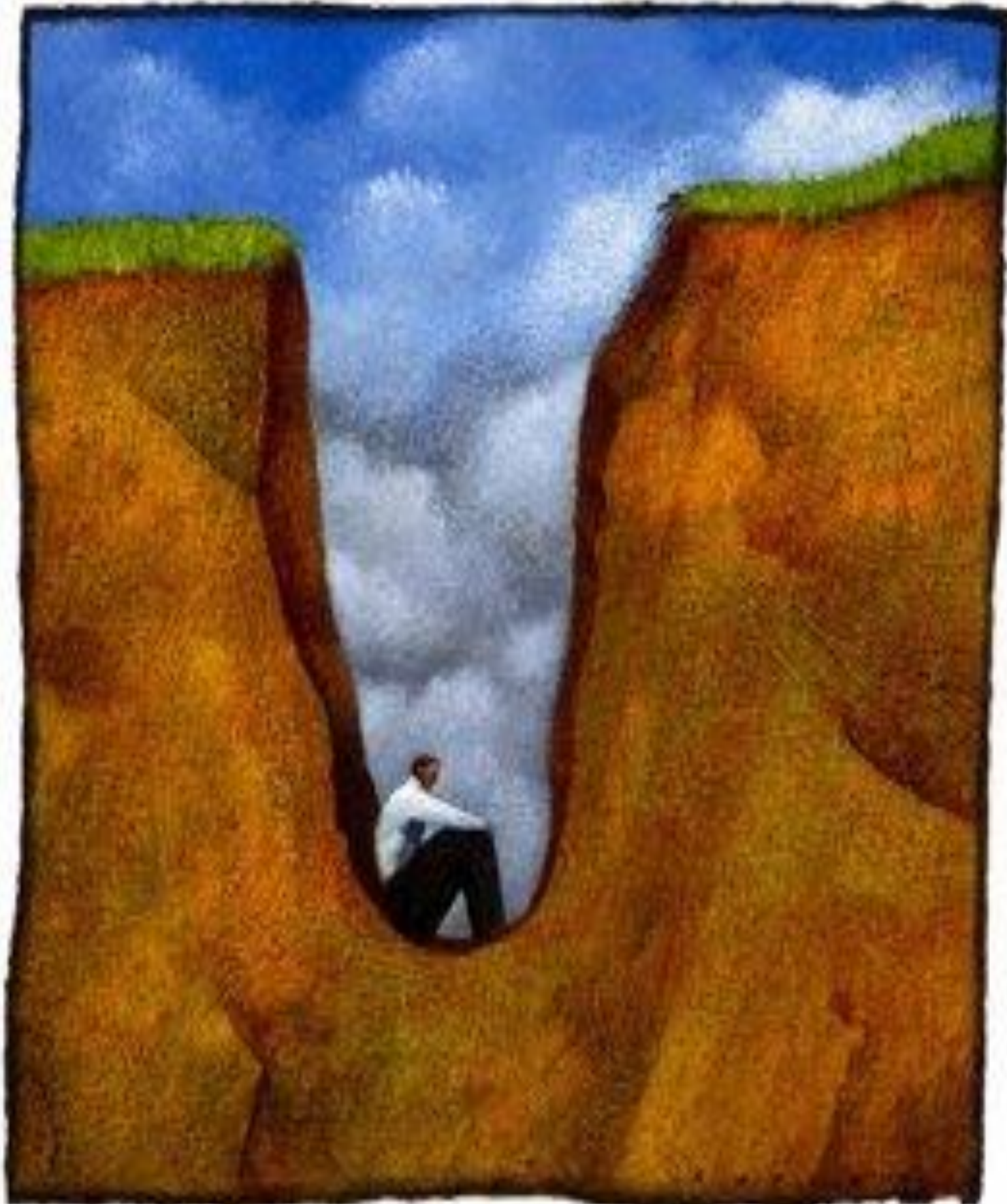


# Student Stuckness: Communication Practices That Assist Students in Overcoming Challenges

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## Students Experiences of Feeling Stuck

*"Days before graduation I had an emotional and mental breakdown. I finally realized how exhausted and tired I was and why. I realized during the entire Fall 2021 semester I had two deaths in my family, a loved one had a terrible health prognosis, I ended up on anti anxiety and depression medication, I literally couldn't do some assignments due to exhaustion, and being a mother and caregiver while working full time was just too much."*

*"...It took me a very long time to conclude what I wanted to major in and understand my academic interests. I felt that I did not belong in school but I was stuck here because I did not have an option. I felt stuck because I was just doing classes because I wanted to pass not because they were of interest to me. I also felt stuck because I did not know the right path to choose. I felt that my back was up against the wall and I had no time or capability to choose a career path for me."*

*"I was finishing up my first semester in college, and I got assigned 3 papers all due on the same day. I did not know where to start because I had never gotten assigned 3 papers before all due on the same day. I had 2 weeks to write them, but the stress on managing 3 papers made me feel trapped and felt that I had nowhere to start."*

## Study Focus

As these quotations illustrate, students experience a variety of challenges in college. This study sought to understand challenges college students experience, who they communicate with to resolve challenges, and the communication that is most helpful to allow students to overcome challenges. Developing effective support messages can assist students in overcoming adversity, developing resilience, and persisting in their educational efforts.

## Methods

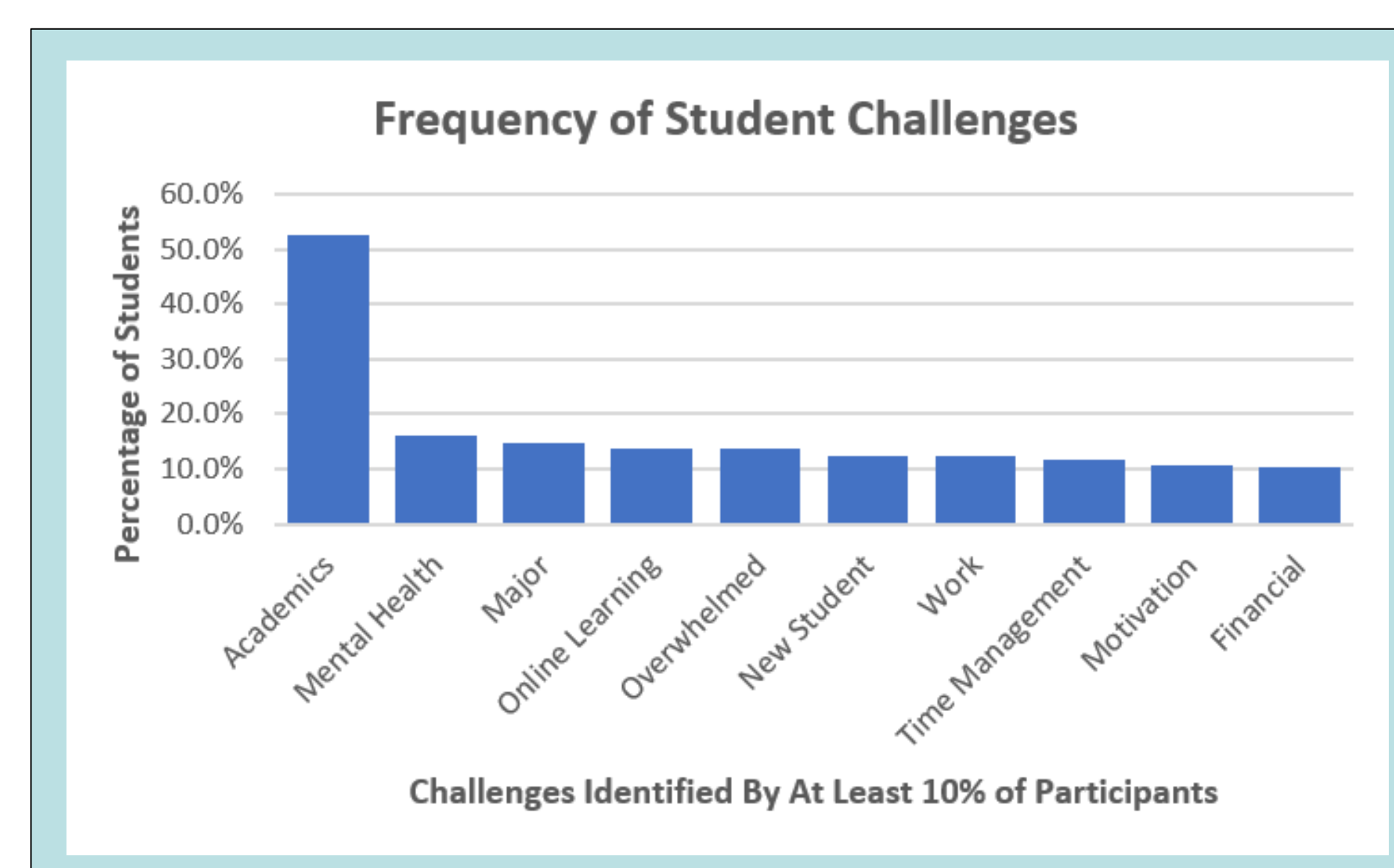
College students ( $n = 203$ ) at a midwestern university completed an open-ended survey asking them to describe a time they felt stuck as a student, who they communicated with about the challenge, and the messages that helped them work through the challenge.

Student participants represented 36 different majors and were predominantly Seniors (50.7%), followed by Juniors (19.2%), Sophomores (13.3%), and Freshmen (16.7%). Participants' age ranged from 18-54 years, with a median age of 21 and an average of 22.3 years. Most participants self-identified as female (71%), followed by male (24.6%), non-binary (3%), or declined to report (1%). Participants self-identified as White (71.9%), Asian (7.4%), Black or African American (6.4%), more than one race (2.5%), Hispanic or Latina/o (3%), or other races (2.5%), with 5.9% preferring not to answer.

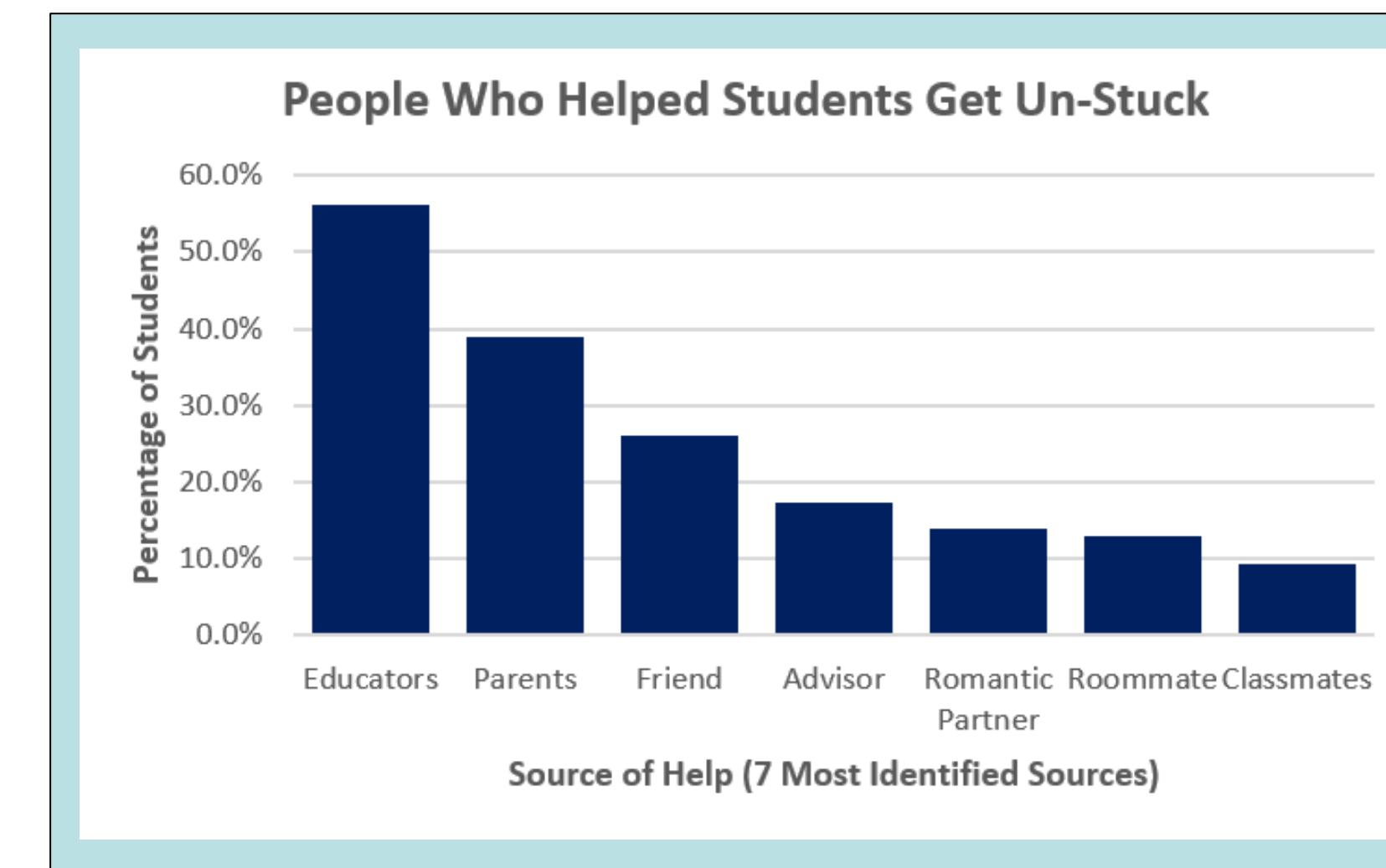
Most students had obligations outside of college. While 18.7% did not work outside of school, most students had paid jobs, working 1-10 hours (7.9%), 11-20 hours (30%), 21-30 hours (17.7%), 31-40 hours (14.8%), or 40 or more hours (10.8%) per week. A fifth (20.2%) performed caregiving roles for children (12.8%), parents (6.4%), and disabled family members (7.4%).

## Findings

When asked to describe a challenge that made them feel "stuck" during college, students identified an array of salient challenges including academics, mental health, selecting a major, online learning, feeling overwhelmed, being a new college student, work obligations, time management, finding motivation to complete coursework, and financial concerns, among others.

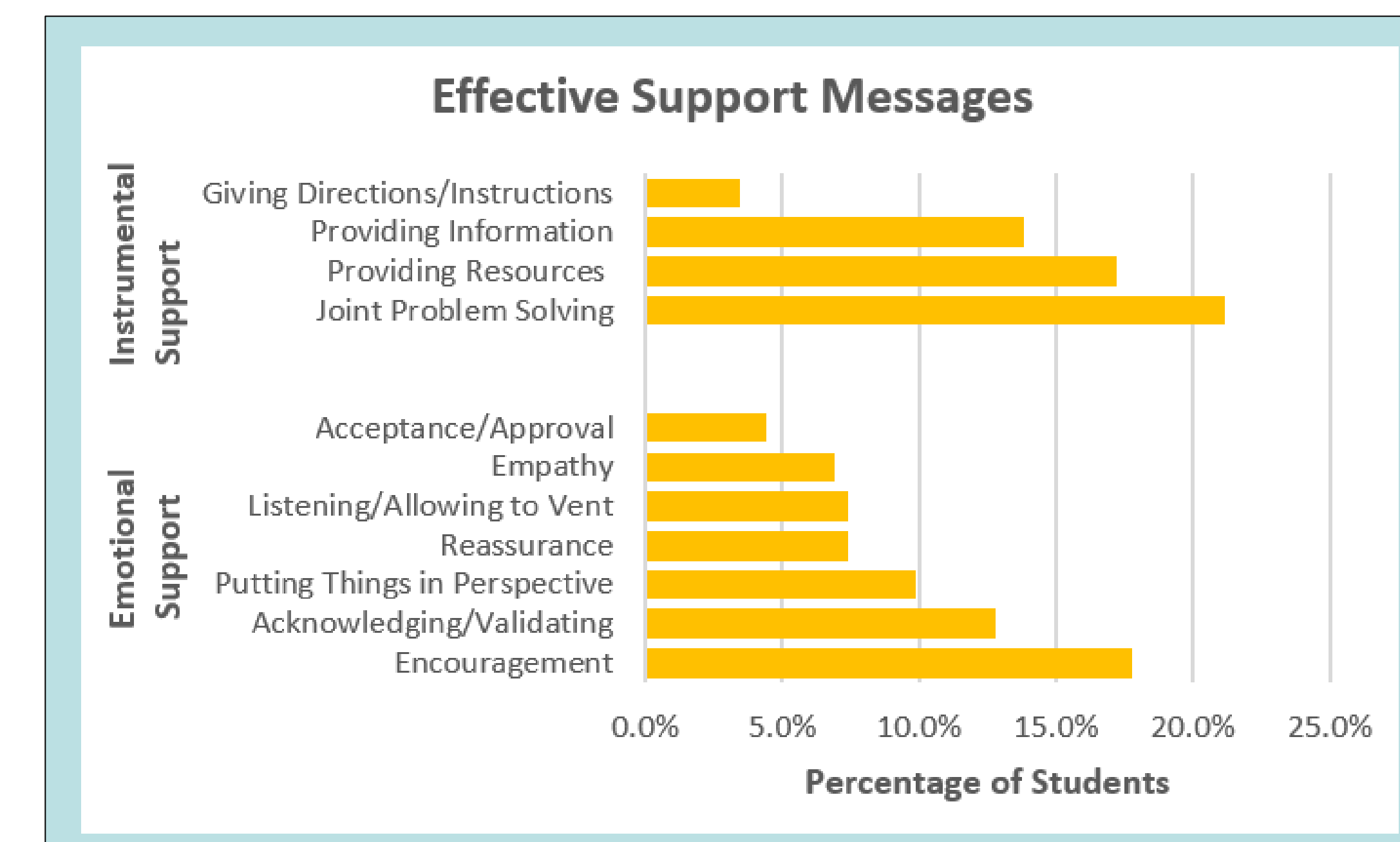


## Findings Continued



Students turned to *educators* (e.g., professors, instructors, teaching assistants) to help them overcome challenges the most frequently (56.2%), followed by parents (38.9%), friends (26.1%), and advisors (17.2%), among others. This emphasizes the important role educators play in helping students overcome educational challenges and learn successful life strategies.

Messages that helped students get "unstuck" included those that offered *instrumental* or *emotional support*. The greatest number of students indicated that problem solving (messages that allowed students to identify and develop action steps) helped them overcome challenges.



## Implications & Future Directions

Growing concerns about student disengagement (McMurtrie, 2022) and mental health issues (Chen et al., 2019; Meluch & Starcher, 2020) necessitate finding ways to help students navigate and succeed in higher education. Findings indicate that students rely on educators to assist them with challenges during college.

Communication behaviors such as offering encouragement, acknowledging student challenges, and providing perspective are effective ways to emotionally support students. Further, talking with students to help them develop their own action plan and sharing resources on campus are powerful ways to communicate instrumental support.

As the educational landscape evolves, additional research on positive messages that enable college students to identify constructive ways to overcome challenges is needed.

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