

# BMI Status and Expectations about Weight Gain and Peer Acceptance of Body Diversity among College-bound Black Female High School Graduates

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### Abstract

There are widely held assumptions about perceived first-year weight gain norms (e.g., "The Freshman 15"), but there is limited research surrounding how pre-college body mass index (BMI) status is associated with these assumptions among ethnically-diverse female high school graduates. The present study aimed to explore distinct effects by BMI status among 209 Black/African American incoming first-year college females planning to attend an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) on multiple aspects of perceived first-year weight change and beliefs about future college peers' acceptance of body diversity. The findings suggest that transitioning cultural norms and preferences regarding positive media role models for healthy approaches to weight management and body image may play a role in weightrelated concerns and expectations among Black college-bound females. Preliminary findings have implications for the value of testing social norm theory in the context of first-year weight gain, which may ultimately enhance the design and effectiveness of healthy weight management initiatives among ethnically- and weight-diverse first-year women during the early college adjustment period.

## Background and Objectives

- Awareness of the popular notion of "the Freshman 15" is pervasive among first-year college students, but its value vastly exceeds empirically-derived estimates of the average amount of weight gained at this developmental juncture.
- An emerging line of research has revealed that heightened concern about weight gain at the outset of college predicts greater perceived weight gain in conjunction with greater eating and body image disturbance in prospective cohort analyses of predominantly White first-year undergrace
- Recent evidence suggests that greater body acceptance by others is associated with positive body image and an adaptive intuitive eating style in college females.<sup>3</sup>
- Conversely, data has shown that experiences of weight-related stigmatization are linked to exercise avoidance, body dissatisfaction and depressive symptoms, and unhealthy weight control practices among undergraduates.
- Remarkably, Black/African American female college students are disproportionately affected by overweight and obesity<sup>7</sup> and at the same time members of this racial/ethnic group purportedly endorse accepting a diverse range of body sizes. Data 80 also suggest that entering overweight/obese college women are also at increased risk or unhealthy body composition changes during the first-year transition.
- Thus, this preliminary investigation sought to examine whether BMI status affects perceived first-year weight gain norms, weight-change expectations, weight-change concerns, and perceptions of future college peers' acceptance of body diversity in an underrepresented sample of Black/African American prospective female college students planning to attend an HBCU.

### Methods

#### **Participants**

The data reported here w Adjusting to College Life. The female students who self-identified Carolina A&T State University recruited through letters mailed to

#### **Procedures and Measures**

Participants completed a brief information:

- Basic demographics (including
- Self-perceived weight status [i heavier than average (OB)]
- A series of questions related to: the co first-year weight gain, first-year weight-cha the first year of college, and expectations about
- administered through SurveyShare which ac

m a larger multi-site investigation entitle

purposes of this set of analyses was drawn

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addresses in the summer of 2011 prior to ente

ina Central University beginning in th

- eight and weight which were used to cale JW), just right (NW), a little heavier than av
- of first-year weight gain, perceived norms sur bectations, concerns about gaining weight o le and female college peers' acceptance of b

#### Statistical Analyses

ANOVA models were computed to evaluate the relationship between BMI status and: 1) perceived first-year weightgain norms, 2) concerns about first-year weight loss and weight gain, and 3) expectations about male and female college peers' acceptance of body diversity. Chi-square analyses were performed to explore the asso ation between BMI status and first-year weight-change expectations. All statistical analyses were performed using

# Results

- On average participants were 17.8 years old (SD = 0.5, range = 17-19).
- The mean BMI of the sample was 25.6 (SD = 6.6, range = 16-49).
- BMI status was distributed as follows: 7% UW, 49% NW, 19% OW, 25% OB
- Self-perceived weight status was distributed as follows: 7% "too skinny", 61% "just right", 31% "a little heavier than average, 1% "a lot heavier than average" • 84% of participants believed first-year weight gain was con average perceived norm of typical first-year weight gai
- 32% of prospective students expected ed having weight, 42.6% expected to maintain the no expectations about their weight char
- •41% of incoming first-year females were no while 17% were very concerned about losing
- 26.8% of participants expressed no concern ab year of college while the same percentage repo year weight-gain.
- BMI status was not associated with perception weight gain, the average perceived first-year about male and female college peers' accept
- BMI status moderated first-year weight charge 001:see Figure 1) and concerns about first-year weight gain (p < .00 Figure 2).



Figure 1. Percentages of First-Year Weight-Change Expectations by BMI Status Group

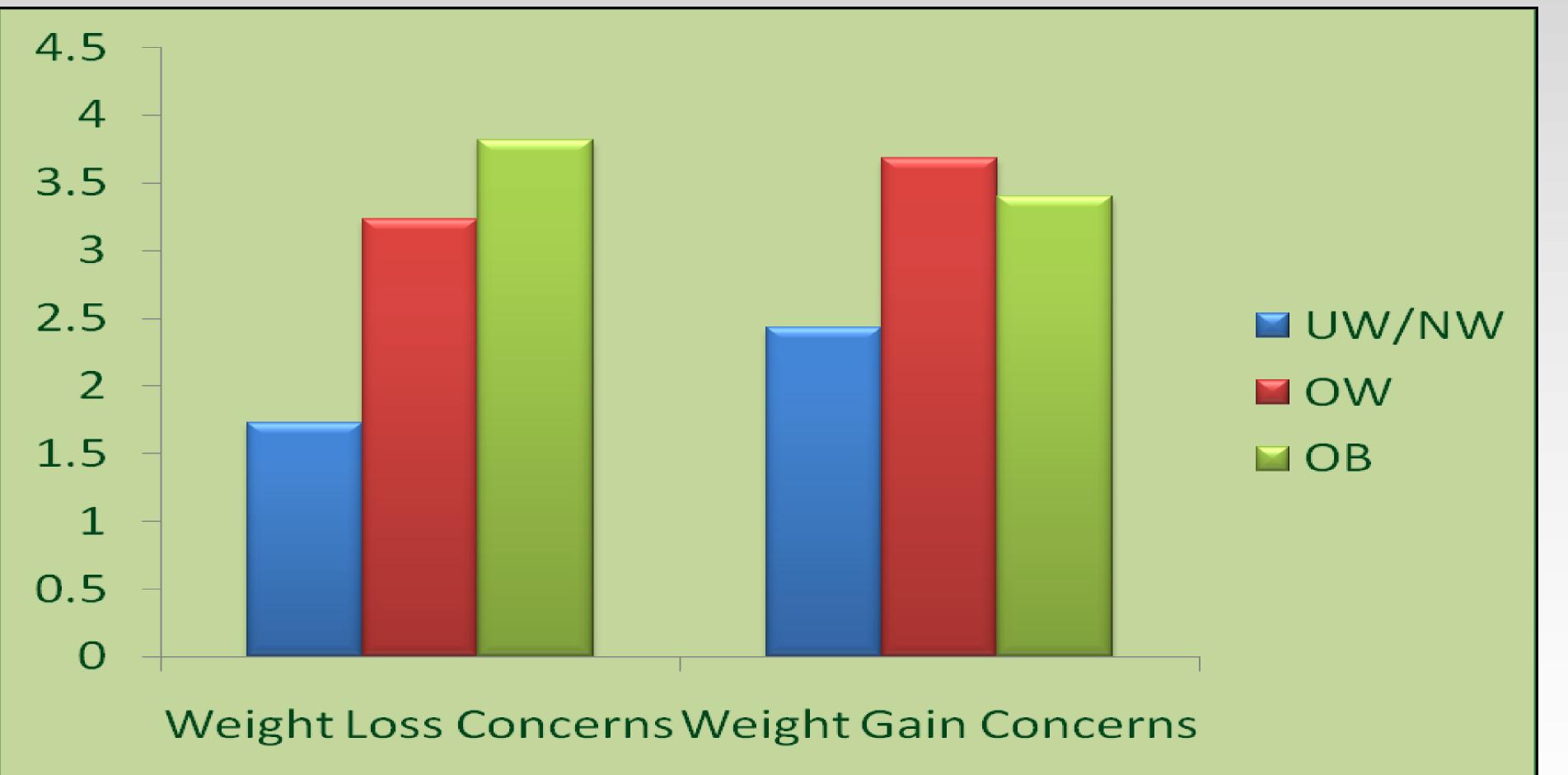


Figure 2. Mean First-Year Weight-Change Concerns by BMI Status Group

# Conclusions and Implications

- Pervasiveness of "the Freshman 15" myth extends to young ethnic minority women preparing to attend college.
- However, most college-bound students expected to either lose or maintain their current weight.
- •Black prospective college women with elevated body weights expressed greater concern about both first-year weight loss and weight gain and a greater number of them expected to lose weight relative to their UW/NW peers.
- Preliminary findings have implications for challenging cultural stereotypes surrounding "the tolerance of fatness" among members of the Black communit
- Results also suggest the value of testing social norm theory in the context of first-year weight gain which may ultimately enhance the design and effectiveness of healthy weight management initiatives among ethnically- and weight-diverse first-year women during the early college adjustment period.

# Limitations

- The relatively modest-sized non-random sample
- Use of self-reported heights and weights to calculate BMI
- The exclusively female sample precludes generalizing findings to Black prospective first-year male students.

### Future Directions

- Assessing whether results are comparable to those generated from White/European American prospective college females
- Evaluating to what extent e impacting results, particularly with respect to cultural difference diet and ideal body size/shape preferences among various regions of the United States
- Exploring the potential impact of the greater media presence of positive Black female celebrity role models for promoting healthy approaches to weight management and body image
- Exploring whether prosp Uvs. PWI) also affects findings

### ments

- 11 awarded to Jennifer B. Webb, Ph.D. • The authors would ers and university Admissions Offices.

#### • JBW also thanks Su stance in preparing portions of this poster..

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