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## 1. Introduction

Weight loss programs are most often studied according to their quantitative results; however, it is equally important for program facilitators to understand the perceived learning of program participants. This ensures participants' future success and maintenance of weight loss because the effectiveness of weight loss programs is dependent upon the participants' individual backgrounds, experiences, and perceived learning.

This research examines the perceived learning of women ages 40–64 who participated in Weight Wise Women, a 16 week weight loss program that emphasizes planning meals, overcoming psychological barriers to weight loss such as stress, balancing calorie intake with energy expended, increasing exercise, and overcoming negative social influences.

## 2. Methods

Focus groups were conducted separately for each cohort at the end of each 16 week Weight Wise Women program. Michelle D'Abundo facilitated the focus groups by following the Weight-Wise Focus Group Guide. Focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim. Elizabeth Tant, co-facilitator, created a seating chart and recorded hand-written notes to supplement the transcription of audio recordings. Participation in the focus group was voluntary and 57 women chose to participate.

#### Analysis

Focus groups were analyzed using the constant comparative method. Coding was used to identify themes like eating strategies, journaling, coping skills, social support and self-efficacy.

#### Weight-Wise Focus Group Guide

- . Round Robin Check-in: Please introduce yourself and state one word that describes your experience with the Weight-Wise Program.
- 2. How many times have you participated in weight loss programs in the past?

a. Specifically the Weight-Wise program

- 3. What were your reasons for participating in the Weight-Wise Program?
- 4. What did you learn during the Weight-Wise program?
- 5. How did goal setting affect your participation in the program?
- 6. What did you like most about the Weight-Wise program?
- 7. What was your greatest barrier to succeeding at weight loss? **Probes:** Time, schedule, exercise, etc.
- 8. If you were to identify something that needed changing with the Weight-Wise Program, what would it be?
- 9. What would you do to improve the Weight-Wise program?
- 10. How did support from others affect your participation in the program?
- 11. How did you change as a result of participating in the Weight-Wise Program?

**Probes:** Health, wellness, nutrition, physical activity, etc.

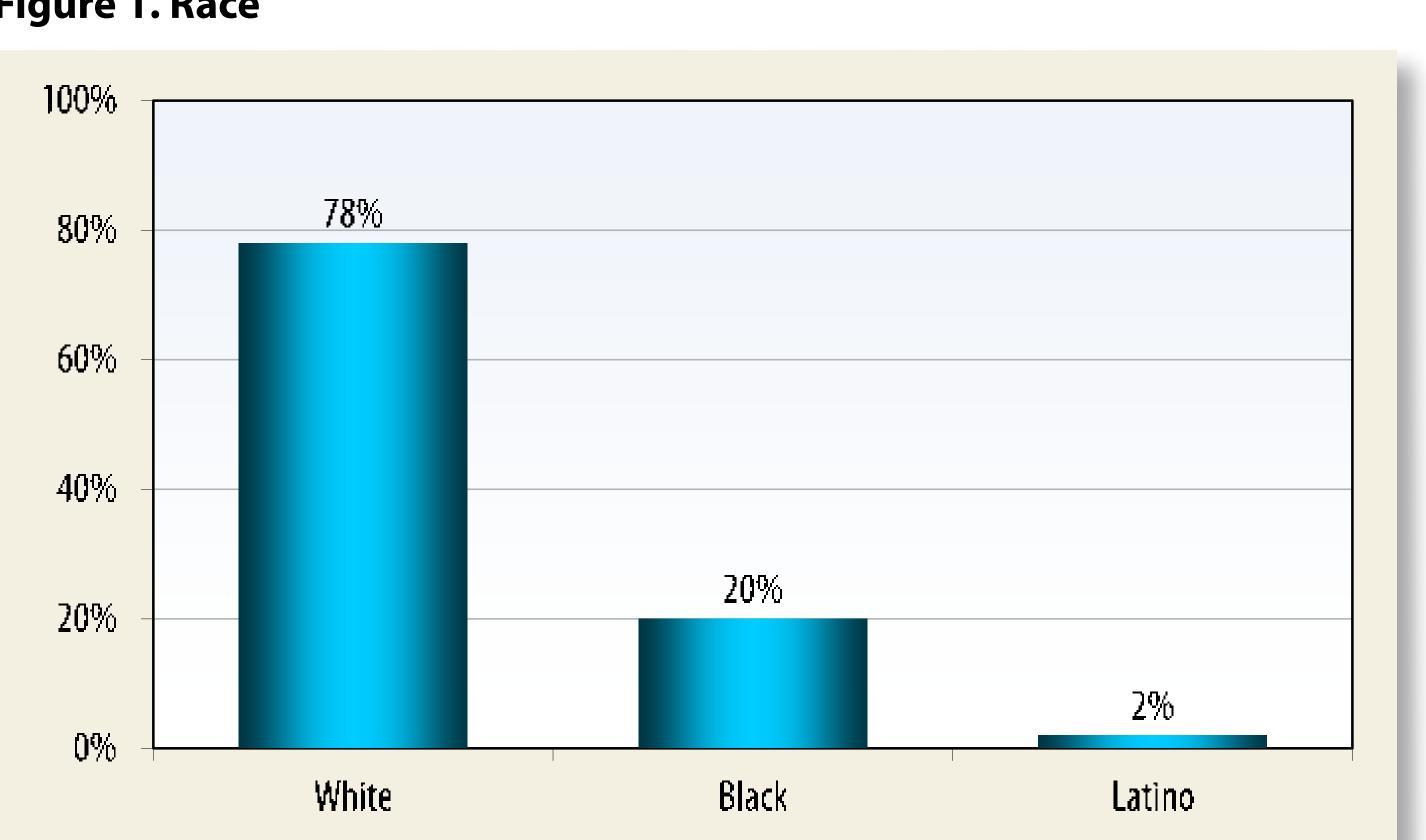
- 12. How well do you think you will be able to self-monitor your eating and physical activity in the future?
- 13. Round Robin Check-out: Describe your biggest accomplishment from participating in the Weight-Wise Program.

# Perceived Learning about Food and Eating Habits of Women Participating in a Weight Loss Program

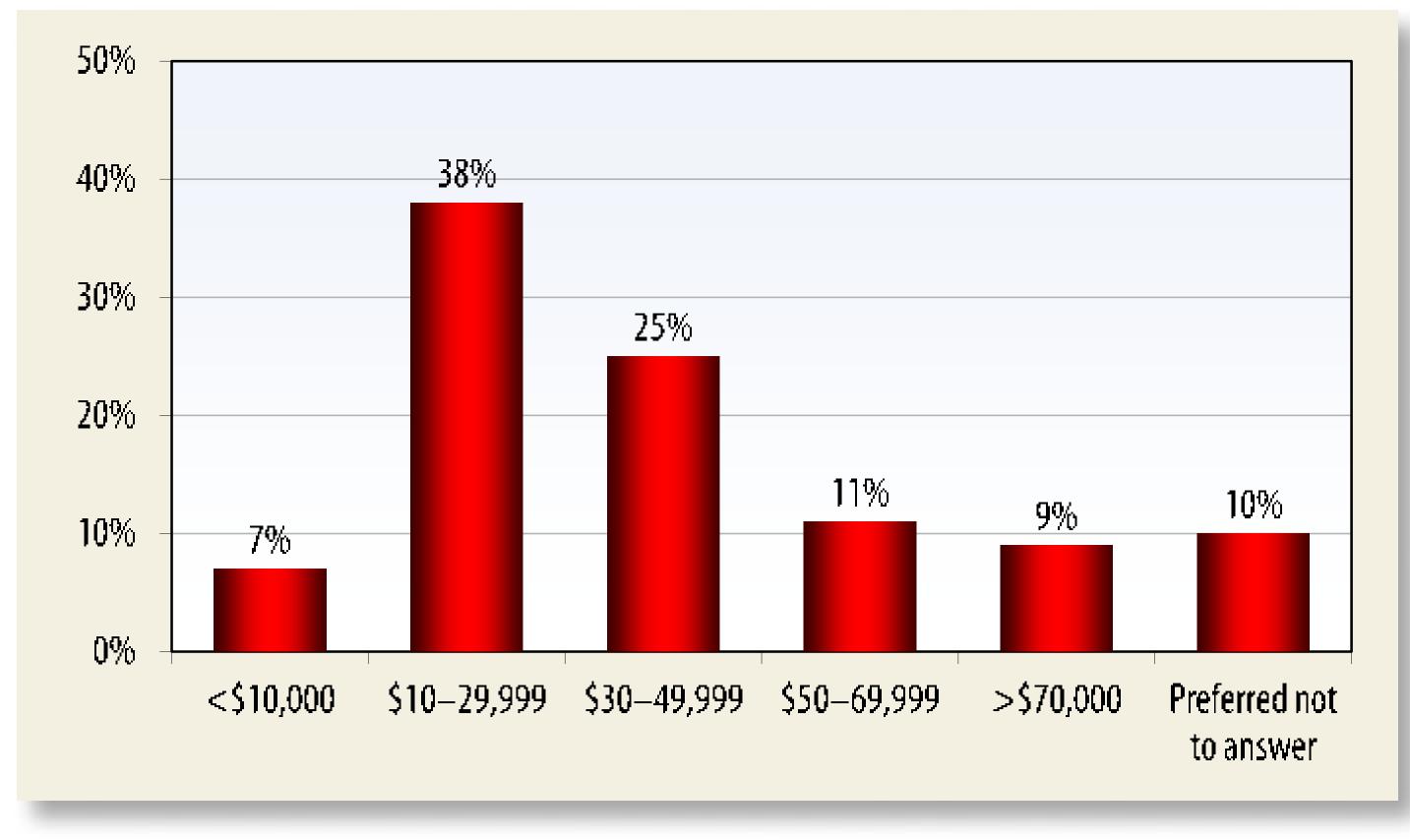
# **2. Methods** (continued)

# **Demographics of Focus Group Participants**

- Mean age: 55 years (oldest 72, youngest 44)
- Gender: female
- BMI: >25
- All participants were residents of Brunswick or New Hanover County in southeastern North Carolina.







# Figure 2. Annual Household Income

# 3. Results

When asked to describe their experience with the program in one word, several participants used words like "educational," "learning," and "enlightening." This learning was later described as learning related to eating strategies, journaling, coping skills, social support, and self-efficacy

# **Eating Strategies**

Participants were taught eating strategies including planning meals, eating at restaurants, and learning new ways to prepare food. Because of what they learned in the program, participants reported packing meals and snacks to last throughout the day, ordering healthier food at restaurants, and learning that "healthy foods can actually taste good."

# **3. Results** (continued)

Each week, program facilitators offered samples of healthy recipes for participants to try and many responded by saying that they would not have tried the recipe on their own; however after tasting it in class they make it often. This hands-on learning approach allowed the women to try new things and incorporate new and healthy foods into their daily diet.

#### Journaling

Participants were asked to complete and return weekly food journals. These journals were used to record daily nutritional intake including total calories, servings of fruits and vegetables, and ounces of water consumed. Participants were also asked to record the total minutes spent exercising daily as well as their mood.

Participants reported both positive and negative aspects of journaling. Focus group participants agreed that journaling was a successful strategy for measuring calories consumed and calories expended daily; however, participants also said that journaling was inconvenient and time-consuming. Recording daily mood patterns encouraged the women to recognize emotional and social triggers to overeating and how it can impact weekly weight-gain or weight-loss. Overall, journaling appeared to help the participants understand the relationship of daily food intake and successful weight loss.

#### **Coping Skills**

Participants also learned coping skills through group activities related to dealing with stress, emotional eating and self-confidence. Throughout the focus group, participants said they were now able to deal with stressful situations by exercising, journaling, calling a friend or just taking a deep breath as opposed to emotional eating. Two women noted that they had never identified their lack of portion control as being related to emotional issues, but were now able to handle their emotions in a more positive way.

#### **Social Support**

All participants cited support from the group as a significant, positive factor in their experience with the program. This support included sharing experiences, recipes, healthy products, and eating strategies in a positive, non-judgmental atmosphere. Learning through collaboration was a major theme as the women learned from one another and adopted other's ideas as their own.

#### Self-Efficacy

Overall, the women discussed feeling empowered by their knowledge related to nutrition and exercise. One participant even said she felt like a "guru" because of the vast knowledge she gained from the program. The women believed this knowledge about nutrition and exercise represents a lifestyle change as opposed to a crash diet that has no implications for day-to-day living. Several focus group participants expressed feeling confident because they now have the tools to lose weight and maintain a healthy lifestyle.

#### Advisor

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#### Acknowledgment

The Weight Wise Women program was funded by a grant from Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina, and implemented by the Healthy Carolinians' Obesity Prevention Initiative in collaboration with the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Audio equipment was provided by the UNCW Department of Health and Applied Human Sciences.



# **3. Results** (continued)

| Participant Quotes  |
|---|
| "Before I was really scatterbrained about my menus, but I plan out my day and<br>I carry my lunch bag around and if it's in my lunch bag I know it's safe to eat."  |
| "When you plan your meals, be concerned with calories because sometimes you eat all your calories in one meal if you don't plan."   |
| "You have choices when you go out to eat, and there are things on the menu and<br>there are ways of eating the foods that you like but that are lower calorie and<br>better for you."                             |
| "Writing it down is so important. It's so much easier to know where you're at by the end of the day"  |
| "Writing down the food is very important. That's a great part of your success."   |
| "I love this diary cause'I can write all kinds of stuff in there, notes to myself, and I think that is probably one of the most successful parts of the whole program."   |
| became more self-awareI was trying to figure out well, I'm eating, but you<br>know I need to redirect this and that's where I had to exercise to take those<br>emotions instead of to comfort food all the time." |
| "I realized there are other ways to comfort myself than food."  |
| "If you've gained 5 pounds and you say 'I can't believe I've gained that much' someone will say 'Don't sweat it. You'll work it off the next week."   |
| "I liked hearing the other people's ideas and what they were doing. I just thought they were so creative and fascinating. You know, just the support."  |
| "Sometimes you just need to talk to other peopleabout problems you're having because not everybody wants to listenIt keeps you motivated when you're here."   |
| "You realize when you lose the first few pounds that it's only because of what you're doing and not any outside source and it's really up to you."  |
| "I set goals but I set them realistically I'm going to lose 2 pounds within 3 weeks, realistically that can happen and when you end up meeting it you're really encouraged."                                      |
|   |

# 4. Implications

By focusing on perceived learning as opposed to quantitative results alone, facilitators of weight loss programs can gauge participants' ability to succeed after the program ends as well as their ability to maintain weight loss. Facilitators can also use studies such as this one to see what participants believed to be most important when describing their learning experiences in the program.

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