

Reported Perceived Weight Status and Weight Goals Among College Students and Their Relationships with Type of Major

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Study objective: To examine the relationship between reported perceived weight status and accuracy in perceived weight and weight loss goals by academic major, in an attempt to highlight the need for comprehensive interventions to prevent the likelihood of college students developing disordered eating tendencies.

Background: Studies suggest that losing weight is a common weight goal.¹ Studies show that 46.4% of students report wanting to lose weight and only 35.0% of students are reported to be overweight or obese.^{1,2} Other studies suggest that college women in particular tend to overestimate their weight.³ People who also incorrectly perceive themselves are more likely to adopt ineffective weight management strategies.^{4,5} Studies suggest that the majority of students in college incorrectly report their weight status and that this misconstrued weight perception has a big impact on the weight control behaviors, more so than the actual weight status of the participant.⁶ These weight control methods tend to be inconsistent and unhealthy. Unhealthy weight practices can lead to disordered eating and eating disorders.^{7,8} Disordered eating is very common in college students, particularly females.^{2,9-12}. Around 4-9% of college women are diagnosed with a clinical eating disorder and even more, around 40-49% are showing symptomology.¹³ Health majors, including nutrition and exercise physiology, may be at particular risk due to social comparisons with peers.¹³

Subjects: The data being used for this study was from The College Health and Nutrition Assessment Survey (CHANAS), an ongoing, cross-sectional study at the University of New Hampshire. The study data included is from 2008-2018. The primary objective of CHANAS is to evaluate the health of college students, a population that is generally missed in research, as well as allow undergraduate and graduate students a chance to participate in data collection methods. There were 6,637 students included in this study. These students are between the ages of 18-24.

Methods: (UNH IRB 5524)

Anthropometrics

-Height (cm)
-Weight (kg)
-BMI (kg/m²)

Self-Reported Online Survey Questions

-How would you describe your weight? (slightly underweight, underweight, just the right weight, slightly overweight, overweight)
-What are you trying to do about your weight? (lose weight, gain weight, stay the same weight, not trying to do anything with my weight)

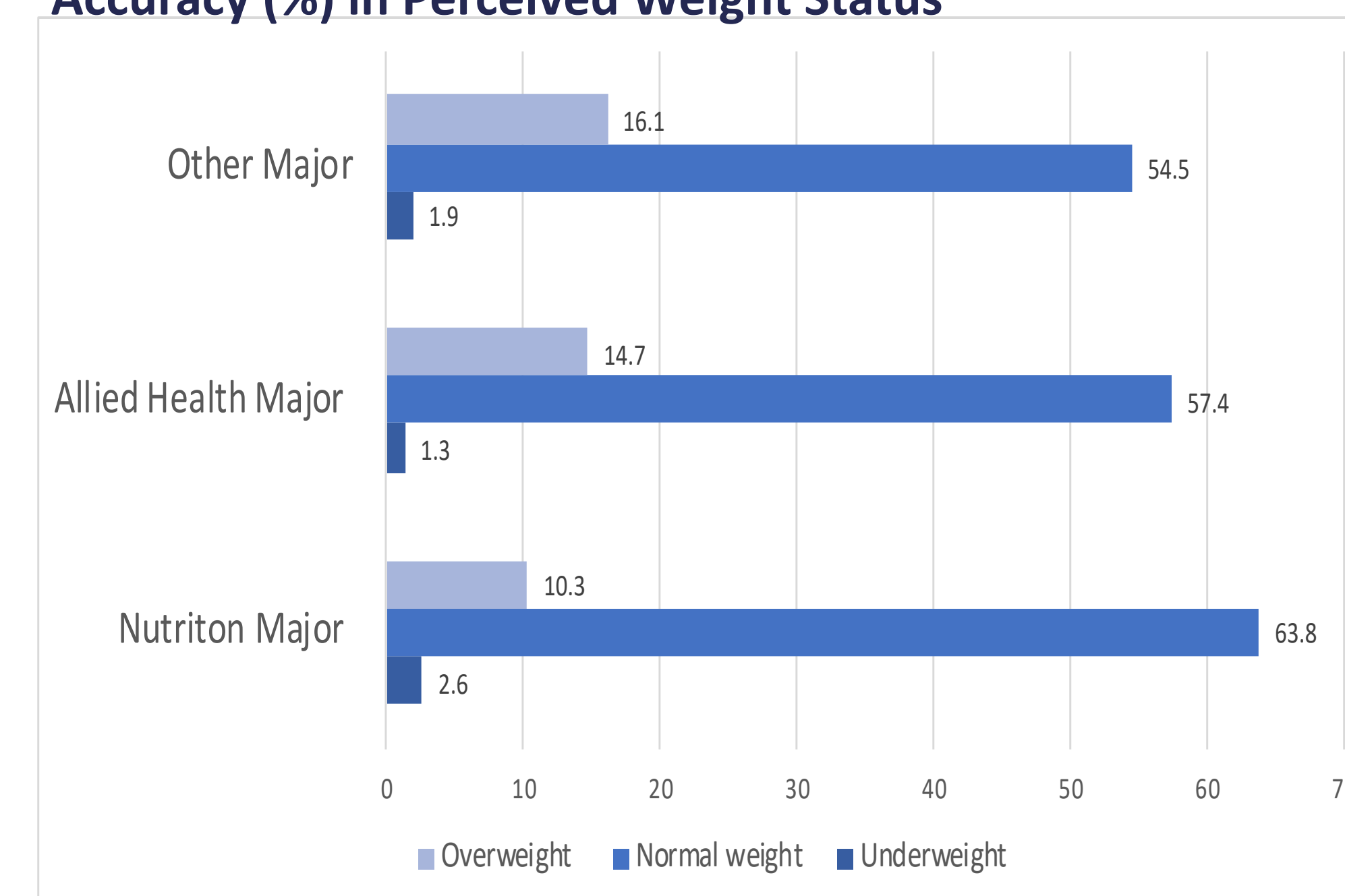
Reported Perceived Weight Status and Weight Loss Goals by Type of Major

	Nutrition Major	Allied Health Major	Other Major	Significance*
Perceived Weight Status				
N(%)				
Underweight	25 (6.3)	105 (7.2)	409 (8.2)	0.004
Normal weight	296 (74.0)	1006 (68.6)	3270 (65.5)	
Overweight	79 (19.8)	356 (24.3)	1316 (26.3)	
Weight Goals				
N(%)				
Lose Weight	209 (51.9)	715 (48.7)	2593 (51.9)	<0.001
Stay the Same Weight	136 (33.7)	422 (28.8)	669 (13.4)	
Gain Weight	21 (5.2)	166 (11.3)	1248 (25.0)	
Not Trying to Do Anything	37 (9.2)	164 (11.2)	486 (9.7)	

*P value < 0.05

Participants excluded if answered "I choose not to answer"

Accuracy (%) in Perceived Weight Status



Subjects considered accurate if:

- Self-reported underweight AND had a BMI of <18.5
- Self-reported normal weight AND had a BMI of 18.51-24.99
- Self-reported overweight AND had a BMI of >25.0

Conclusion: The majority of college students report their weight as normal, and report wanting to lose weight. This study also suggests that the majority of students with a normal BMI can accurately report their weight status.

Implications: To our knowledge, this is one of the few studies done assessing accuracy in perceived weight status and weight loss goal by type of major, therefore it is contributing to the field of college health. This study also lends itself to help with intervention development for healthy weight and weight management programs that are focused on lifestyle changes, that can potentially be tailored to fit health majors.

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