

Advancing university-based eating disorder prevention strategies: A needs assessment approach

Lisa Ziegler^{1,2}, MS, CHES, Donna J. Peterson¹, PhD, Antonio J. Gardner², PhD, CHES, Barry Hunt², EdD, Taylor VanDyk³, MS, RD, CHES

¹School of Human Sciences, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, United States ²Department of Food Science, Nutrition, and Health Promotion, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, United States ³Virgin Pulse, Minneapolis, United States

Background

Research suggests that between 11-17% of college students are affected by eating disorders (ED) and as a result are at a notably higher risk for adverse health outcomes, behavioral problems, and suicide. Efforts to bridge the gap that currently exists in ED prevention and treatment are needed, particularly at Southern universities with limited access to mental health care and support resources (Eisenberg et al., 2011; Tavolacci et al., 2015).

Objective: To collect needs assessment data to inform the design of an eating disorder prevention program at a large, public Southern university.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was used to employ this needs assessment study in February of 2020. A diverse sample of students enrolled in 15 general, undergraduate courses were recruited to participate in a web-based questionnaire. The 34-item questionnaire comprised eating disorder risk factor measures including body dissatisfaction, thin-ideal-internalization, dieting, negative affect, psychosocial functioning, and BMI. Focus groups were used to gather students’ perspectives and preferences concerning university-based health and prevention programs and initiatives, and students’ perceived need for eating disorder prevention and support resources.

Sample Characteristics (N = 286)	n (%)
Gender	
Female	199 (69.6%)
Male	85 (29.7%)
Race	
Caucasian or White	199 (69.6%)
African American or Black	55 (19.2%)
Asian	13 (4.5%)
Multiple Races	8 (2.8%)
Other	7 (2.4%)
Prefer not to say	4 (1.4%)
Body Mass Index (BMI) Category	
Underweight (>18.5)	62 (4.2%)
Normal Weight (18.5-24.9)	145 (56.5%)
Overweight (25-29.9)	71 (27.2%)
Obese (<30.0)	31 (12.1%)

Results

Questionnaire data from a representative sample of the university’s student population (n = 286) were obtained. Nearly 2 in 5 participants reported a BMI classified as overweight or obese (39%) and 40% of the participants indicated being dissatisfied with their body. Comparing gender groups, body dissatisfaction was significantly positively correlated with negative affect for females (r = .50, p < .05) and males (r = .31, p < .01) suggesting that greater body dissatisfaction is associated with elevated negative affect. A significant negative correlation between body dissatisfaction and psychosocial functioning (r = -.27, p < .05) was found for females only. Comparing racial groups, body dissatisfaction was significantly positively correlated with dieting for White students (r = .15, p < .05) but not Black students.

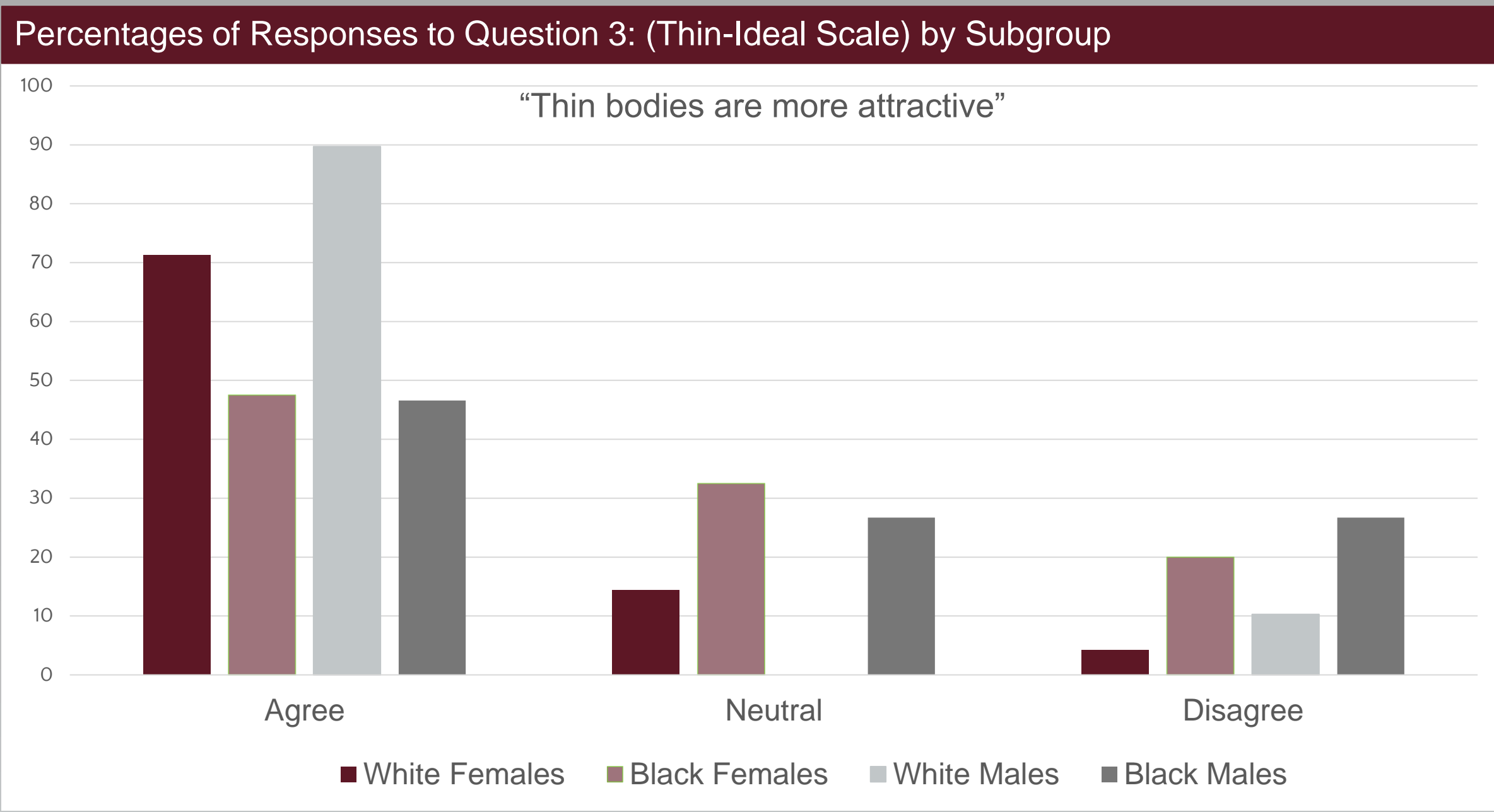
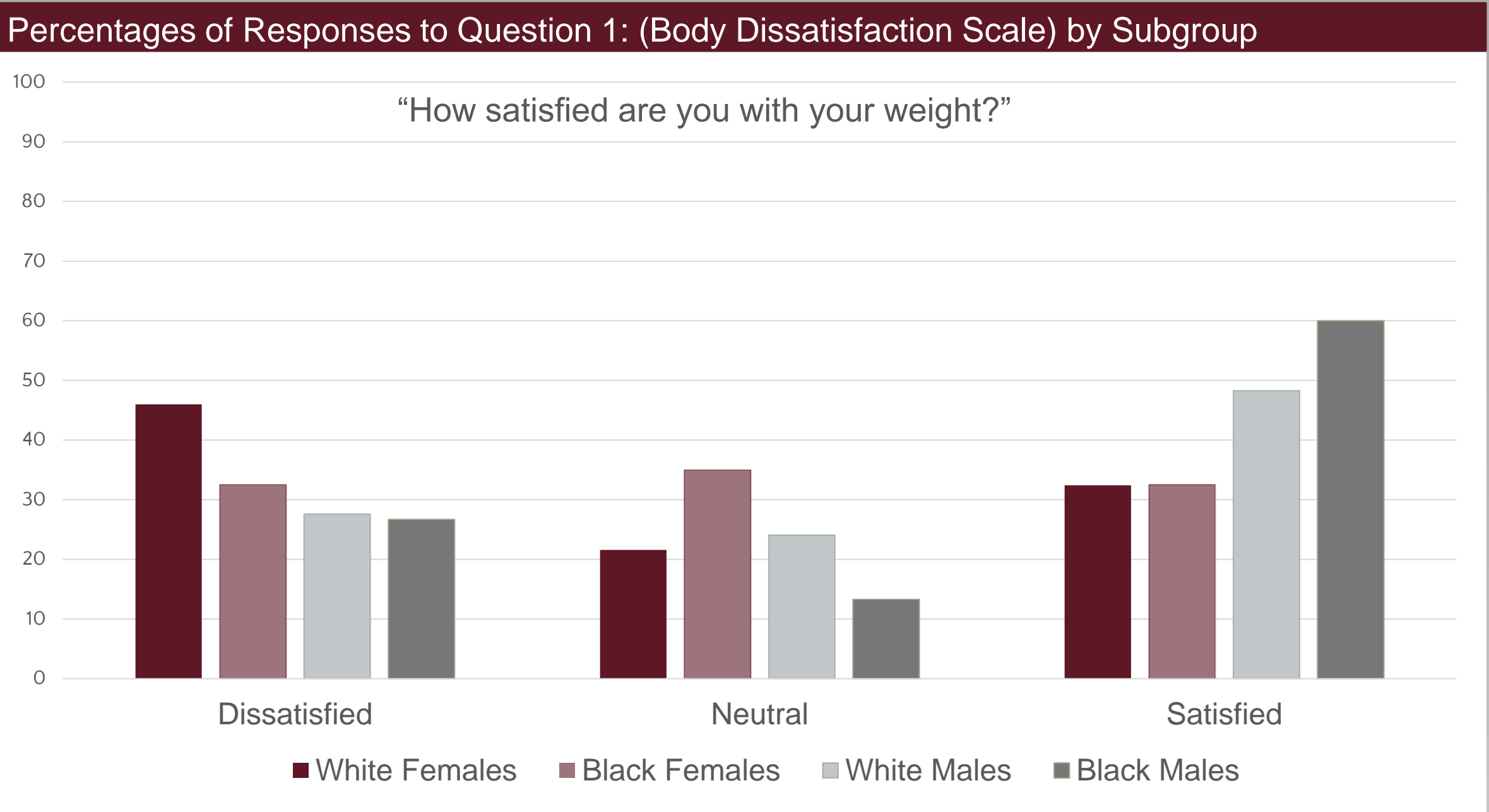
Key Take-Aways

Findings indicated **similarities and differences in eating disorder risk factors** between gender and racial student subgroups. The needs assessment results support the need to shift the focus of prevention efforts towards **diversity-oriented interventions**. Determining the most severe risk factors for each subgroup is a necessary step to designing effective eating disorder prevention programs. **Recommended university-based approaches to eating disorders** include support groups and programs addressing body dissatisfaction and negative affect concerns, educational outreach and trainings to increase the campus community’s knowledge about eating disorders and ability to respond to concerns appropriately, implementing social support based interventions and coping skill development opportunities, carrying out comprehensive mental health screenings at the university health center, establishing a multidisciplinary team to offer treatment and recovery support to students affected by eating disorders, and utilizing a combination of expert/professional and peer facilitators.

Investigating eating disorder risk factors and program preferences across different subpopulations emerges as an effective approach to inform the design of **university-based eating disorder prevention efforts**.

“Such programs are important because **body dissatisfaction can be destructive to an individual’s self-esteem and self-worth and can contribute to anxiety and depression.**”

College Student Focus Group Participant



Focus Group Results

Themes	Quotes
<u>Theme 1:</u> Mental Health and Nutrition are health topics of great concern	“Healthy body image and stress management are a great concern.” “...addressing weight stigma, body positivity, and health at every size.”
<u>Theme 2:</u> Smaller groups for sensitive topics	“Some people might feel more comfortable engaging in programs that are small groups especially if the topic is related to eating disorders or body image.”
<u>Theme 3:</u> Programs should take place at a central, “neutral” location on campus	“Certain locations such as the counseling center and that area of campus could come across as stigmatizing and it would be better to have smaller scale programs in more neutral locations”
<u>Theme 4:</u> Programs should take place in the afternoon or evening	“...before 5pm while students are still on campus” “I'd prefer workshops in the afternoon or if there were multiple time options.”
<u>Theme 5:</u> A combination of expert/professional and peer facilitators is most preferred	“...having one expert begin the program and utilizing peers to lead discussion segments.” “It could be beneficial to have peers who have overcome eating disorders and mental health struggles share their stories during a program.”
<u>Theme 6:</u> Programs should address diversity	“Programs should consider student’s background and culture” “....programs that are for specific student interest groups, minority populations, or culture groups.”



Literature Cited:
Eisenberg, D., Nicklett, E. J., Roeder, K., & Kirz, N. A. (2011). Eating disorder symptoms among college students: Prevalence, Persistence, correlates, and treatment-seeking. *Journal of American College Health*, 59(8), 700-707. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2010/546461>
Shaw, H., Ramirez, L., Trost, A., Randall, P., & Stice, E. (2004). Body image and eating disturbances across ethnic groups: More similarities than differences. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 18(1), 12–18. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-164X.18.1.12>
Tavolacci, M. P., Grigioni, S., Richard, L., Meyrignac, G., Dechelotte, P., Ladner, J. (2015). Eating disorders associated with health risks among university students. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 47(5), 412-420. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2015.06.009>.