

CLOSING THE LOOP OR TIGHTENING THE NOOSE? AN EXAMINATION OF THE USE OF STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES TO IMPROVE DIETETIC EDUCATION

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Statement of the problem

Faculty involvement is key to the development, measurement, and integration of student learning outcomes into a system of quality improvement. Research on use of student learning outcomes in higher education has drawn on broad theoretical models that focus on institutional factors that support assessment activities. The following questions remain:

- How do factors outlined in broad theoretical models impact faculty in specific programs?
- In what ways are there programmatic differences in faculty attitudes regarding assessment activities?
- In what ways are there programmatic differences in faculty involvement in assessment activities?

Theoretical framework

A model was developed to revise earlier frameworks that focused on the institutional level. (Peterson & Augustine, 2000; Peterson & Einarson, 2000).

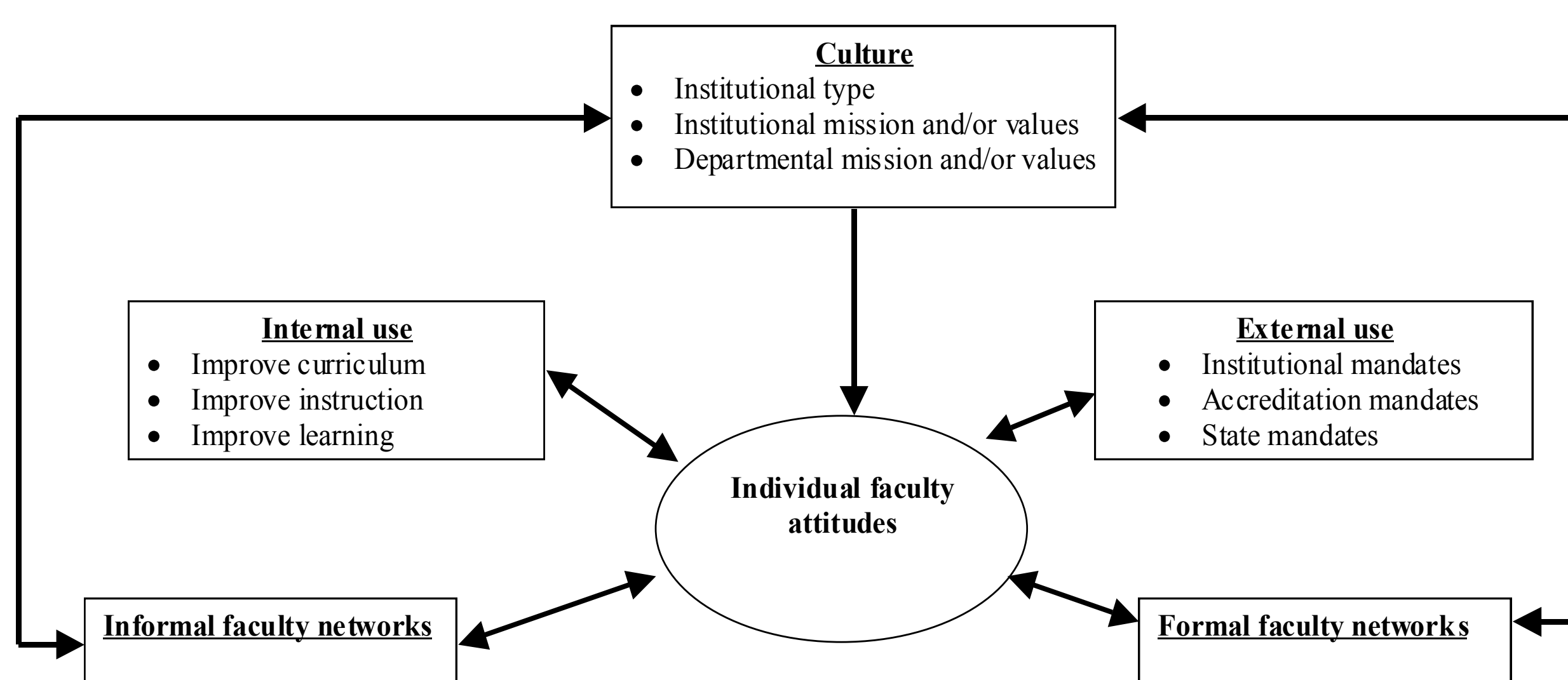


Figure 1 – Conceptual model for the study of institutional factors that impact faculty attitudes toward measuring student learning outcomes

Overview of the Methodology

Population studied

- All directors of dietetic education programs in the United States. N=556
- Didactic based programs found in two year colleges, four year major research universities, comprehensive universities, liberal arts institutions, HBCUs, for-profit institutions.
- Supervised practice programs found in university medical centers, community hospitals, public health departments, school food service programs, military and VA hospitals.

Survey instrument used

27-question survey adapted from previous research on accredited engineering programs (Volkwein, Lattuca, Harper, & Domingo, 2007) and on faculty serving on accreditation committees (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003).

Data analysis

- Descriptive statistics on faculty attitudes and use of student learning outcomes
- Multiple regression analysis to determine the effect of the following 4 independent variables on use of student learning outcomes
 1. Internal versus external motivation for use
 2. Depth of institutional implementation and commitment to assessment
 3. Level of faculty involvement in assessment activities
 4. Patterns of faculty involvement in assessment activities
- Analysis carried out on the population as a whole and subgroups based on program type, institution type, field/terminal degree of the program director, years served as program director.

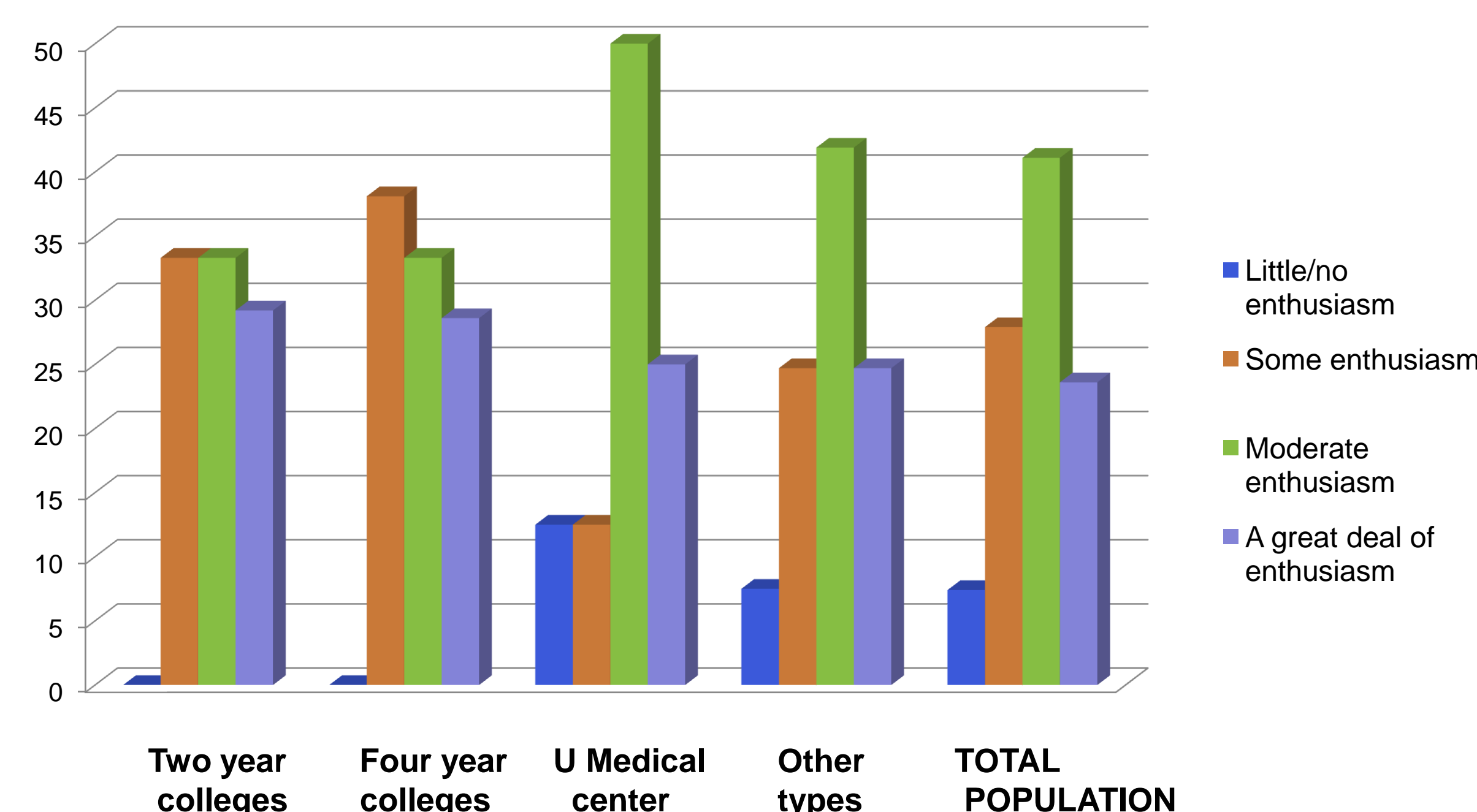
Overview of results

The response rate was 52%.

Level of enthusiasm for assessment activities

- 64.3% either moderately enthusiastic or had a great deal of enthusiasm about using student learning outcomes for program improvement.
- Highest level of enthusiasm was in University Medical Centers where 75% were moderately enthusiastic or had a great deal of enthusiasm.
- Lowest level of enthusiasm was in four-year institutions where 55% were moderately enthusiastic or had a great deal of enthusiasm.

Table 1 – Level of enthusiasm for using student learning outcomes for program improvement by institution type



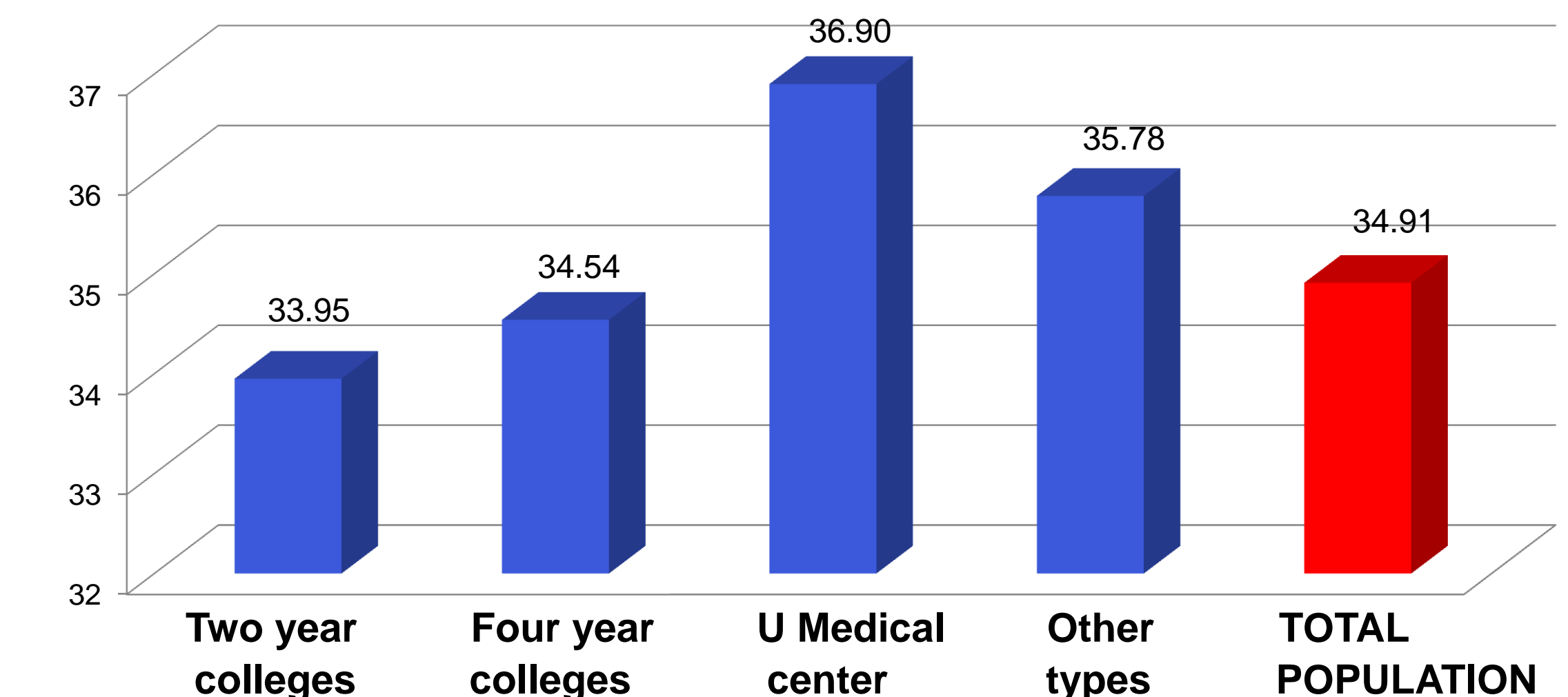
Attitudes about improvement activities at the institutional level

- In the population as a whole, mean scores were positive for 4 out of 11 survey statements

Attitudes about improvement activities at the program level

- In the population as a whole, mean scores were positive for 10 out of 11 survey statements.

Table 2 – Mean program attitude score by institution type (range of possible scores 11-44)



Data on the model of institutional factors that impact faculty attitudes

1. Independent variables correlated with the dependent variable, use of student learning outcomes
 - Patterns of faculty involvement ($X^2 = .35$)
 - Depth of Institutional Implementation & Commitment ($X^2 = .30$)
 - Level of Faculty Involvement ($X^2 = .26$)
 - Internal versus External Motivation ($X^2 = .19$)
2. For the population as a whole ANOVA F statistics were significant ($F(4,199) = 8.57, p = .00$), but independent variables explained only 15% of the variation in the dependent variable
3. For subgroups of the population, model statistics were similar to the overall population.

Conclusions

- Positive attitudes toward program improvement activities and enthusiasm for using student learning outcomes for program improvement among dietetic educators are quite different than those reported for faculty at large (Burke & Minassians, 2002)
- Levels of use and positive attitudes measured in this study are similar to reports of faculty on accreditation steering committees (Welsh & Metcalf, 2003) and recent reports of engineering faculty (Volkwein, Lattuca, Harper, & Domingo, 2007).
- Efforts by institutions, states, and accrediting agencies to promote a culture of assessment may be working.
- Research investigating faculty at large is not precise enough to capture the differences in faculty attitudes among academic areas. Researchers should continue to investigate specific academic programs to determine differences lie in faculty attitudes and level of use of student learning outcomes for program improvement.