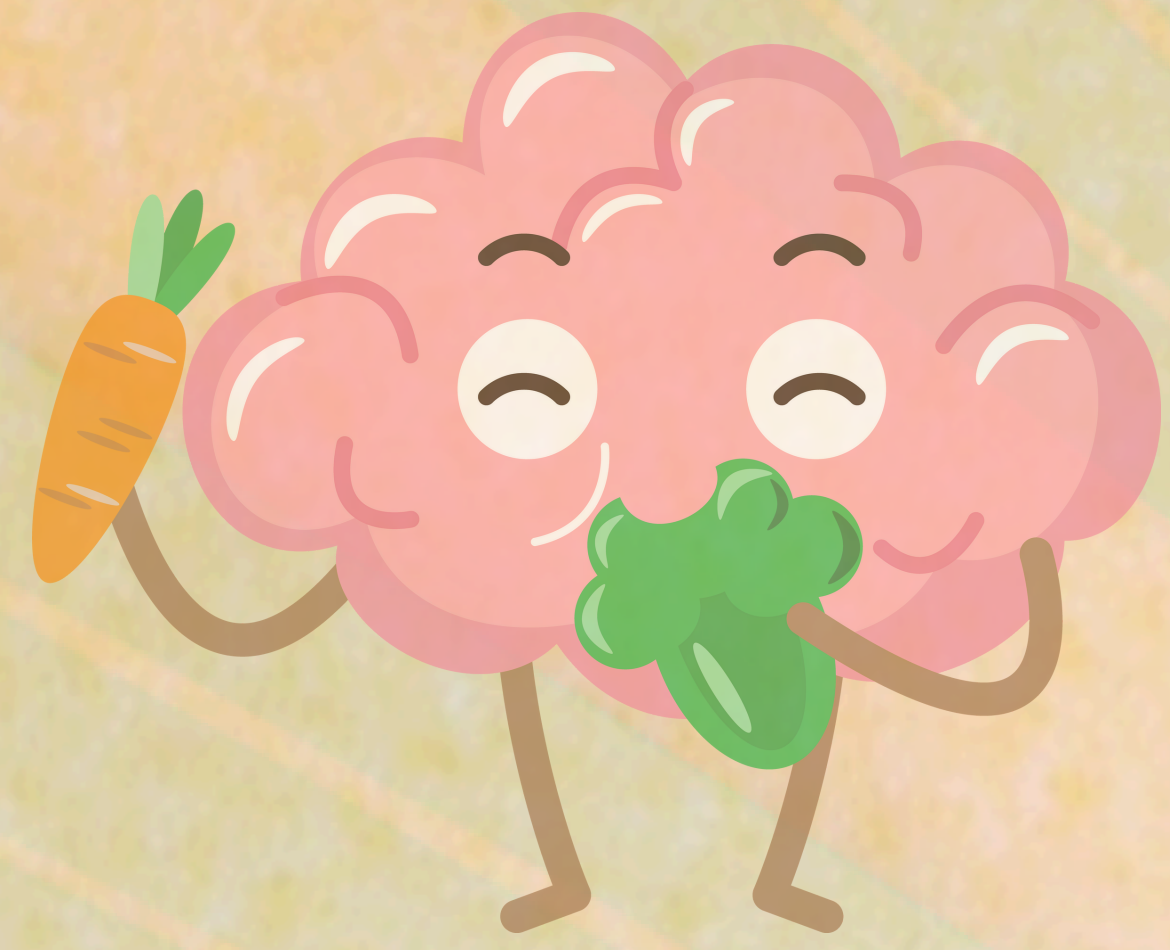


# Feminist Praxis, Care, and Community Engagement in Action: Addressing food insecurity among students at a Hispanic Serving Institution

Dr. Hilda Ontiveros-Arrieta, Women's & Gender Studies



## Abstract

This study examines feminist praxis and community-engaged approaches to addressing food and hygiene insecurity among first-generation students at a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) through a case study of Pete's Plate, a campus-based mutual aid and resource pantry. Recent campus data indicate that approximately 62% of students experience food insecurity, with first-generation students disproportionately affected by intersecting structural barriers related to income, caregiving responsibilities, and immigration status within the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Grounded in feminist and intersectional frameworks, this research centers care, reciprocity, and student agency as methodological and ethical commitments. Using a mixed-methods design, the study analyzes utilization data, student surveys, and open-ended narratives to assess both material outcomes and the relational impacts of community-engaged interventions. Findings highlight how feminist praxis disrupts stigma, fosters belonging, and repositions basic needs support as an essential component of student success at HSIs. The study contributes to emerging scholarship on basic needs insecurity by demonstrating how feminist, place-based, and culturally responsive models can advance equity, retention, and holistic wellbeing students.

## Introduction

Food insecurity continues to impact college students nationwide, affecting academic performance, persistence, and overall well-being. Pete's Plate was established to address basic needs insecurity by providing free meals to students experiencing food access challenges. This study assesses the prevalence of food insecurity among service users and evaluates the program's perceived impact on students' academic experience and ability to remain enrolled at the University.

## Methodology

This assessment employed a cross-sectional survey design to evaluate the impact of Pete's Plate on student food security and academic persistence. Data were collected through a brief, anonymous questionnaire administered to students accessing services during the assessment period. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was collected to ensure confidentiality.

The instrument included closed-ended items measuring:

1. Service utilization (e.g., prior use of Pete's Plate),
2. Indicators of financial vulnerability (e.g., SNAP/Pell eligibility),
3. Student classification,
4. Food insecurity behaviors (e.g., skipping meals due to lack of access or affordability within the past 12 months), and
5. Perceived academic impact (e.g., whether receiving a meal improved their academic experience, supported persistence, or helped them remain enrolled).

A total of  $N = 279$  students completed the survey. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate percentages for each item. Results are presented visually in charts to support transparency and accessibility of findings.

## Findings/Results

A total of 279 students completed the Pete's Plate assessment survey. Findings indicate that food insecurity remains a significant issue among service users and that the program plays a meaningful role in supporting student persistence and academic success.

### Food Insecurity:

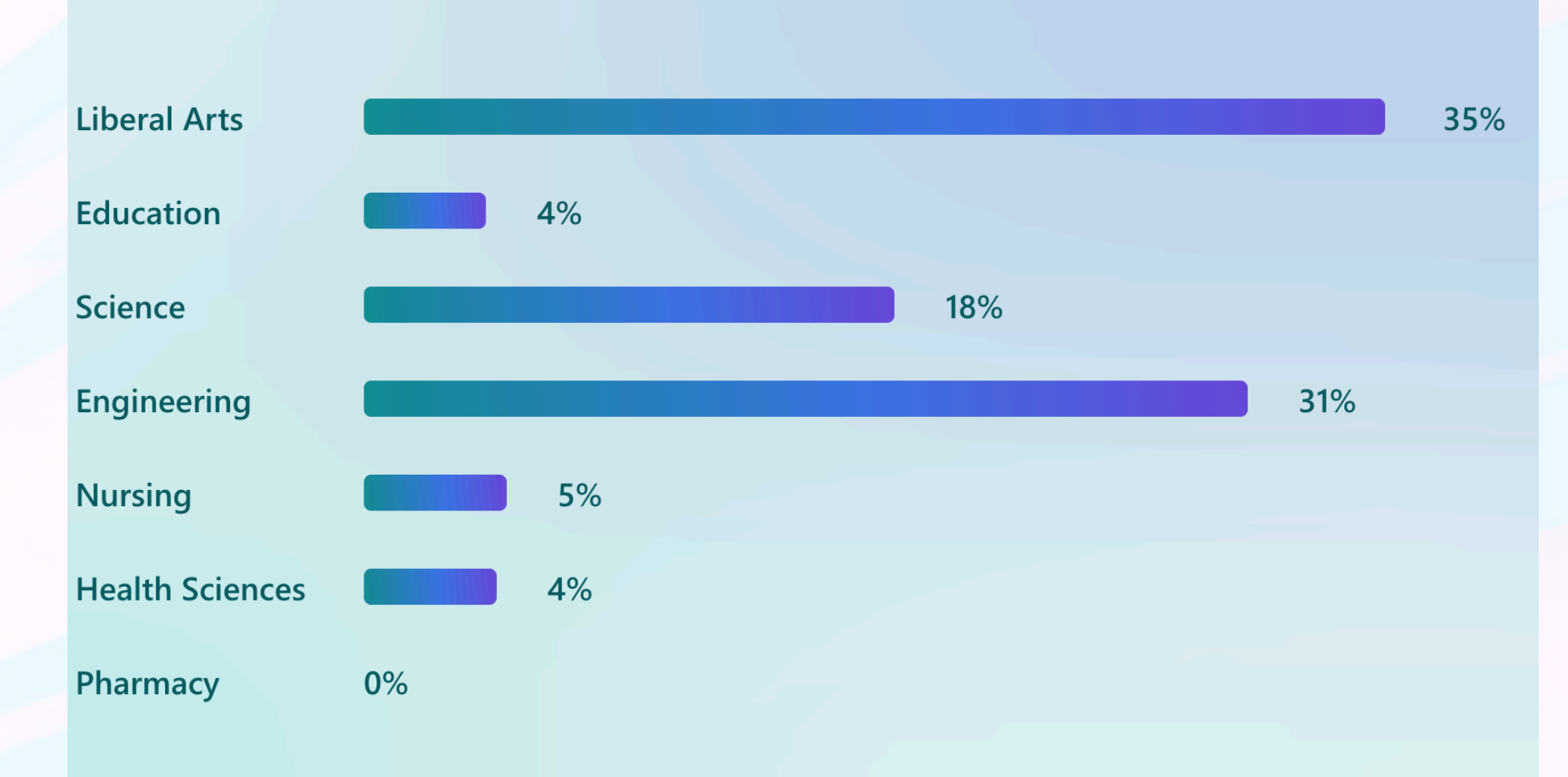
- 41% of respondents reported that they had skipped a meal within the past 12 months because they could not access or afford food.
- 23% selected "maybe," suggesting episodic or uncertain food insecurity.
- Only 34% reported that they had not skipped meals due to financial constraints. These findings indicate that a substantial proportion of students utilizing Pete's Plate are experiencing moderate to high levels of food insecurity.

### Academic Impact:

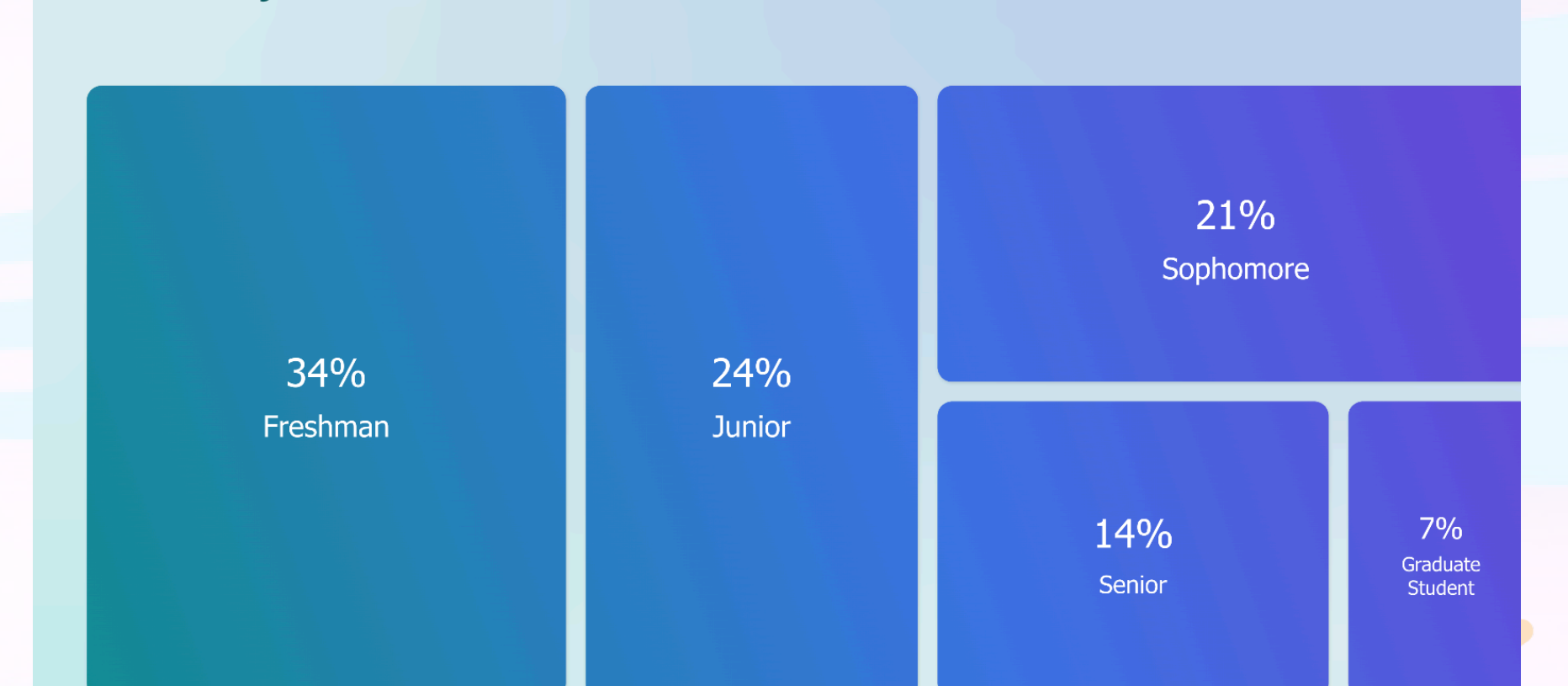
- 75% of respondents indicated that receiving a meal from Pete's Plate improved their academic experience, helped them remain enrolled, or supported progress toward completing their degree.
- 10% reported that it did not, and 13% were unsure. The strong majority response suggests that the program functions not only as a basic needs resource but also as an academic support and retention intervention.

\*\*\*Overall, the findings demonstrate that Pete's Plate is serving a population with documented food access challenges and that students perceive the program as directly contributing to their ability to succeed at the University.

### Which UTEP college are you enrolled in?

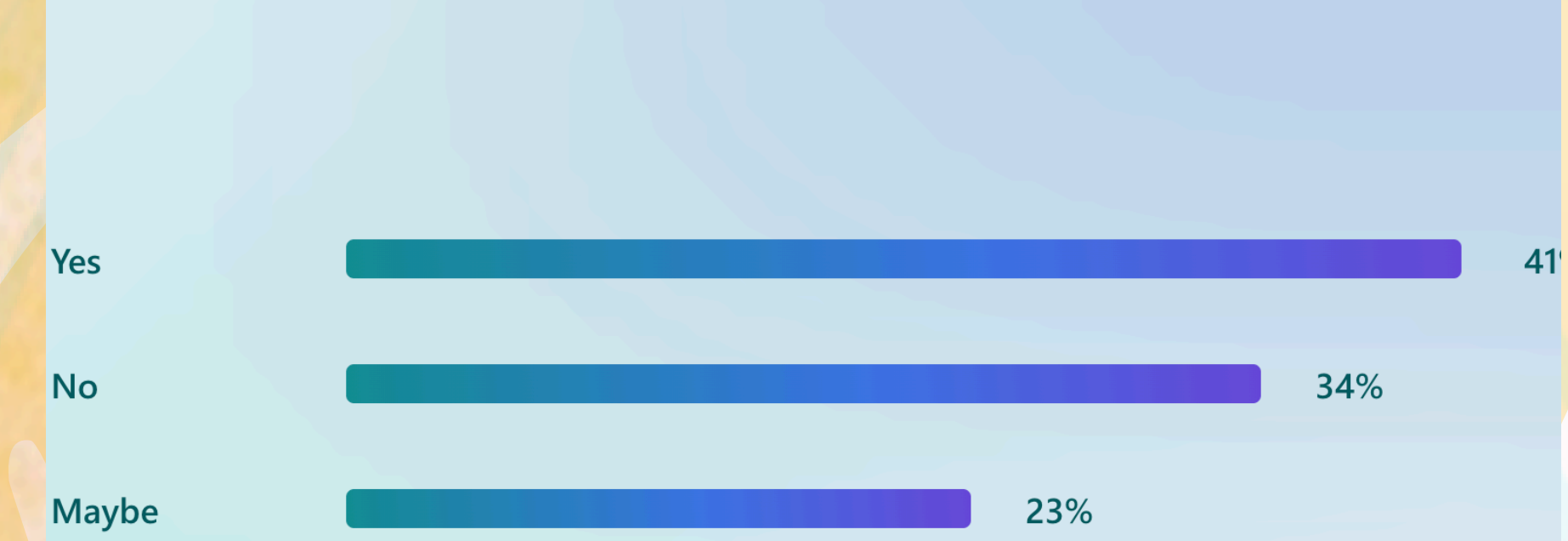


### What is your classification?



## Findings/Results

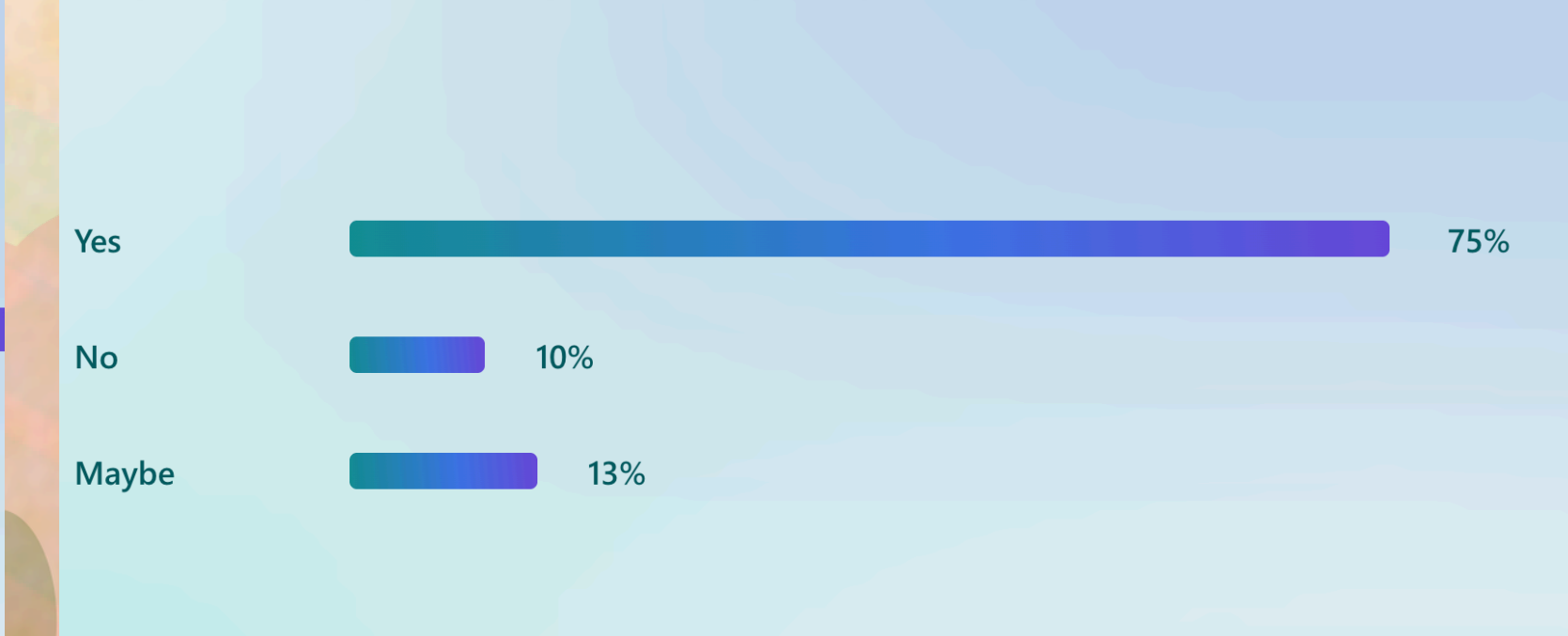
Within the last 12 months, have you skipped a meal because you could not access/afford food?



Within the last 12 months, have you skipped a meal because you could not access/afford food?



Has getting a meal from Pete's Plate improved your academic experience, helped you stay in college, or complete your degree?



## Conclusion

The findings indicate that Pete's Plate serves students experiencing significant food insecurity and that the program meaningfully supports academic persistence and success. A majority of respondents reported that receiving meals improved their academic experience and helped them remain enrolled, underscoring the critical connection between basic needs support and student retention. Future research at UTEP can expand this work by incorporating longitudinal data to examine retention and graduation outcomes among service users, conducting comparative analyses with non-users, and integrating qualitative interviews to better understand students' lived experiences. Broader campus-wide assessments of food insecurity would also strengthen institutional strategies aimed at advancing student success and servingness at an HSI.