A Foundation for Success:

Positive High School Experiences that Supported Post School Outcomes for Students with Disabilities in Utah

Crystal Emery, PhD
May 2025

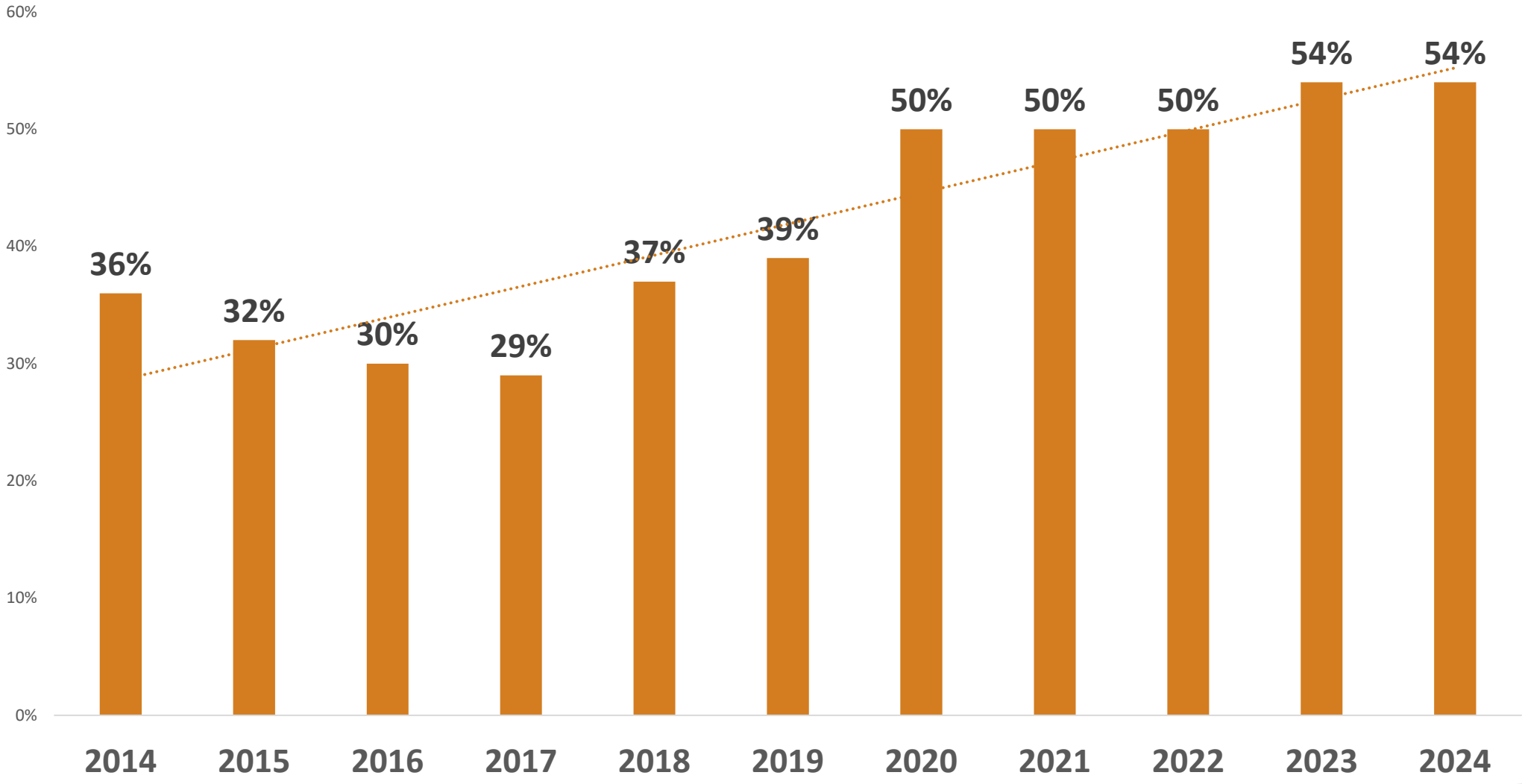
UTAH EDUCATION POLICY CENTER
THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH
uepc.utah.edu

Utah State Board of Education

Session Agenda

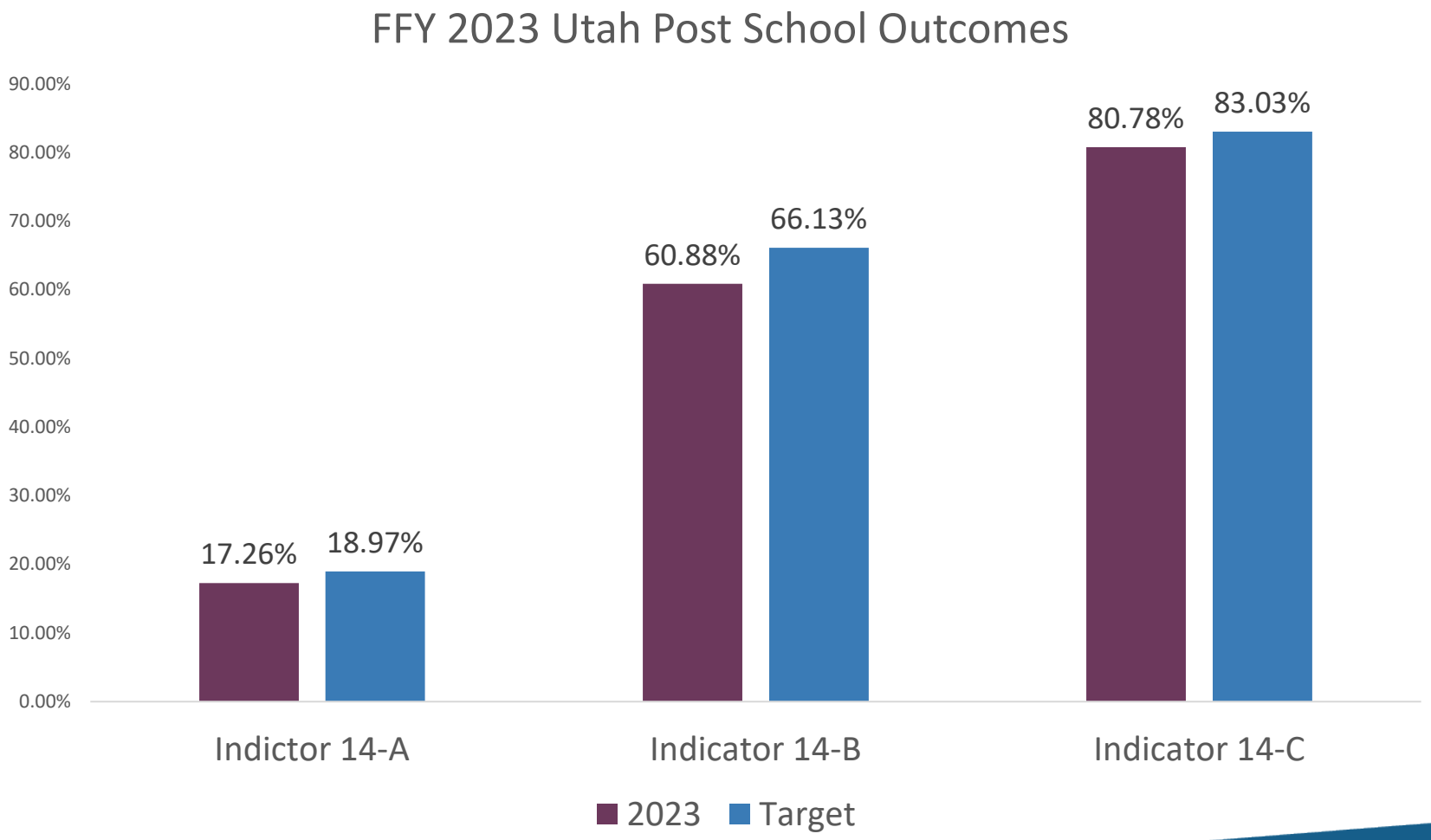
- Overview of Utah's Post School Outcomes
- Review Research Questions
- Brief Overview of Qualitative Method
- Results
- Discussion with Guiding Questions

Survey Response Rates



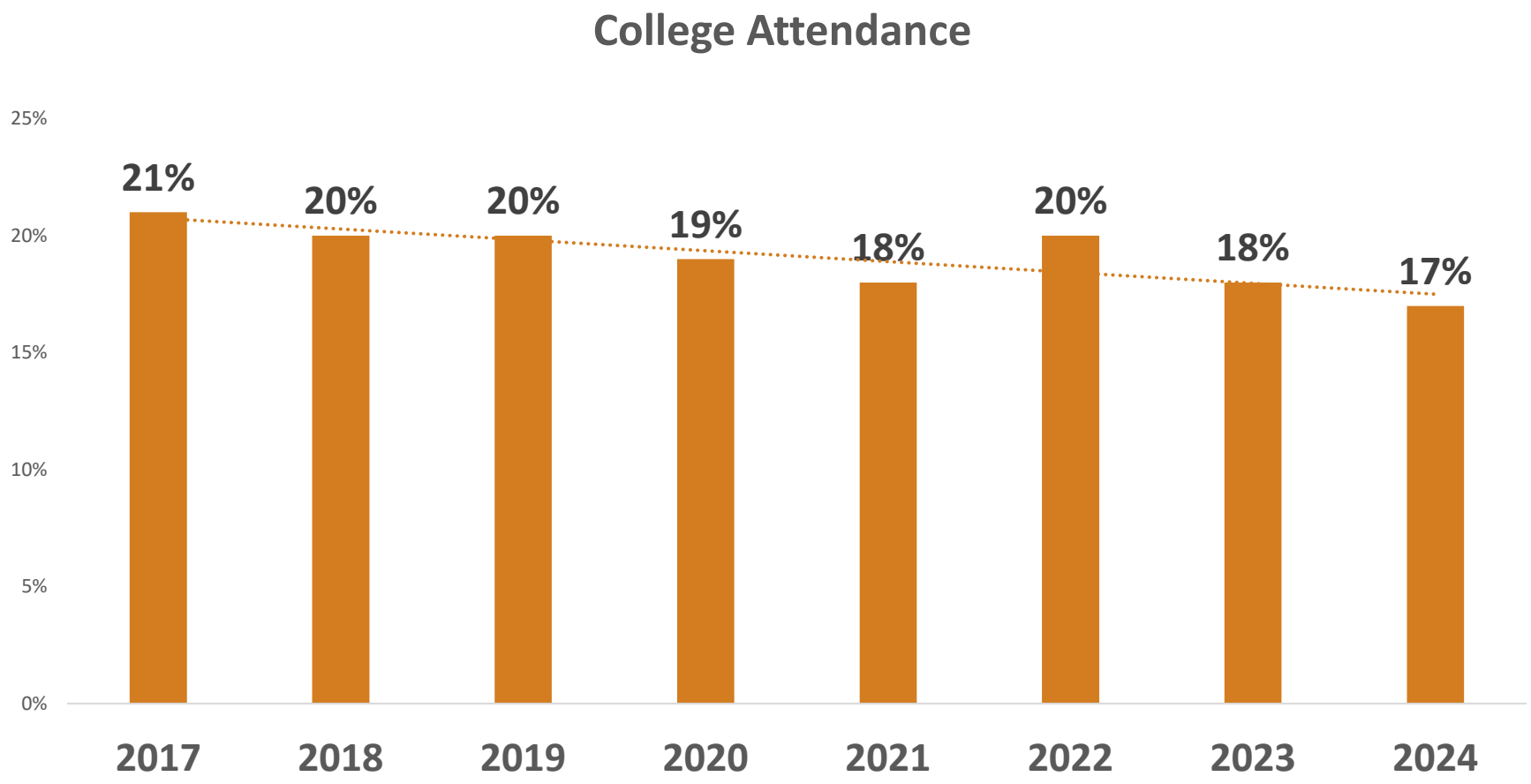
Utah State Board of Education

FFY 2023 State Data & Targets



Utah State Board of Education

2 & 4-Year College Attendance



Utah State Board of Education

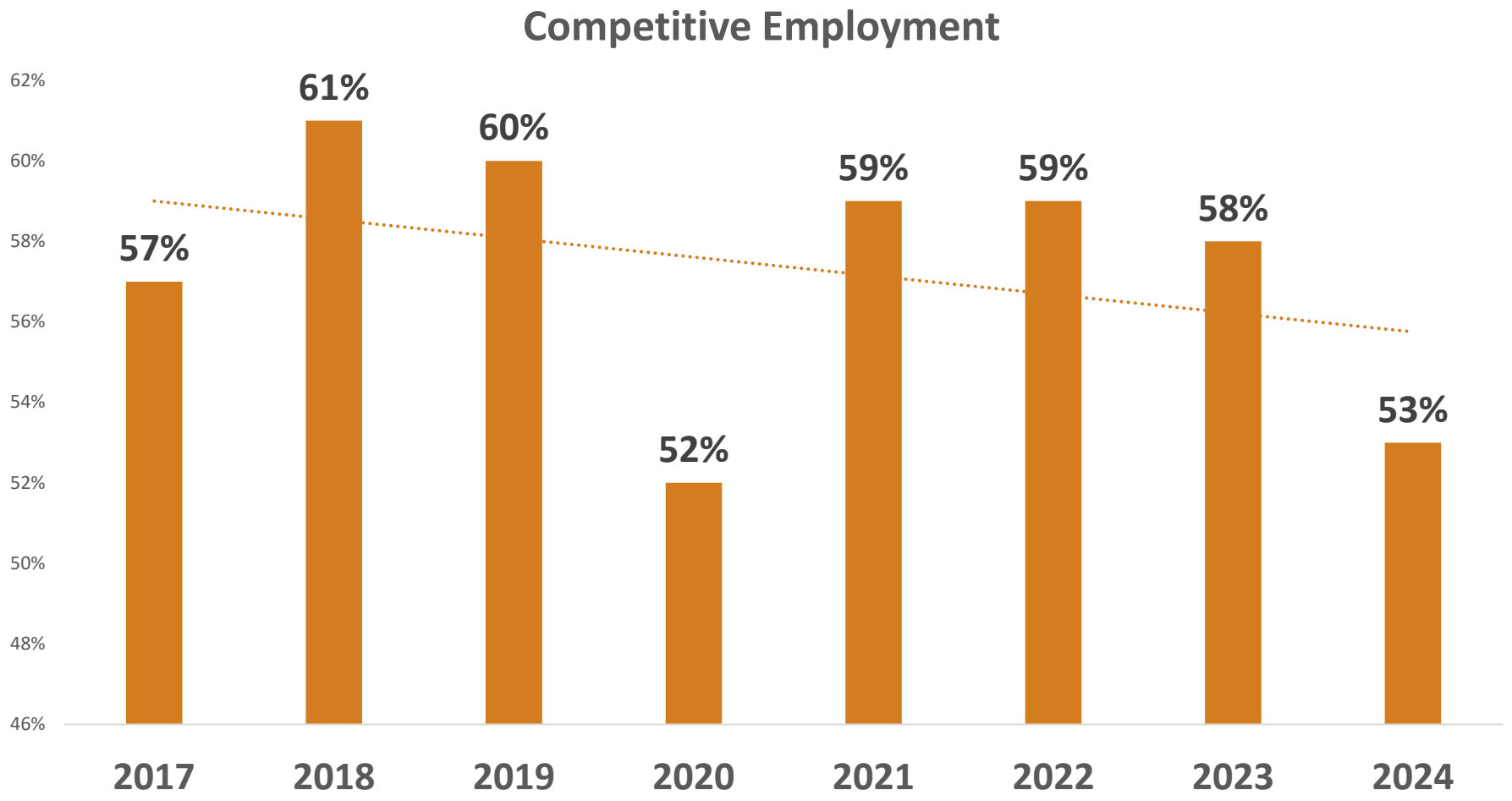
Utah College Enrollments for All Students

In fall 2024, freshman enrollment at Utah's public colleges and universities increased 4.32% across the board. This was the largest enrollment increase in the state in over a decade (USHE)

Females outpacing males in higher ed (53%)

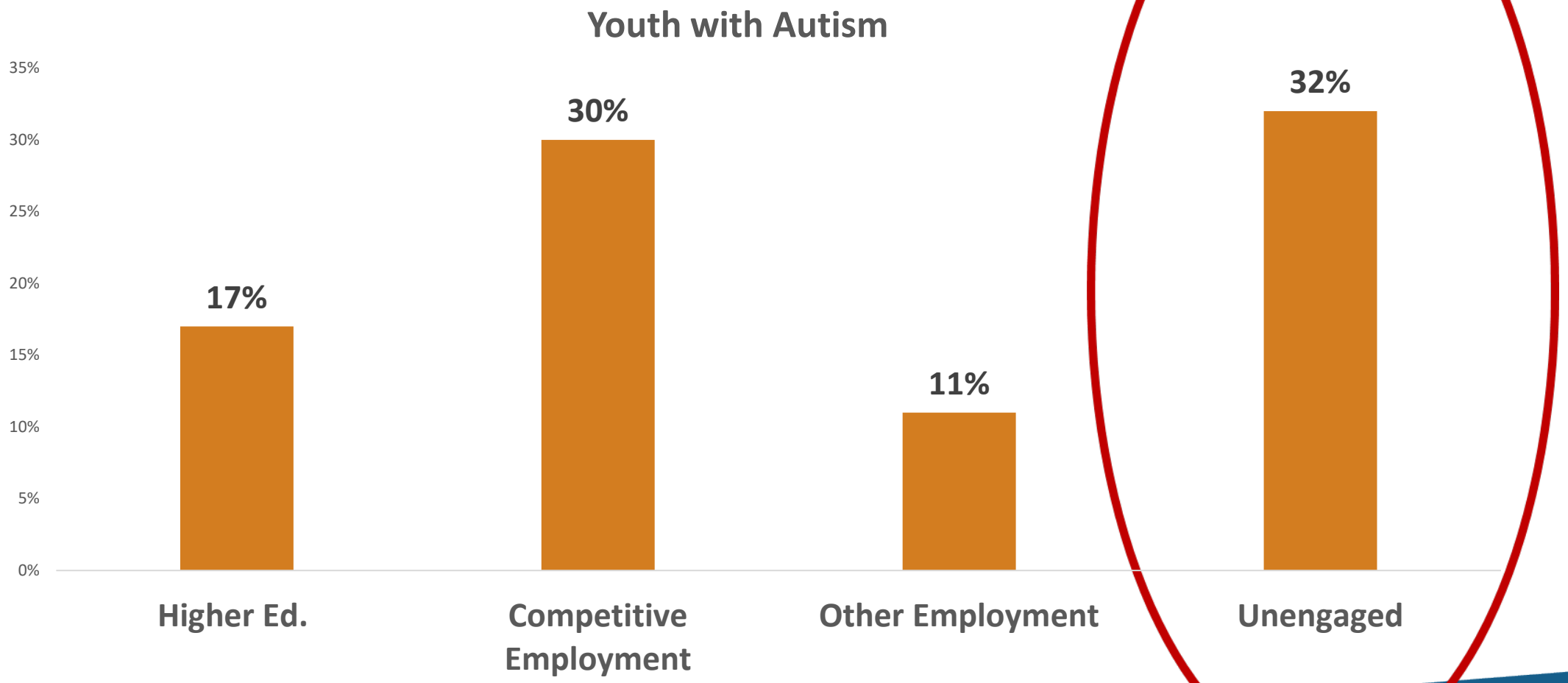
Males outpacing females in tech colleges (58%)

Competitive Employment



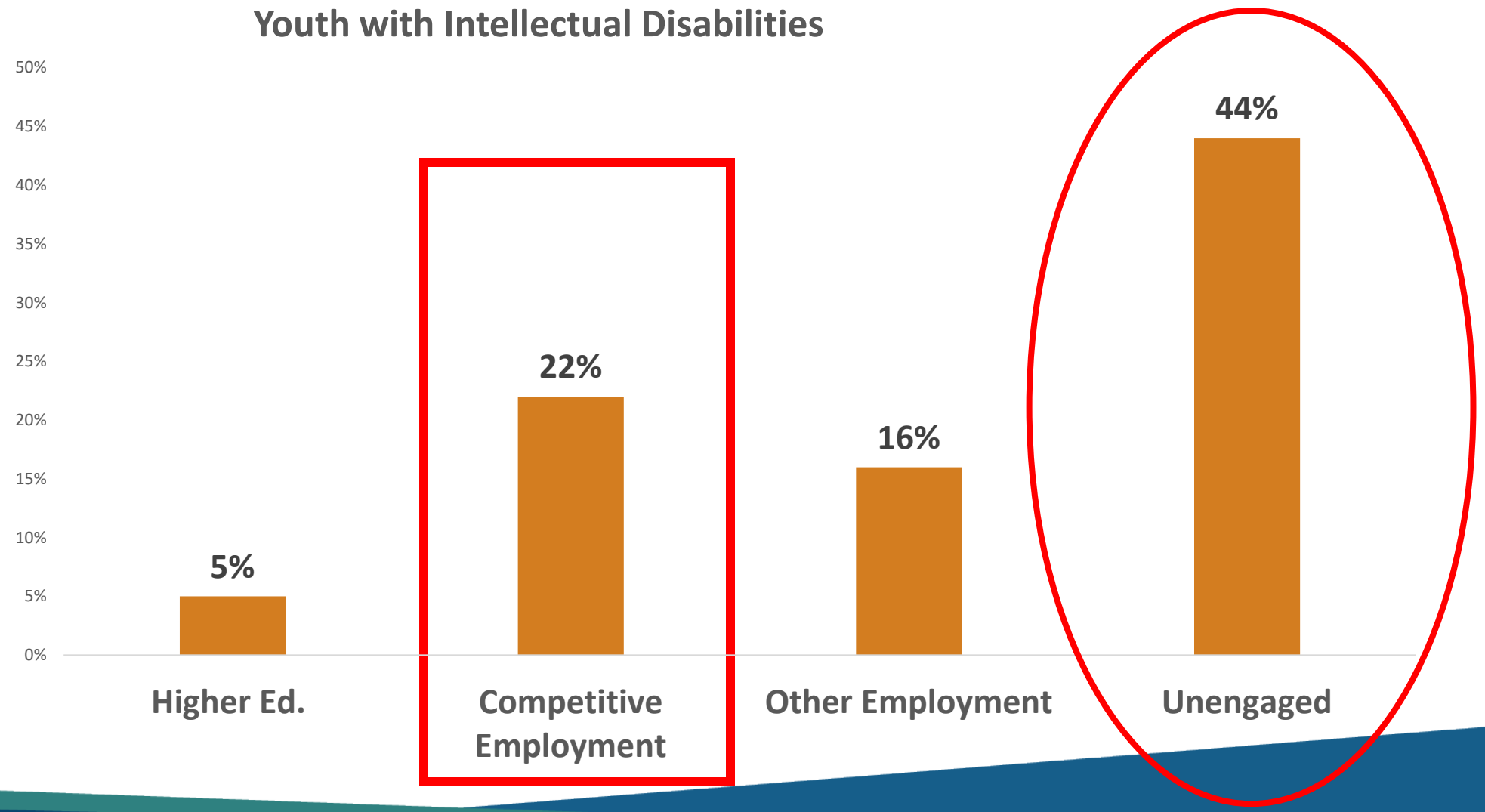
Utah State Board of Education

2024 Survey



Utah State Board of Education

2024 Survey – cont'd



Utah State Board of Education

2024 Responses from Unemployed Youth

- 8% Did not plan to work after high school
- 20% Full-time student / Going to school
- 7% Unable to find work
- 9% Don't have the necessary skills or qualifications
- 3% No transportation to work
- 1% On waiting list for services
- 3% Family obligations
- **34% Health or disability related problems**
- 1% Would lose SSI benefits if I worked more
- 12% Other reasons

How Do You Relate?

- How does Utah's data compare to your state?
- Do you have similar questions, concerns, or barriers?

5-Year Mixed Methods Study

(Not including this most recent year's data)

SCAN ME

Utah State Board of Education

Research Questions

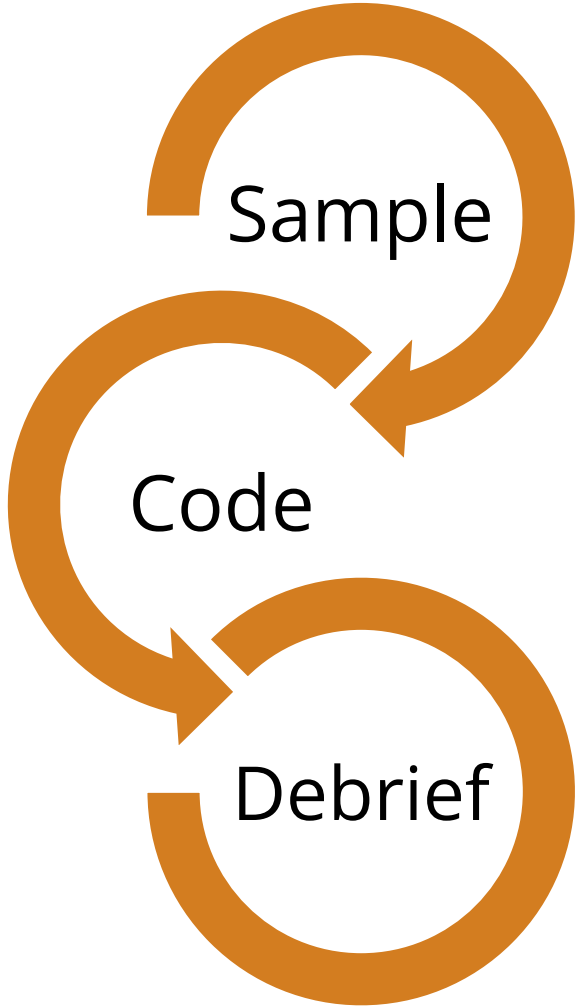
1. What positive high school experiences supported individuals with disabilities in reaching their goals after exiting the school system?
    - What positive high school experiences were associated with students reaching their goals of some postsecondary education or employment after exiting high school?
2. How did students' experiences support their transition from high school?
    - In what ways did students' high school experiences support their transition into postsecondary education or employment?

Ethical and Responsible AI Use

- Obtained permissions from USBE
- Used an AI platform (Claude) that does not train its model on the data
- Provided only de-identified data (e.g., Q23 responses)
- Utilized Human-AI Collaboration framework
- Tested three prompts to better understand how to improve coding accuracy
- Implemented an inter-rater reliability process for utilizing Claude
- Validated assertions (e.g., central themes)
- Asked about negative experiences to maximize the beneficial impact of its use

Codebook Development

- Randomly sampled 100 comments (3 samples)
- Open coded all comments (2 members of UEPC research team)
- Debriefed after each sample (develop and revise codebook)
- Identified codes that described comments and aligned with evidence-based and research-based predictors for post-school success



Prompt Engineering Options Tested

- Basic Prompt + System Prompt
- Basic Prompt + Additional Context
- Basic Prompt + System Prompt + Additional Context

Inter-Rater Reliability

Source	Human 2	Claude - Context	Claude – Researcher Role	Claude – Context + Role
Human 1	**0.742**	0.722	0.757	**0.753**
Human 2	-	0.753	0.774	**0.785**
Claude – Context	-	-	0.788	0.830
Claude – Researcher Role	-	-	-	0.871

- Coded comments joined to the full dataset - associations between specific post-school outcomes with high school experiences were determined
- Findings were compared across demographic groups (race, gender, disability)

Other Comments: Examples

- “She had a baby and took the baby to school with her, the school had daycare for the baby. Teachers helped student get her work done and were very accommodating, they helped her graduate.” (other (school daycare); supportive school personnel (teachers), graduate HS)

- “The Easter Seals program helped him to get skills and opportunities to plan, smaller class sizes helped him built friendships. He is still in contact with friends from high.” (other (Easter Seals Program), Personalized Learning (small class sizes), supportive family or friends).

- “Actually leaving the high school scene ended up being a good thing for her. She got away from some bad influences and was able to start over and recreate her situation for the better. She got her GED and finished a CNA program. Now she is hoping to attend a nursing program at UVU.” (other (alternative path), none)

Concerning Comments

- “Her graduating was a huge goal, [alternate school] staff was amazing. [Previous high school] was not helping, for years she asked for help with bullying and [staff] just told her to ignore the bully. She tried to self-harm and [administrators] ignored the problem. When they took her out [of her previous high school] she was better. [Alternate school] was so helpful and took the time to help her, meeting the counselor and the teacher we knew things would get better. She went from not wanting to go to school to wanting to go early.”
- "Talks about wanting to kill himself, had him in seeing someone, but with COVID that has stopped. Numerous welfare checks with the local police dept for the safety of the family since his behavior is a serious issue."

Concerning Comments (continued)

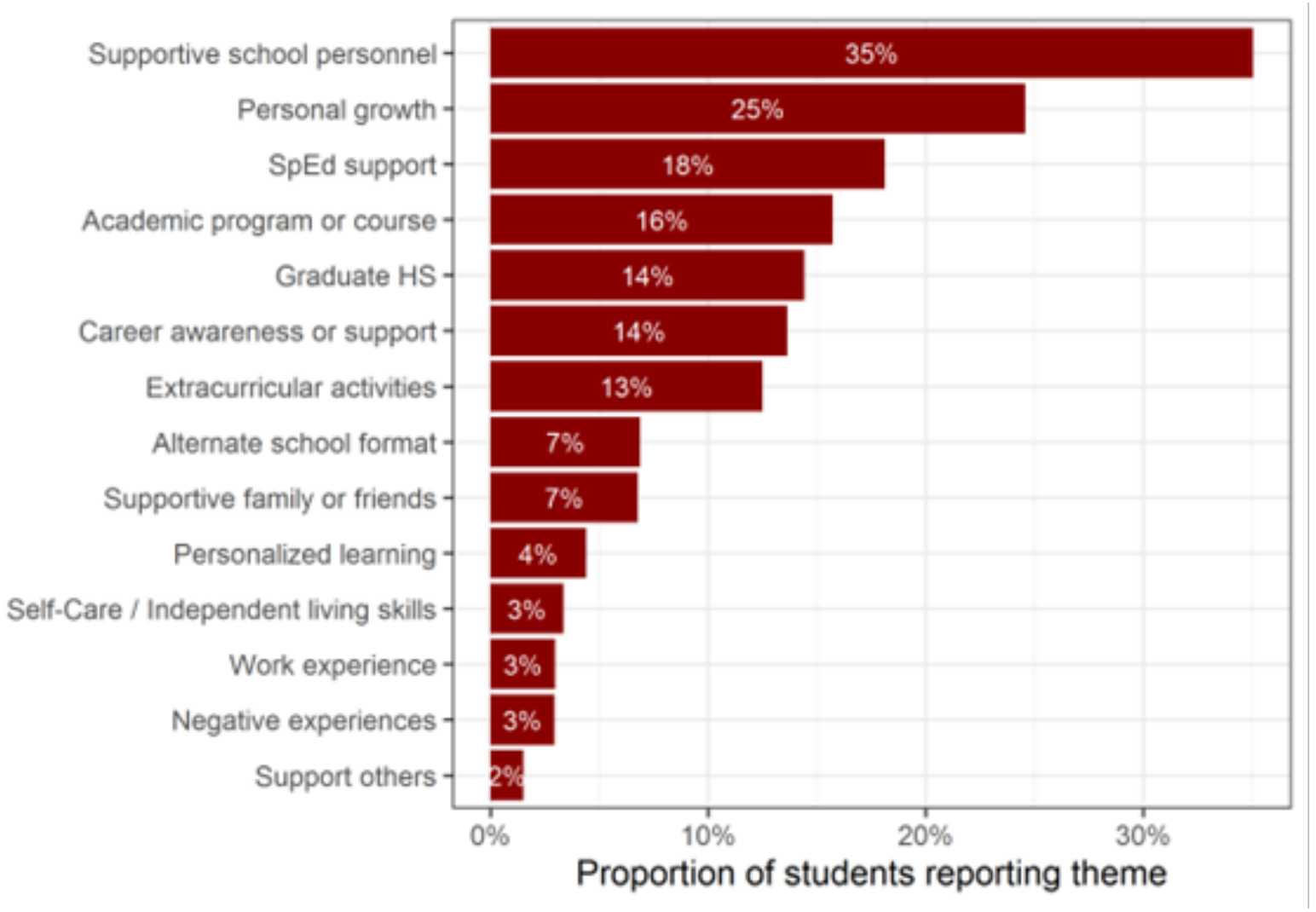
- “Was attacked and is in private counseling services … Will not leave the house these days.”
- "Is off his meds and tried to kill himself this April. Do not know where to go for help.”
- "Has had a mental breakdown and is now getting help at this time. Until there is any improvement in her mental health she will not be working or going to school.”
- "Has major health issues with his stomach and needs major surgery. Has been written off from working till further notice.”
- “She was sexual[ly] abused and she had [a] very hard time studying.”

Research Question 1

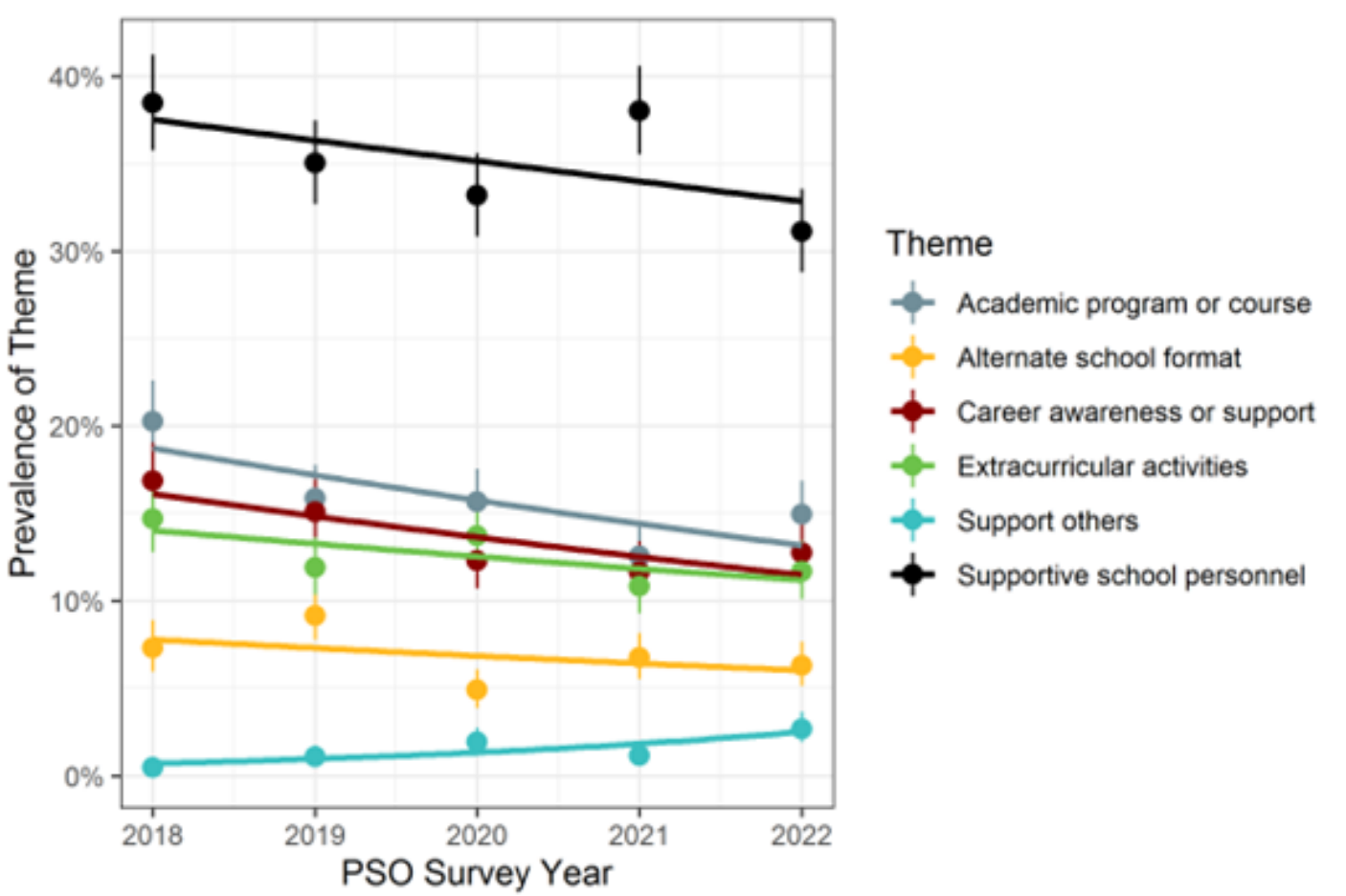
What positive high school experiences supported individuals with disabilities in reaching their goals after exiting the school system?

- What positive high school experiences were associated with students reaching their goals of some postsecondary education or employment after exiting high school?

Frequency of Positive Experiences



Trends of Positive Experiences



Top 7 Positive Experiences

ACADEMICS & SUPPORT

#1 Supportive School Personnel

#3 Special Education Supports

#4 Academic Program or Course

#6 Career Awareness or Support

[The student's] individual IEP counselor insisted that he take **several advanced placement courses** that he received passing grades in **and were instrumental in raising his confidence to do well in college**.

Top 7 Positive Experiences (continued)

ACHIEVEMENTS

#2 Personal Growth

#5 Graduate High School

His resource teacher helped him get caught up and make up the credits he was behind in. And talked him into going to summer school, **so he could graduate on time with his class**. She was always there for him and helped him see that there was a light at the end of the tunnel. And with a little hard work and help anything is possible.

EXTRACURRICULARS

#7 Extracurricular Activities

Involvement **in sports** in high school was the most positive thing, and learning the **social skills, accomplishing goals, and traveling with the team independently** meant a lot.

Supportive School Personnel

Code	Subcode	Percentage
Supportive School Personnel	Teacher(s)	81%
	SpEd teachers	14%
	Counselor	9%
	Others	<5%

Supportive School Personnel: Examples

- “Teachers at [charter high school] were patient and accommodating, making it possible to be successful. [He] gained confidence and was comfortable in his surroundings at school.”
- “Coaches and the staff were very helpful for what she needed and advocated for her. The staff was amazing to help her, the structure of the SpEd program to push her is what helped her be successful while in school. Also, the help she received from [her therapist] in therapy sessions helped her with the skills she needed exactly when she was struggling.”
- “[The student’s] individual IEP counselor insisted that he take several advanced placement courses that he received passing grades in and were instrumental in raising his confidence to do well in college.”
- “My case manager in high school - without [him] being there for me I would have been suspended from high school or just dropped out of high school. I thank him for not giving up on me and for making sure I did graduate.”

Unsupportive School Personnel: Examples

- "**The school did nothing to help our son.** They told him things like you can be a doctor if you want to be one knowing he can't read past the second-grade level and has severe autism and can't function on his own." **(unrealistic expectations)**

- "[Teacher] was horrible, she **told my son he was stupid and would not become a Vet**. and would not help him with his classes in animal sciences." **(low expectations)**

- "She did not enjoy high school. She felt like because she was quiet, she often didn't get noticed as someone who needed help. She did not advocate for herself. She felt **she needed to be taught those skills to advocate for herself**, so she didn't have to wait for her IEP for teachers to realize she needed assistance and had accommodations that needed to be provided to her."

Unsupportive School Personnel: Examples (continued)

- “Mother stated that she felt that the student's special education teachers were **too easy on her** and did not prod her hard enough to achieve more academically. She also stated that the regular **classroom teachers did not read the IEP** assessments about her daughter's issues and **were not prepared**.”

- “[Student] was disappointed with her High School teacher. She was told she didn't have enough credits to graduate a few weeks before [and was] told there was not enough time to complete it. [The student] proved them wrong and finished her work and credits and graduated with the rope and accomplishments she wanted … **In the future your staff should encourage, not discourage someone from succeeding**!”

Summary of Relationships Between Positive High School Experiences and Postsecondary Education and Employment

- **Three categories were positively associated with post-secondary education and/or employment:**
  - Academic Program or Course
  - Career Awareness or Support
  - Extracurricular Activities

- **Three categories were negatively associated with post-secondary education and/or employment:**
  - Negative experiences
  - Self-care or independent living skills
  - Supportive family or friends

Research Question 2

How did students' experiences support their transition from high school?

- In what ways did students' high school experiences support their transition into postsecondary education or employment?

Positively Correlated Experiences (1)

ACADEMIC PROGRAM OR COURSE

My Academic support class really helped me learn time management skills and how to speak up for myself. Before my senior year I was shy. I no longer feel shy. These skills are helping me succeed at [a local] university.

Positively Correlated Experiences (2)

CAREER AWARENESS OR SUPPORT

Having taken classes through **technical college in high school really helped the student know what technical college was like.** This prepared her for post-secondary school.

Positively Correlated Experiences (3)

EXTRACURRICULARS

The teacher in high school **recognized [the] student's gift of rhythm and got him on the drums and in the high school band**. Also that same teacher connected student to [a local] university drum team and marching band. The Science teacher was amazing too; he helped the student get a couple scholarships.

Taking College Level Classes in High School Helped Students Discover Their Unique Talents in a Supportive Environment and Increased their Confidence in Pursuing Education and Employment Opportunities Post-High School

EDUCATION

Attending [a technical college] to earn credits in cosmetology and **get experience in college type classes while in high school, where my IEP team could help me** if needed."

EMPLOYMENT

Took 3 years of **welding in high school and currently employed with an awesome company where I am a welder** and enjoying my job and [I] also got married. Life is good.

Extracurricular Activities Inspired Student's Academic Achievement and Future Goals

EDUCATION

I felt more confident in high school and being myself. Had the necessary support from teachers/friends. **My experiences with theater and performing helped me know that I love that and wanted to go to college for it.**

EMPLOYMENT

When I got out of high school, I knew what I wanted to do - **I wanted to be a pro mountain bike rider** ... I wanted to go pro but I didn't really stick with it ... I started a little business working on cars and trucks and then I transferred to leather working. **I still do a little of [mountain biking]** but it all comes to reality stuff. It [comes] down to getting a full time job and providing and these things [are] a hobby. I have the full-time job with Fed-Ex.

Supportive School Personnel Worked with Students and Their Families to Leverage Connections and Resources for Student Success

EDUCATION

I went on a school lead field trip to the culinary arts program in May of my senior year. **I met with [a chef] from [a local] community college and he set me up to go into his program.** I have enjoy[ed] great success.

EMPLOYMENT

I think having help to graduate, being supported with my IEP goals, that has helped me to be successful in post-high life**. I have been able to open my own soda shop business in [another state] thanks to being able to graduate and having my teachers believe in me.**

Negative Experiences at Times Challenged Students with Disabilities in Achieving Post-High School Success

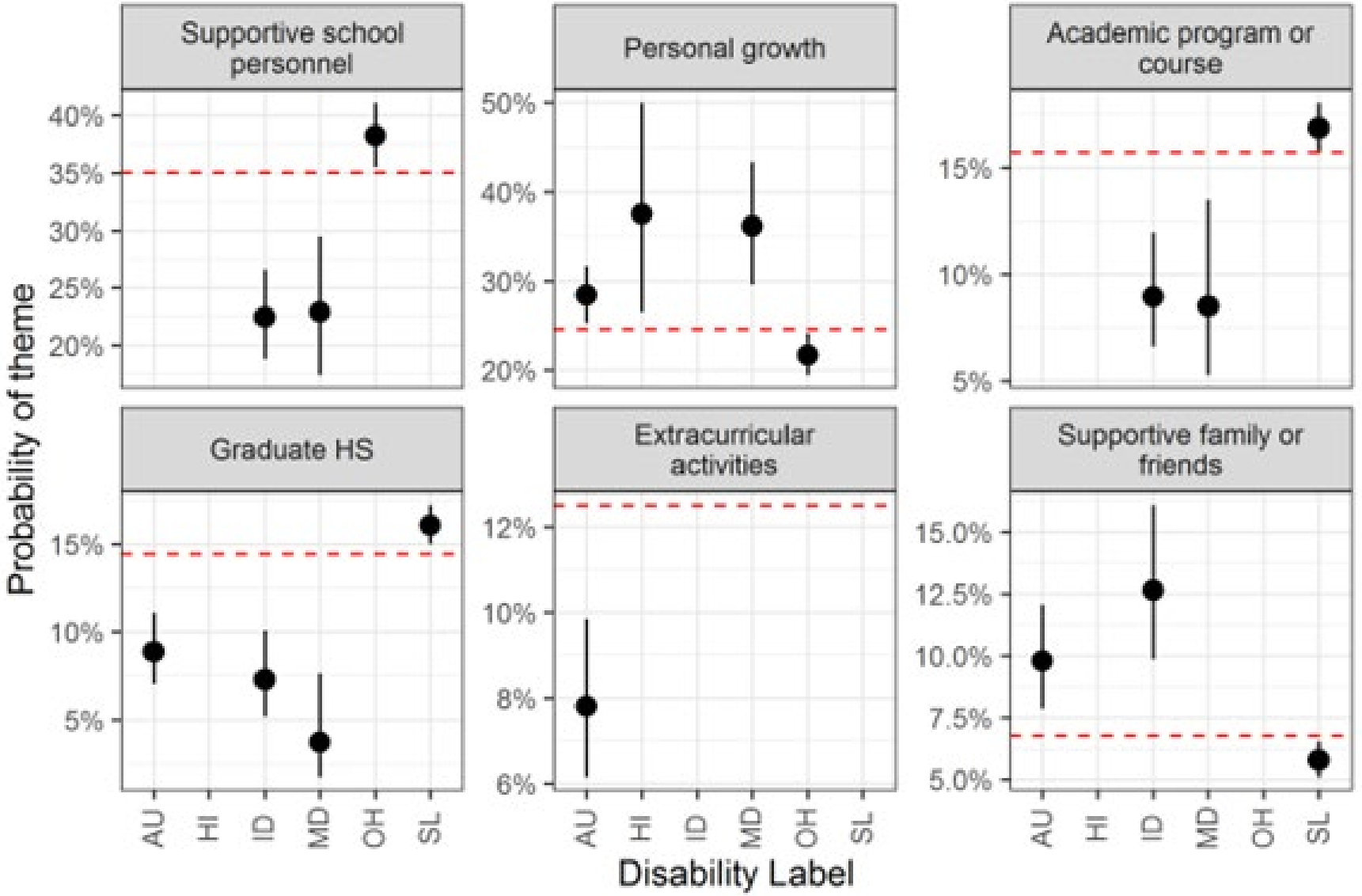
EDUCATION

Autism teacher was horrible - **she told my son he was stupid and would not become a Vet and would not help him with his classes in animal sciences**.

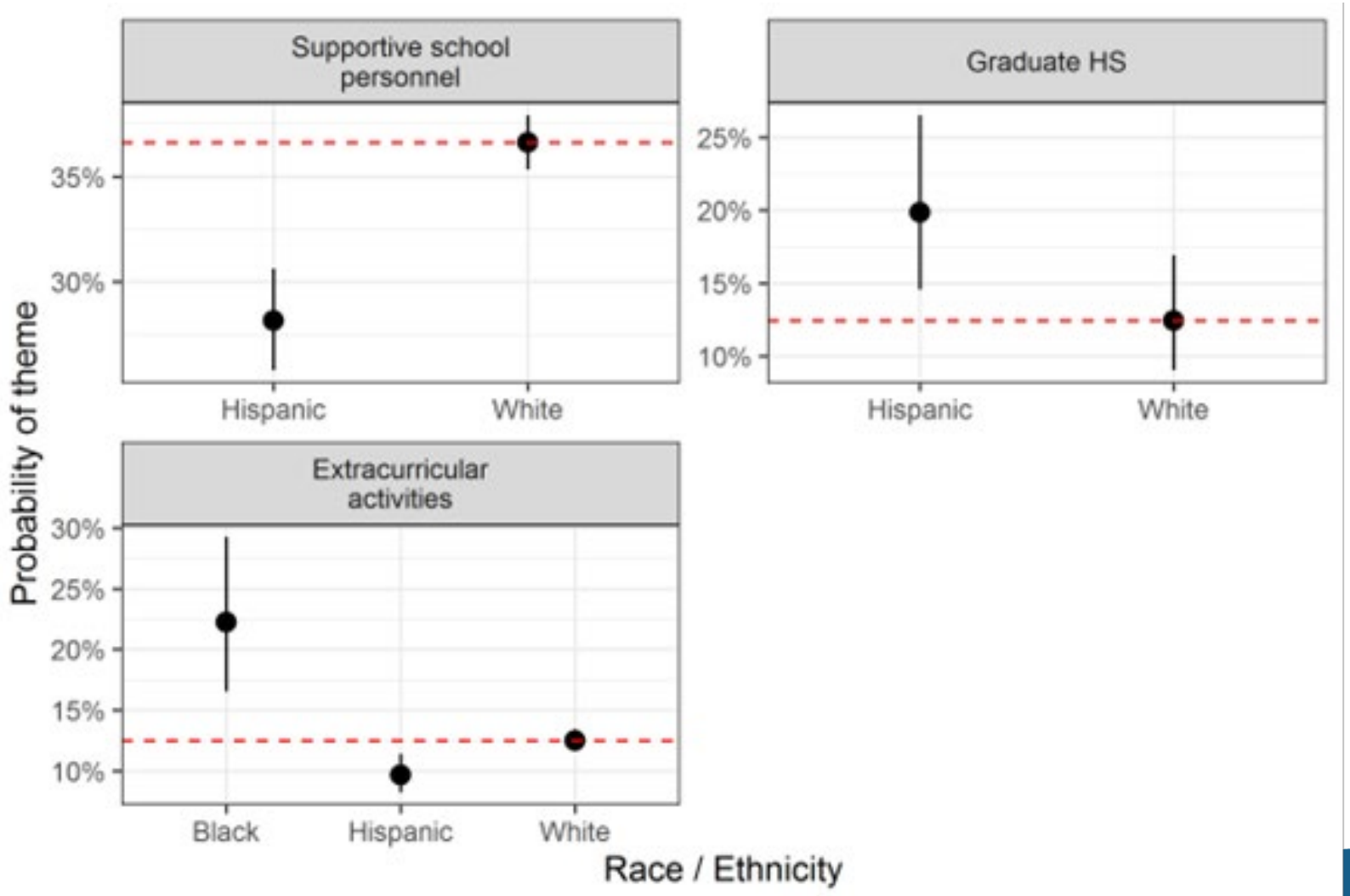
EMPLOYMENT

Nothing, **the school did not help me with preparation for life after high school or provide me with job skills** or where to go for help after high school.

Significant Differences by Disability Label



Significant Differences by Race/ Ethnicity



Positive Experiences by Exit Code

Exit Code	Theme	Absent	Present	Diff
Regular Diploma	Supportive School Personnel	85%	90%	5%
Regular Diploma	Sped Support	86%	91%	4%
Regular Diploma	Graduate HS	86%	95%	9%
Regular Diploma	Career Awareness or Support	87%	90%	3%
Regular Diploma	Self Care / Independent Living Skills	87%	82%	-5%
Regular Diploma	Negative Experiences	88%	51%	-37%
Dropped Out	Personal Growth	10%	6%	-3%
Dropped Out	Graduate HS	9%	5%	-5%
Dropped Out	Career Awareness or Support	9%	6%	-4%
Dropped Out	Personalized Living	9%	13%	4%
Dropped Out	Negative Experiences	8%	40%	33%

Guiding Questions for Discussion

- What findings resonate with you?
- What findings surprise you?
- What is missing from the findings that you were expecting?
- What findings are actionable?

Where Do We Go From Here?

- Create TA that addresses the need for all education staff to become supported and trusted personnel
- Continue to explore ways to infuse transition services with the positive predictors of post school success (e.g., CTE pathways, self-advocacy/self-determination, youth autonomy/decision making)
- Work to better prepare students with the most significant support needs for further education and employment – not just independent living
- Encourage SWD participation in extracurricular activities and work experiences related to their interests

Thank you!

Contact

crystal.emery@schools.utah.gov

Rachel.Barnett@Utah.edu