeting are excited to share their perspectives with the representatives from the Board. We sincerely appreciate the time and energy of all parties involved in making the year's first SPS meeting a success, and look forward to a productive conversation.

## The virtual learning experience and its lasting effects on the University at large

### 1. Advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning

On March 18, 2020, President Zimmer sent an email to the University community that described, among other things, the way in which “the challenge that the COVID-19 pandemic creates has a quality that is discordant with many aspects of how our community functions.”<sup>1</sup> Zimmer further described the urgent need for faculty and students to work together to understand remote education, and over the next two weeks, the University experienced one of the most significant pedagogical shifts since its inception as students prepared for a fully remote spring quarter. This year’s fall quarter has seen further evolution in the academic landscape as various departments have experimented with dual-modality classes. As the recent events at Booth have demonstrated, the instructional system is characterized by flux and an extreme sensitivity to external events.

That said, UChicago will certainly outlast the pandemic. Although the timeline itself remains uncertain, the University will at some point have the option to return to the same pre-pandemic operational framework that existed in 2019. The question remains, though, what aspects of virtual learning will persist, and to what extent will the University be transformed as a result of our experience with remote instruction? Throughout its history, **UChicago has often been at the forefront of change with other institutions following its lead**; we expect that the same will be true following the COVID-19 pandemic.

UChicago Innovations<sup>2</sup>

The Quarter System

First Sociology  
Department

First Doctoral Program  
in Business

### 2-3. Campus life and student health

In order to collect a robust understanding of students’ perspectives, the Liaisons each distributed an all-graduate and all-undergraduate student survey to their respective constituents in June and October, respectively, of this year. The contents of each survey are included as appendices to this document, and contain data that have already informed decisions at the administrative level. We are confident that the major points identified in each document are accurate representations of the issues at the forefront of students’ minds. These pain points are helpful catalysts for conversations regarding the shape of the University in ten, twenty, or fifty years from now. Besides the more immediate needs that were cited, such as easier access to resources and mental health support, the surveys also conveyed a strong desire for a sense of community. Whether this desire will ultimately manifest in a stronger push to return to the ‘old normal,’ or whether the University will be pushed to foster and create communities virtually in ways that have not previously been seen in higher education is the crux of the second and third main points on the previous page.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter regarding the COVID-19 challenge, Robert J. Zimmer, March 18, 2020

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.uchicago.edu/breakthroughs/>



## STUDENT LIAISONS TO THE BOARD

2019-2020

### UNDERGRADUATE LIAISON: Itzel Velázquez



Itzel is a fourth year in the College majoring in Neuroscience and Psychology. She is involved in Peer Health Exchange, the Society for Scientists of Color, and is an author on publications in the Awh Vogel Lab, where she studies working memory capacity and visual attention. She plans to continue to graduate school post-graduation.

Outside of the rigorous academics UChicago brings, Itzel enjoys running along the lakefront, dancing, and finding new places to eat in Chicago.

### GRADUATE LIAISON: Steven Wendeborn



Steven is a second-year student at the Booth School of Business and an alum of the college. As an undergraduate at UChicago, he majored in Economics and Law, Letters & Society and was a member of the Maroon Key Society, as well as a recipient of the Howell Murray Alumni Award. After graduation, Steven joined J.P. Morgan's investment banking division in New York, where he will return next year as an associate in their Mergers & Acquisitions group.

Originally from Singapore, Steven has lived and worked in Seoul, Beijing, and Sydney in addition to Minnesota and New York. Outside of Booth, he enjoys open-water swimming, learning new languages, and travelling.

## STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE NOVEMBER 5, 2020 SPS MEETING

### **Mohsen Ehab Amiri – Bahrain**

Mohsen is a second-year in the Booth School of Business. He was born in Los Angeles, but grew up in his native Bahrain. He attended St. Christopher's School in Bahrain, and then obtained a dual law degree from the London School of Economics and the University of Southern California. He worked in investment banking and private equity prior to Booth and is returning to Citigroup's investment banking division in New York, where he spent his summer.

### **Ryan Choi - Seoul, South Korea**

Ryan is a third-year in the College, majoring in biology with a specialization in the quantitative sciences. He serves as the Chair of the Student Government COVID-19 Committee and is passionate in finding holistic solutions for the Hyde Park community.

### **Max Freedman – Westport, CT**

Max is a third-year in the Law School and an alum of the College. On campus, he is involved in Graduate Council, the Law Students Association, Jewish Law Students Association, the Federalist Society, and the Law School Musical. He also works in the Employment Discrimination Clinic. After graduation, Max will join the Restructuring group at Kirkland & Ellis.

### **Joseph Haydt – Littleton, CO**

Joseph is a joint degree student in Germanic studies and theology, with an emphasis on the religious thought of the Age of Goethe. He graduated in 2014 from the University of Colorado at Boulder with a B.A. in German. In his time at UChicago, Joseph has taught in the College on topics ranging from the German fairytale to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche, in addition to serving as a language instructor in German and ancient Greek.

### **Charles Liang – Wexford, PA**

Charles is a second-year PhD student in the Pritzker School of Molecular Engineering doing research on quantum materials. He earned his B.S. in applied physics with a minor in applied mathematics from Columbia University in 2018.

### **Kimberly Liu – Naperville, IL**

Kim is a third-year PhD student in computational and applied mathematics and the Graduate Council Co-President. Kim served as Vice President of Social Programming on Graduate Council and is a member of the Association for Women in Mathematics. Prior to coming to the University of Chicago, Kim attended Northwestern University and Dartmouth College, earning her undergraduate degree in mathematics and economics. Outside of academia, she has interned in quantitative finance roles.



**Summer Long - Granite City, IL**

Summer is a second-year in the College, majoring in Statistics and Public Policy. She serves as a member of College Council, and has served on the Student Government Finance Committee, overseeing the allocation of funds to all 450 recognized student organizations.

**Anton Outkine - Chicago, IL**

Anton is a first-year in the College. He created a program that matches incoming first-year students with one another to “add drop” into their preferred course, which can have greater implications in following years.

**Alessandra Veinbachs - Stow, MA**

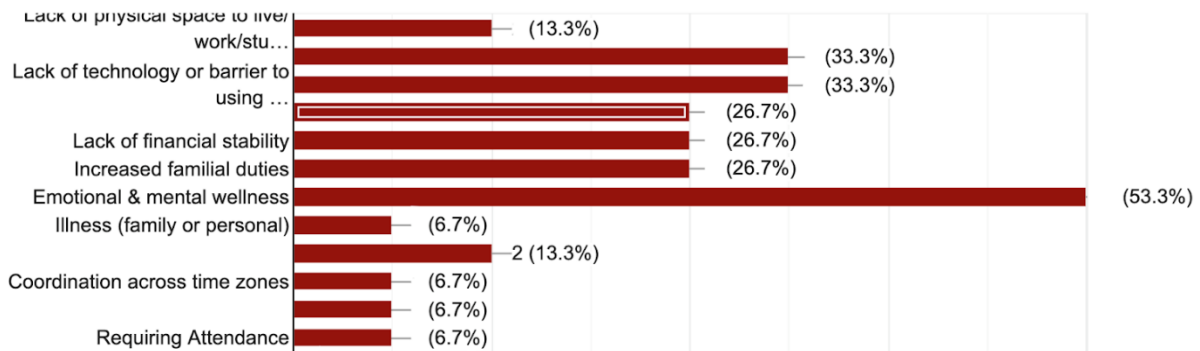
Ali is a fourth-year in the College, majoring in biological sciences and minoring in neuroscience. She’s served as a co-chair of Student Government's Health and Wellness Committee, focusing on helping put together COVID training modules in preparation for returning to campus and thinking of ways to turn many of their initiatives virtual.

## APPENDIX A

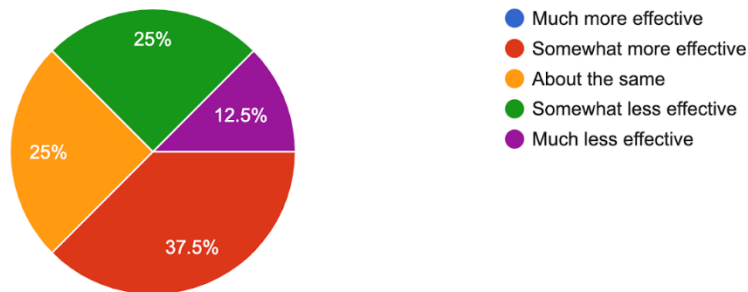
### COVID-19 Survey Conducted on Undergraduate Students (n = 52)

The following responses demonstrate student input in a survey conducted during the second week of Autumn quarter. The aim was to gauge student experiences regarding testing, academic and social experiences both on- and off-campus, financial aid, and other factors.

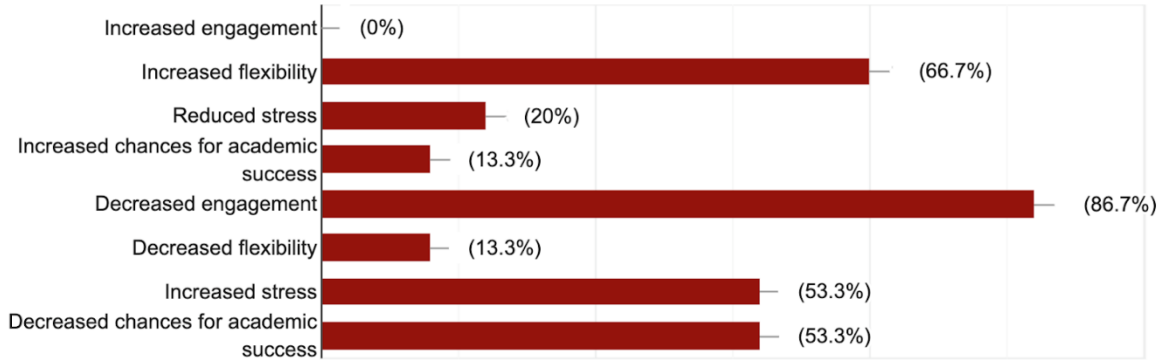
What barriers currently exist to your virtual learning and academic experience? Check all that apply.



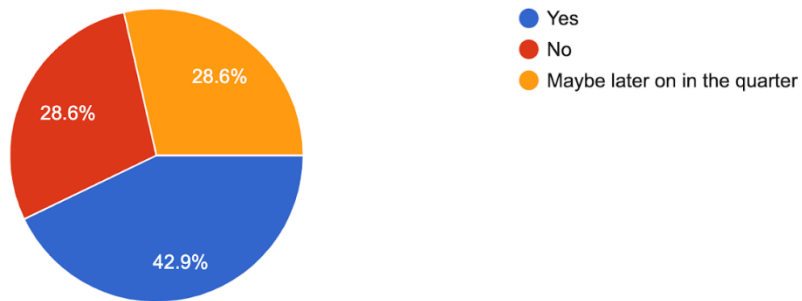
How effective have virtual classes this Autumn been compared to Spring Quarter's classes?



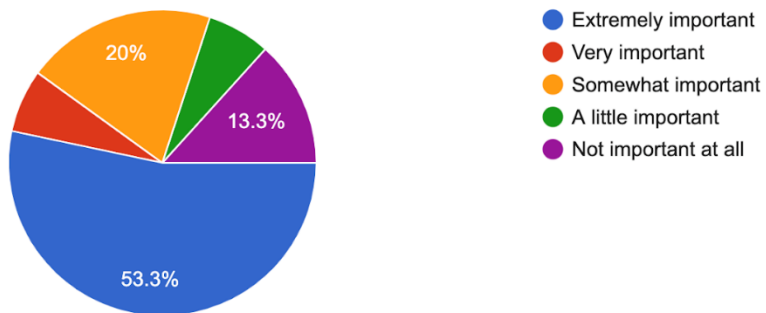
In what ways have virtual classes improved/worsened your academic experience? Select all that apply.



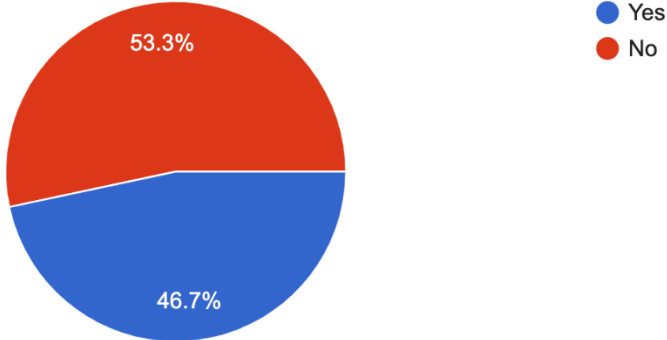
With libraries and on-campus resources slowly opening with limited capacity, do you plan on visiting campus to use these resources?



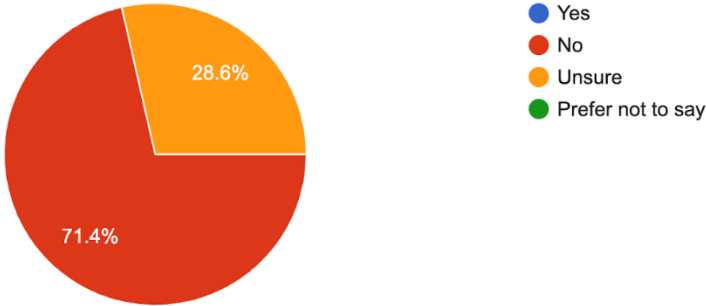
Given a virtual learning experience in the fall, how important is it for you to receive a tuition reimbursement/discount?



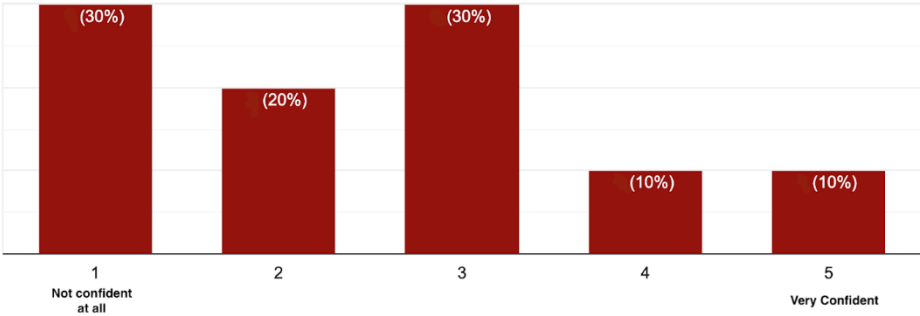
Are you an Odyssey Scholar?



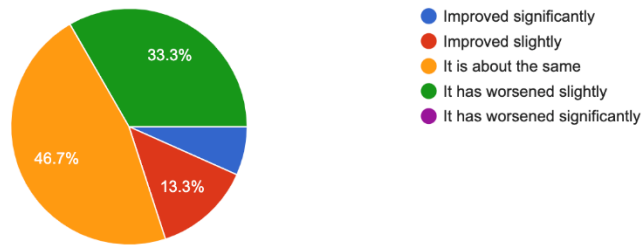
If you are planning on working after graduating, do you have a job offer after graduation?



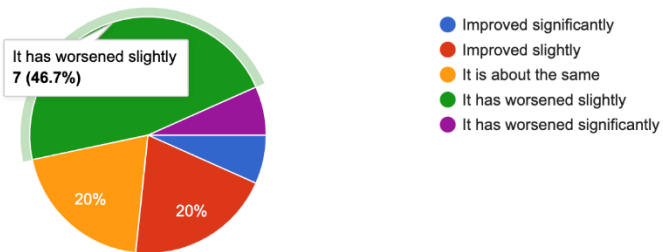
How confident do you feel about the current job market in your field and how likely you are to get a job post-graduation?



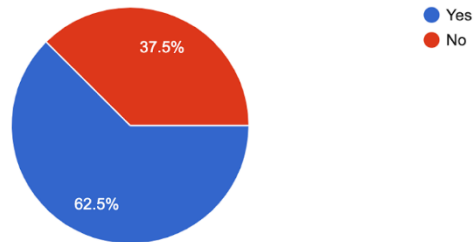
Since the beginning of Autumn Quarter, how would you describe your physical health?



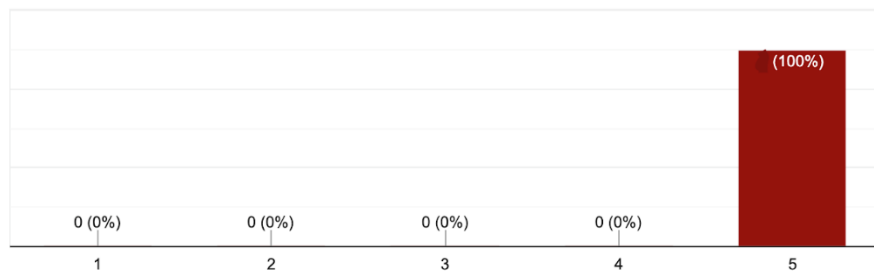
Since the beginning of Autumn Quarter, how would you describe your emotional/mental health?



Off-Campus Students: Did you sign up for the Voluntary Testing Program?



If you did sign up, how easy has the process been to get tested?



# APPENDIX B

# 2020 All-Graduate Student Survey

Selected Results and Data  
UChicago Graduate Council

**CONFIDENTIAL**



i. Demographics

ii. Thoughts for Fall Quarter

iii. Necessary Resources

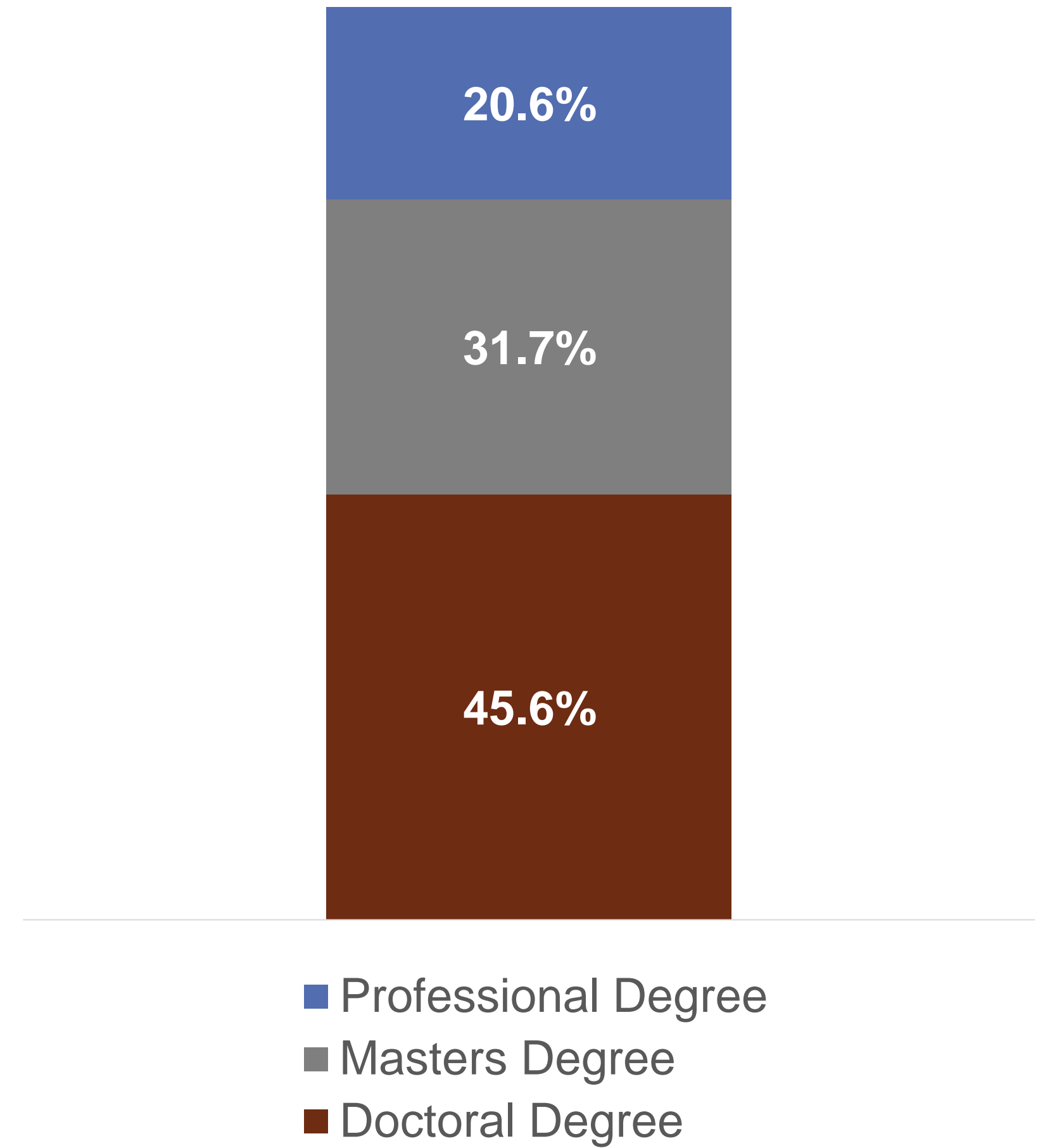
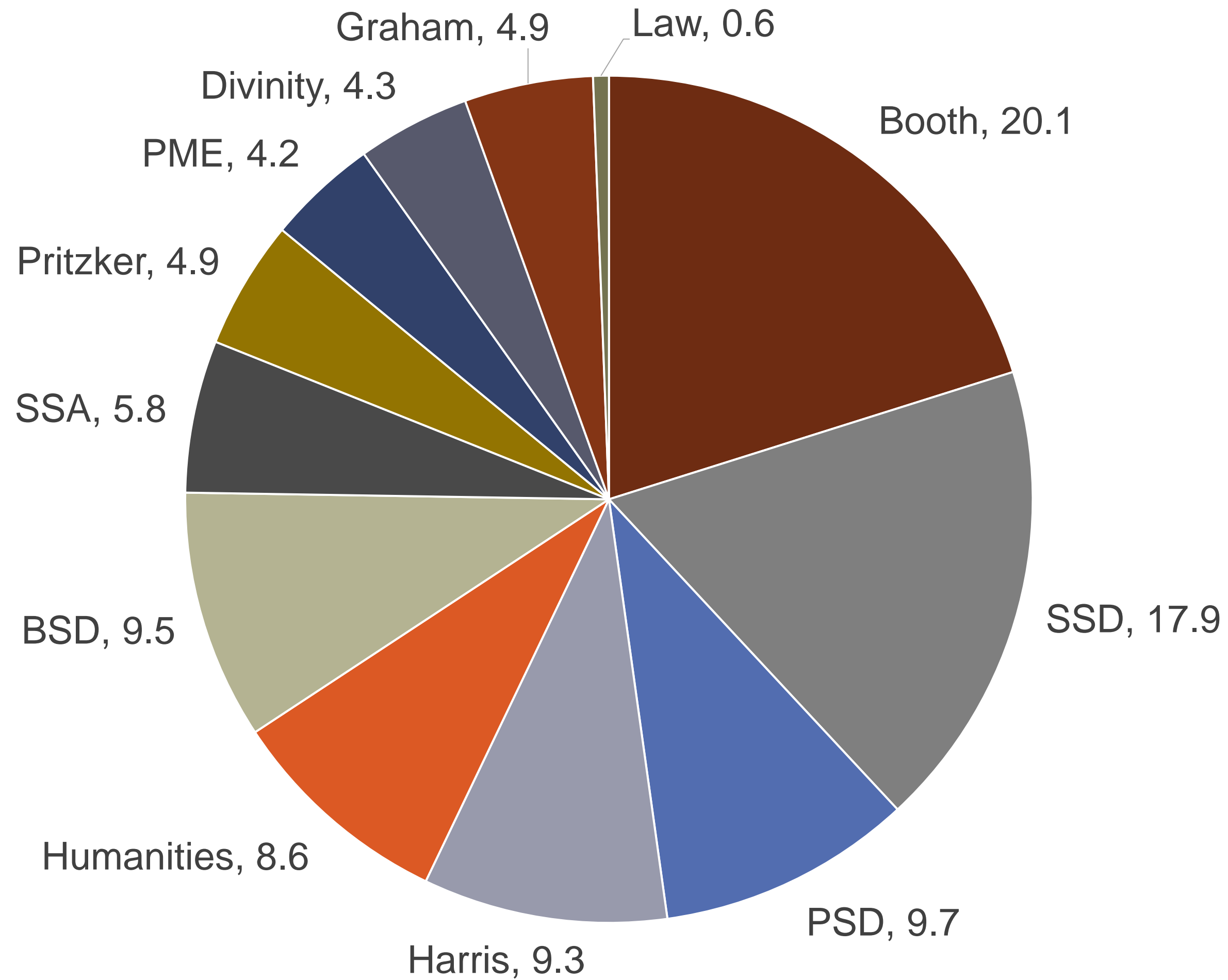
iv. Primary Barriers and Issues

v. Grading

vi. Wellbeing



# Survey Respondent Demographics (%)

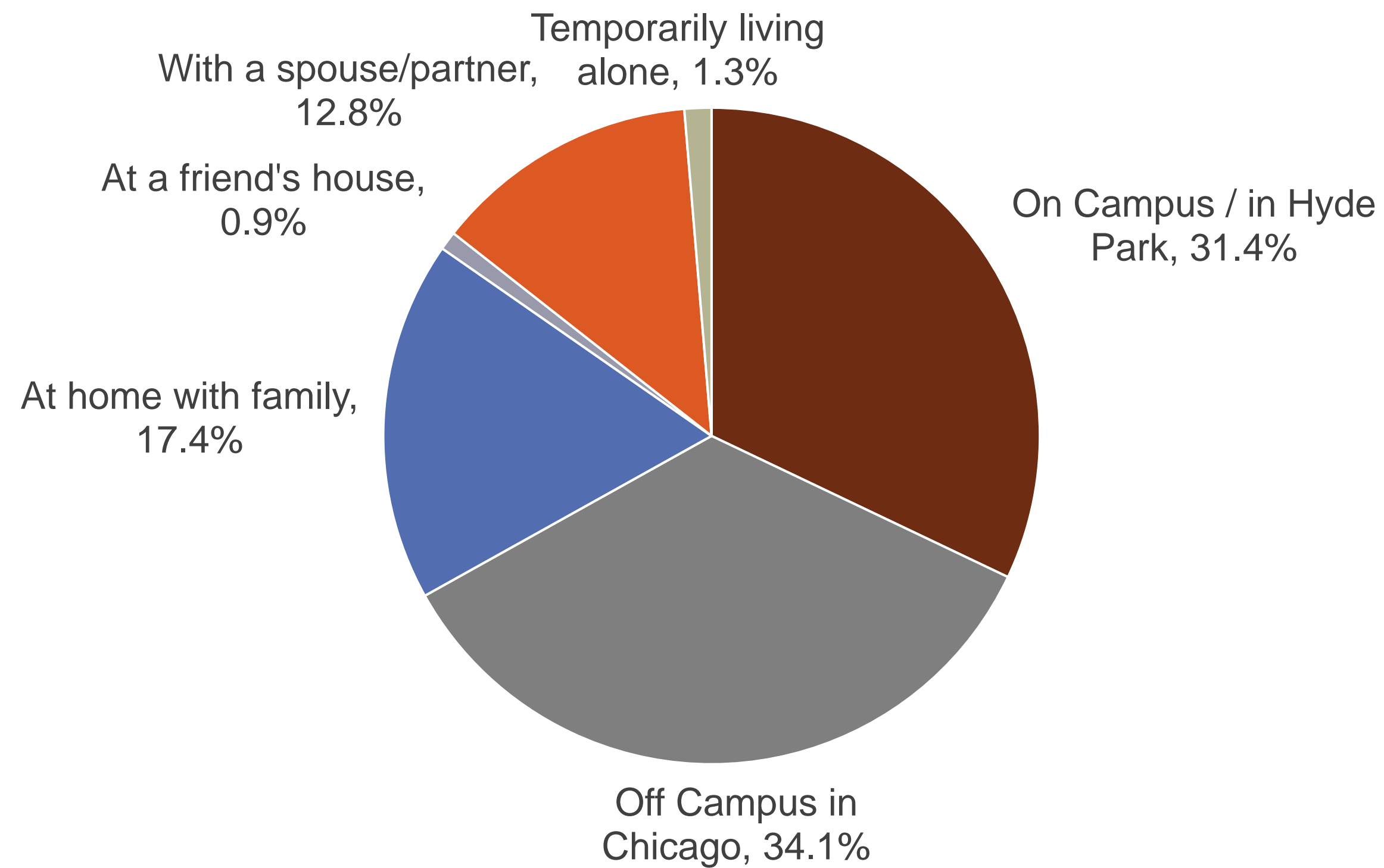


**Total Responses: 1,202**

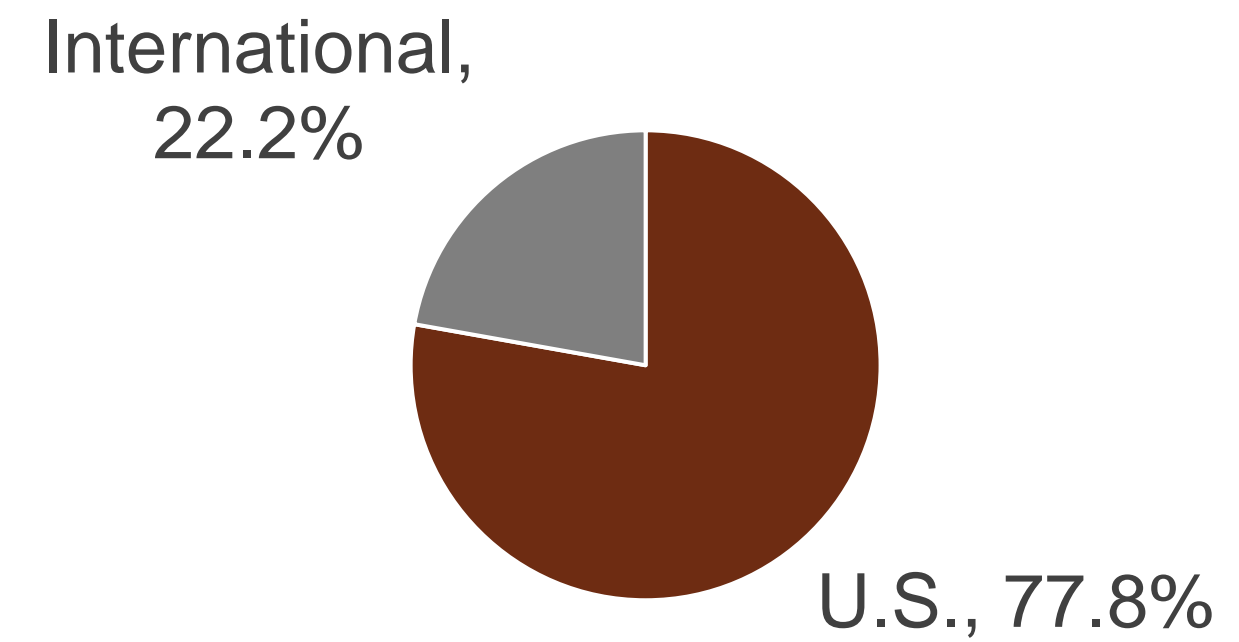


# Geographic Distribution

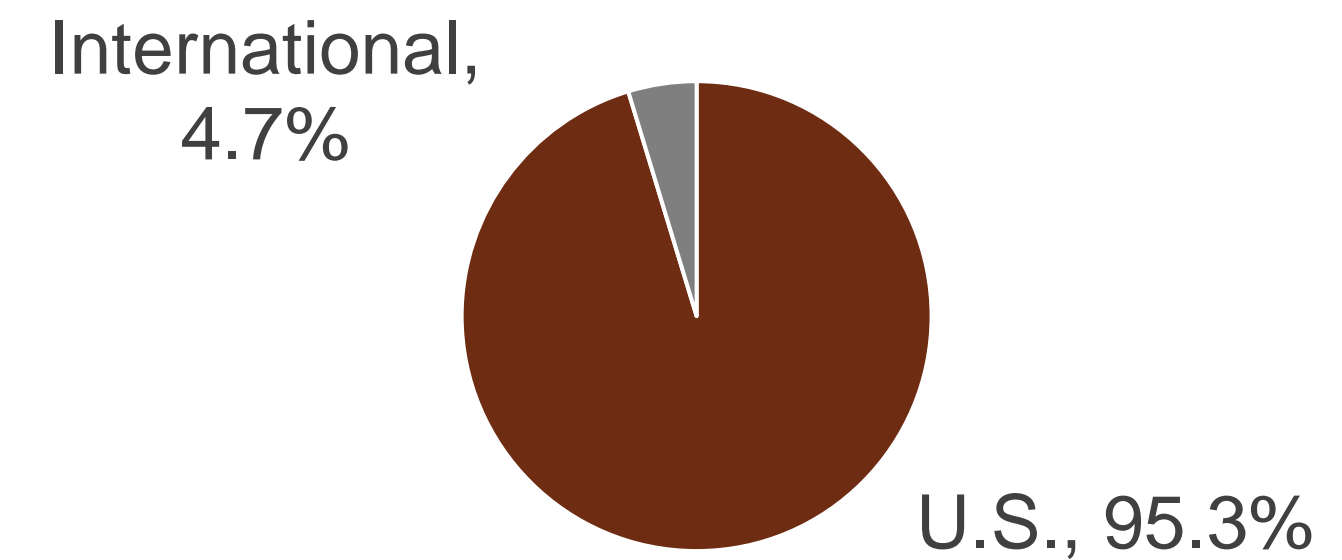
## Current Living Situation



## Permanent Address



## Current Address



# Thoughts for the Upcoming Fall Quarter (Part 1)

No clear consensus among survey respondents with regard to the most preferred method of instruction for fall quarter

#1 (2.12)

Hybrid Approach (Virtual & In-Person Components)

#2 (2.60)

Full Quarter In-Person (Identical to Fall 2019)

#3 (2.71)

Online with Possibility of Return Mid-Quarter

#4 (2.95)

Full Quarter Online (Identical to Spring 2020)

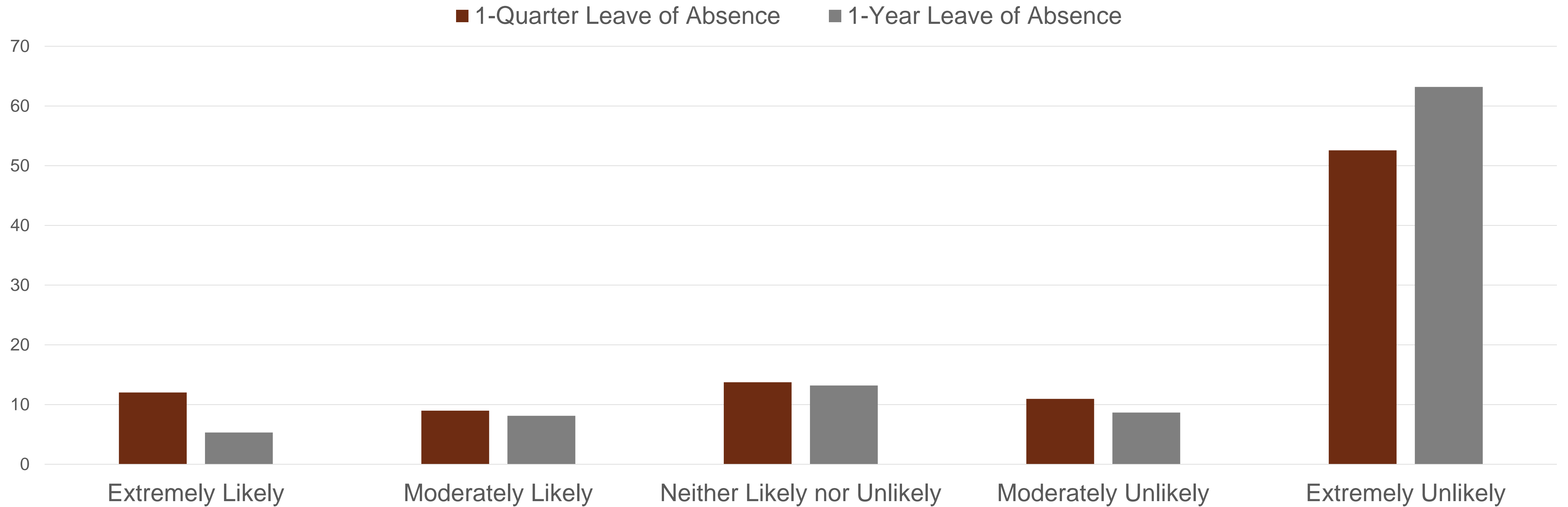
Text responses were emphatic and divided regarding these specific options



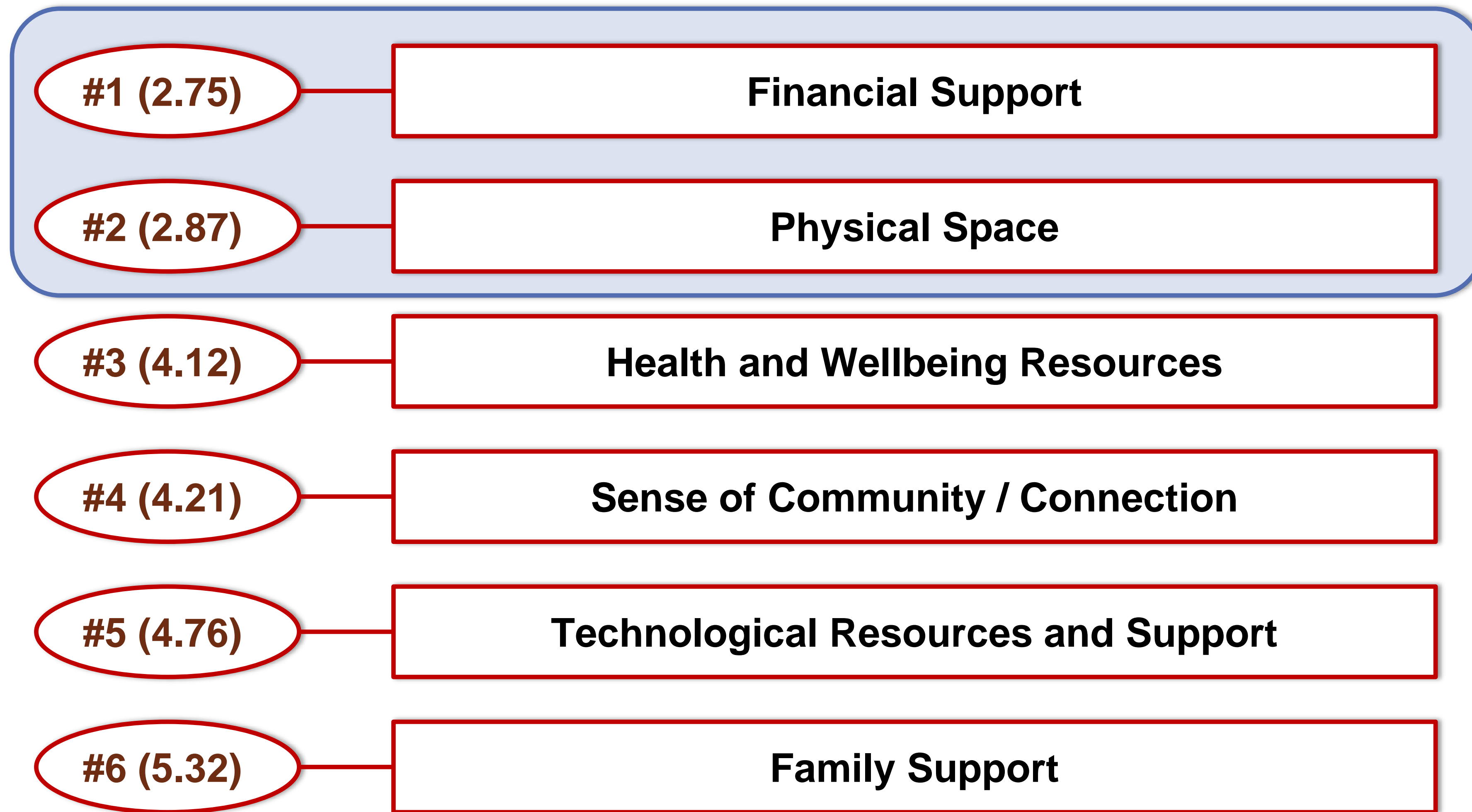
Note: number in parentheses indicates the average rank, i.e. (2.12) indicates an average position of 2.12 across all ranked lists created by survey respondents for the associated issue.

# Thoughts for the Upcoming Fall Quarter (Part 2)

Leave of absence likelihood if fall quarter were to be held online

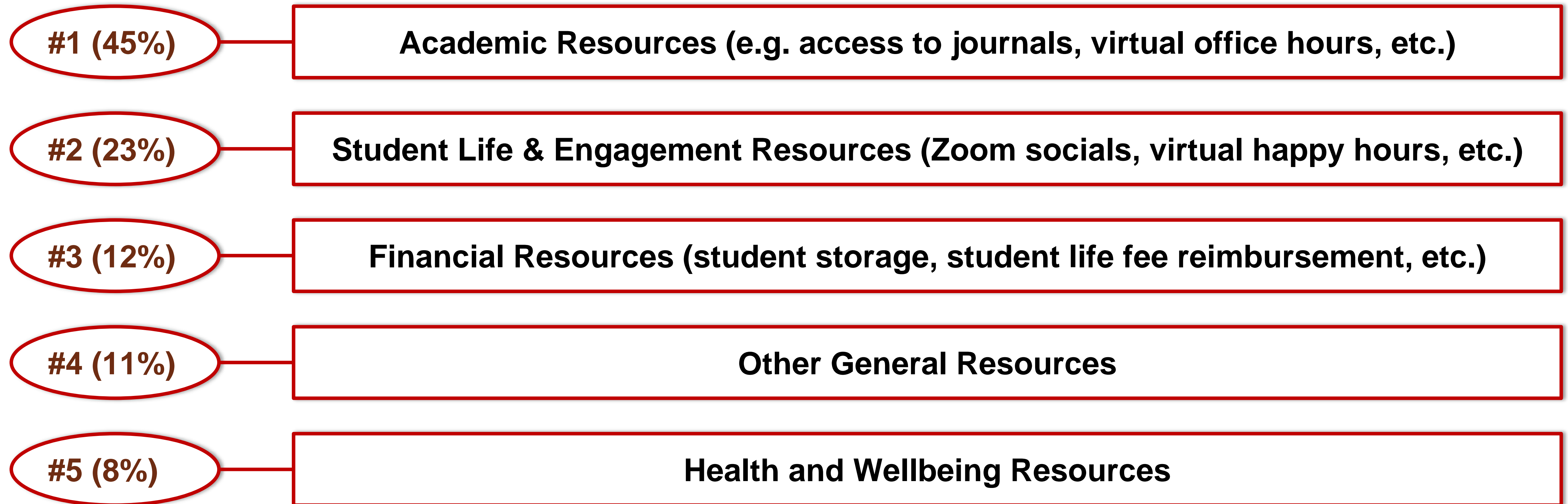


# Ranked List of Critical Resources for Student Success

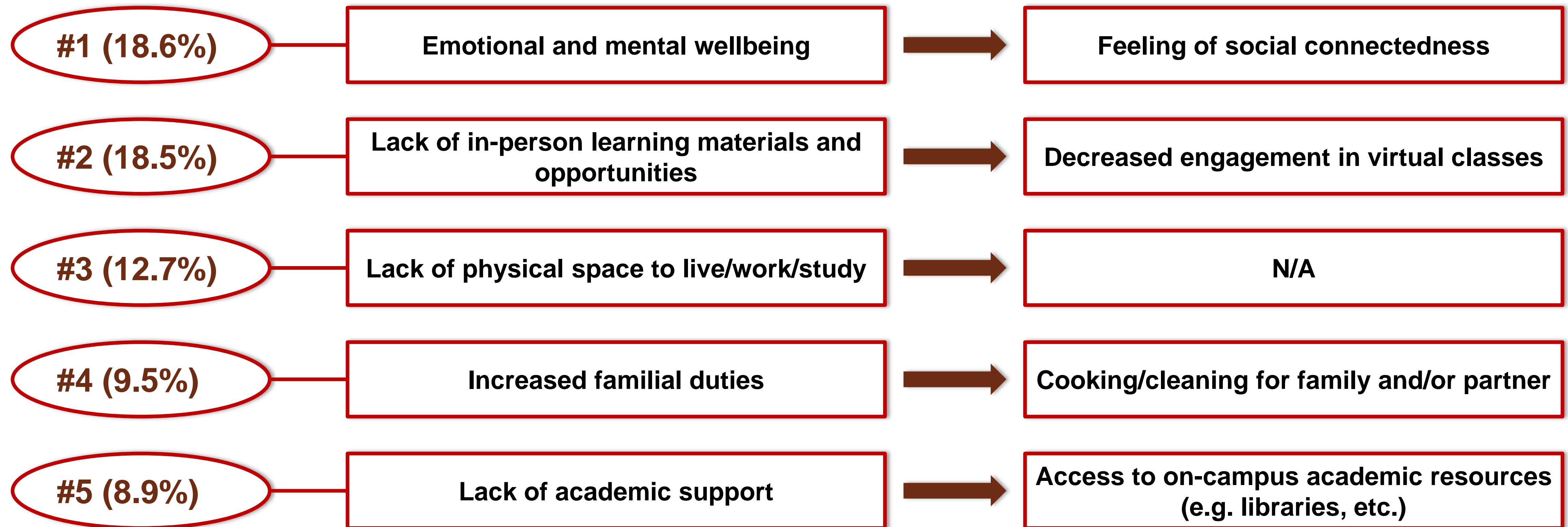


- 56% of students ranked financial support as #1 or #2
- 50% of students ranked physical space as #1 or #2

# Most Helpful Spring Quarter Resources

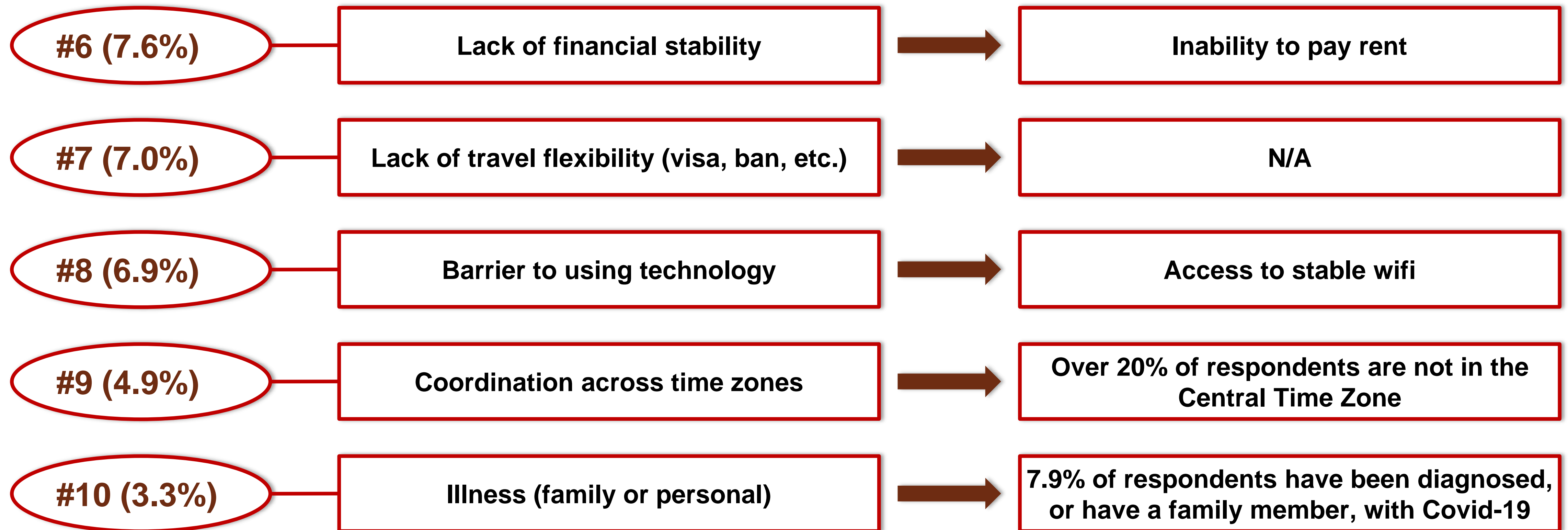


# Primary Barriers and Issues (Part 1)





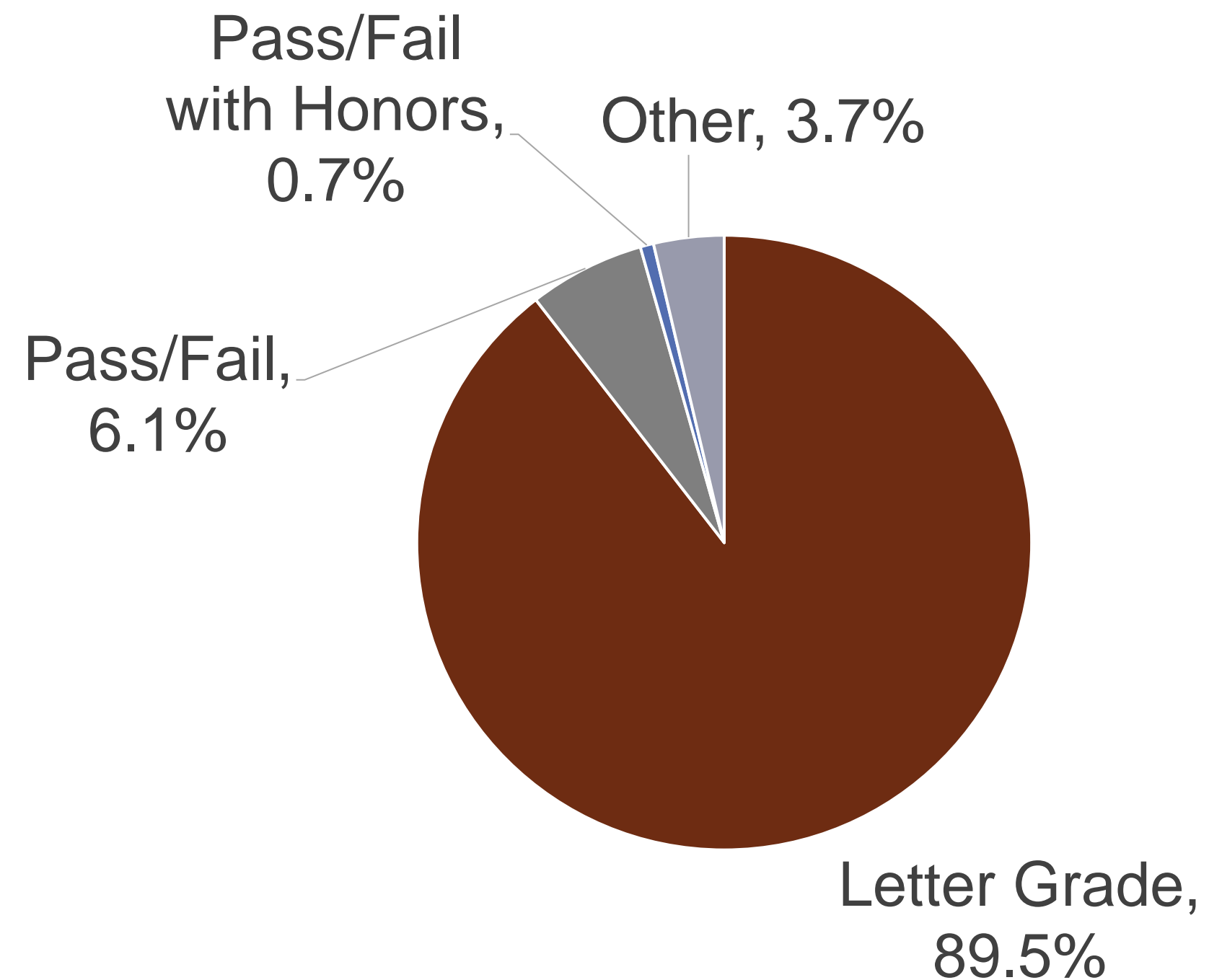
# Primary Barriers and Issues (Part 2)



# Changes to the Grading Scale

## Pre-COVID Grading Scale

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- Out of the respondents, **51% reported that there had been a change to their department's grading scale as a result of the pandemic**
- Changes reported included:
  - Moving from letter grades to pass/fail
  - Moving from letter grades to pass/fail but retaining the option for letter grades for the students who opted-in
  - Keeping letter grades but adjusting the overall grading curve



# Physical and Emotional Wellbeing

Changes in Physical and Emotional Health as a Result of the Pandemic

