

Alumni Engagement and Student Success Through Shared Affinities

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Background

Florida State University's alumni base surpassed 400,000 living graduates in August 2023. Graduates are promptly connected with the Florida State Alumni Association to foster and enrich engagement with the Seminole family. Active alumni help advance FSU's position among the nation's top public universities. CASE's 2018 initial Alumni Engagement Metrics survey established standards for measuring alumni involvement across four areas: Philanthropic, Volunteer, Experiential, and Communications. Lastly, the initial findings of the Northern Michigan University Qualitative Feedback Loops Empathy Interview emphasized the effectiveness of using empathy-based questions as a quality method for initiating and responding to the expressed needs and wants of constituents during interviews, to better serve them.

Our goal was to analyze various undergraduate affinities and affinity engagement activities among a diverse group of alumni and students to provide practical insights for improving alumni relations programs. This was achieved by examining the overlap between constituent engagement wants and needs through synopses of quantitative data (UGS event surveys) and qualitative data (interviews with FSU alumni and students, incorporating open-ended empathy questions).

Methods

- 1: 1 interviews took place via the Zoom platform or phone call.
- 80 interviews were conducted: 40 with alumni, 40 with students, across a five-month period, which consisted of standardized open-ended empathy questions.
- The initial contact emails to schedule an interview and the thank-you follow-ups were managed through Outlook, with Jacey Darrah being carbon copied on all email correspondences.
- The interviewees were either alumni referred by Jacey Darrah, or students identified by the student researchers.
- Discussion of 1: 1 interviews and event survey analysis, of the UGS Who You Can Become series, as well as email communication with Jacey Darrah on a bi-weekly basis via the Zoom platform or in-person.
- Our student researcher-mentor discussions referenced CASE Alumni Engagement Metrics as a starting ground for identifying patterns in constituent actions, emotions, and thoughts on available engagement opportunities.
- Student researchers tracked responses in Excel, which we forwarded to Jacey Darrah before our bi-weekly project meeting to identify correlated engagement patterns.

Empathy Interviews

Concept from Chelsea Haring of Switchboard and Robyn Stille, Sr. Director of Colleges, Schools, and Units at FSU

- Listening without an agenda to make the constituent feel heard
- Asking open-ended questions
- Identify strengths
- Identify weaknesses

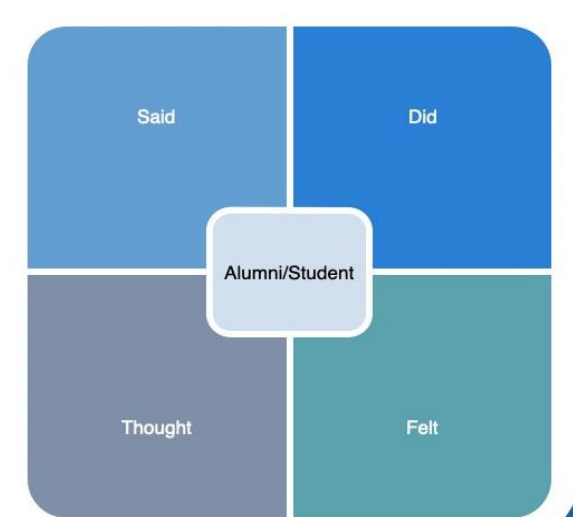


Figure 5. Empathy Interviews as presented in *Amplifying Alumni Voices for Student Success* by Jacey Darrah at the Southeast CASE District III Annual Conference.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to Jacey Darrah, Associate Director of Alumni and Student Engagement for the Division of Undergraduate Studies at FSU, for her mentorship during the 2024-2025 academic year as our mentor in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program. Our gratitude also extends to our alumni and student interviewees.

Interviewee Demographics - Alumni

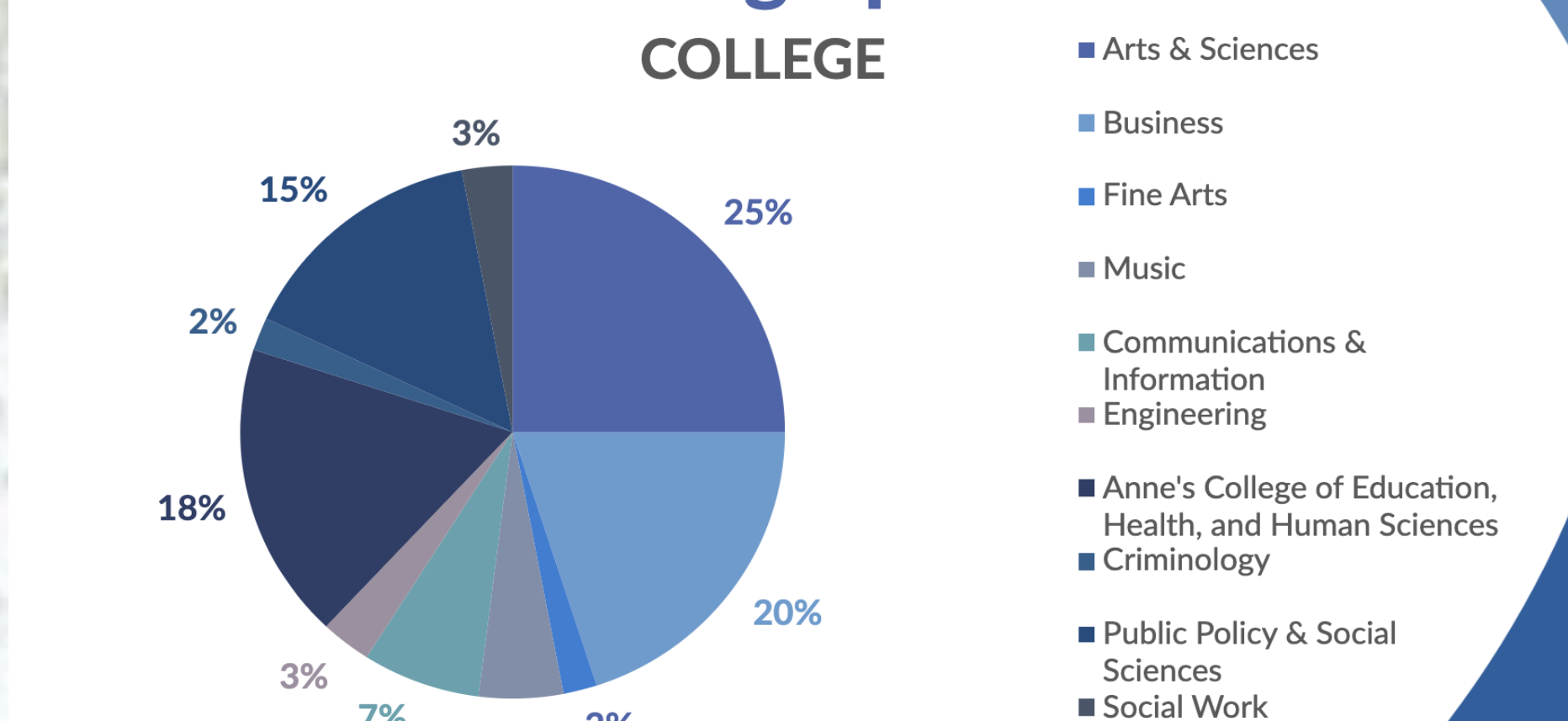


Figure 1. Interviewee Demographics – Alumni as presented in *Amplifying Alumni Voices for Student Success* by Jacey Darrah at the Southeast CASE District III Annual Conference.

Interviewee Demographics - Alumni

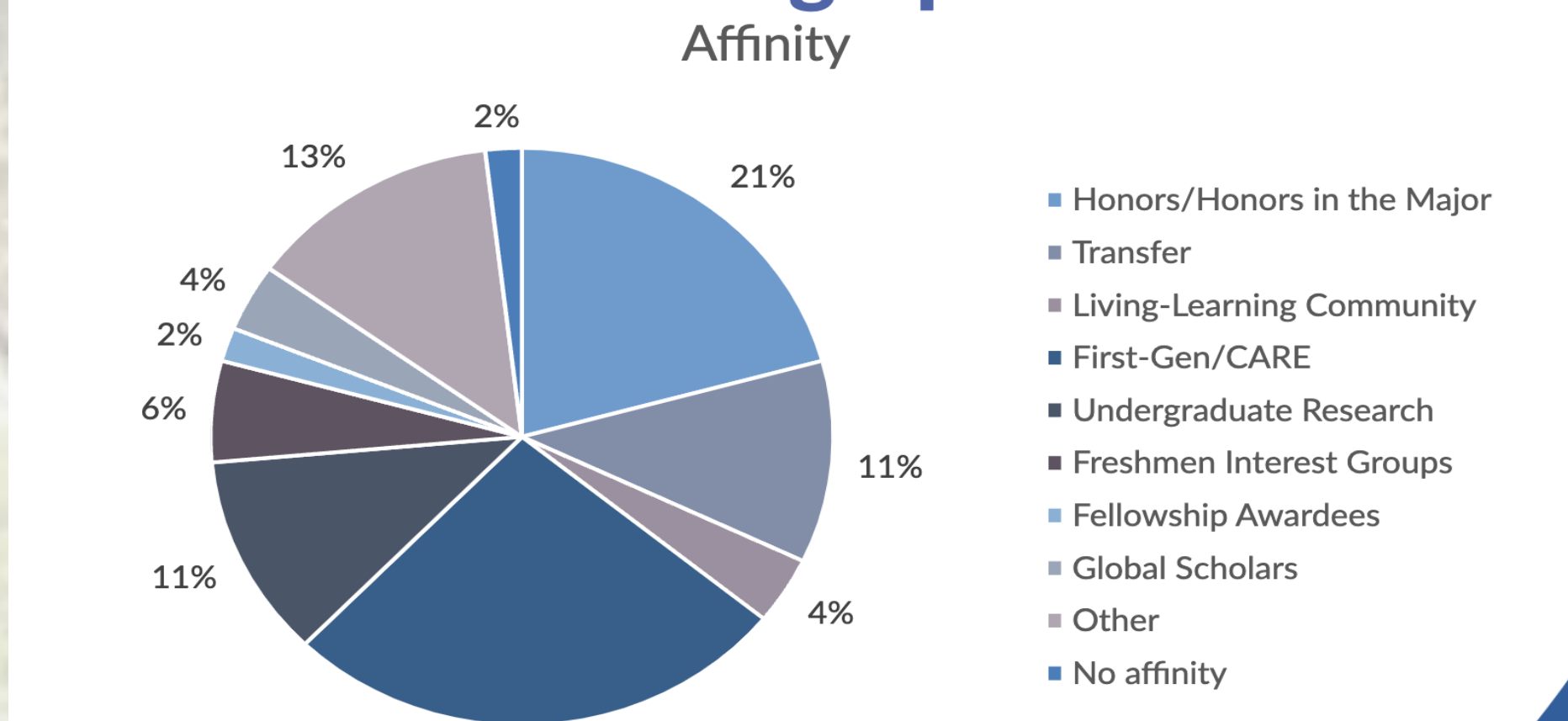


Figure 2. Interviewee Demographics – Alumni as presented in *Amplifying Alumni Voices for Student Success* by Jacey Darrah at the Southeast CASE District III Annual Conference.

Interviewee Demographics - Students

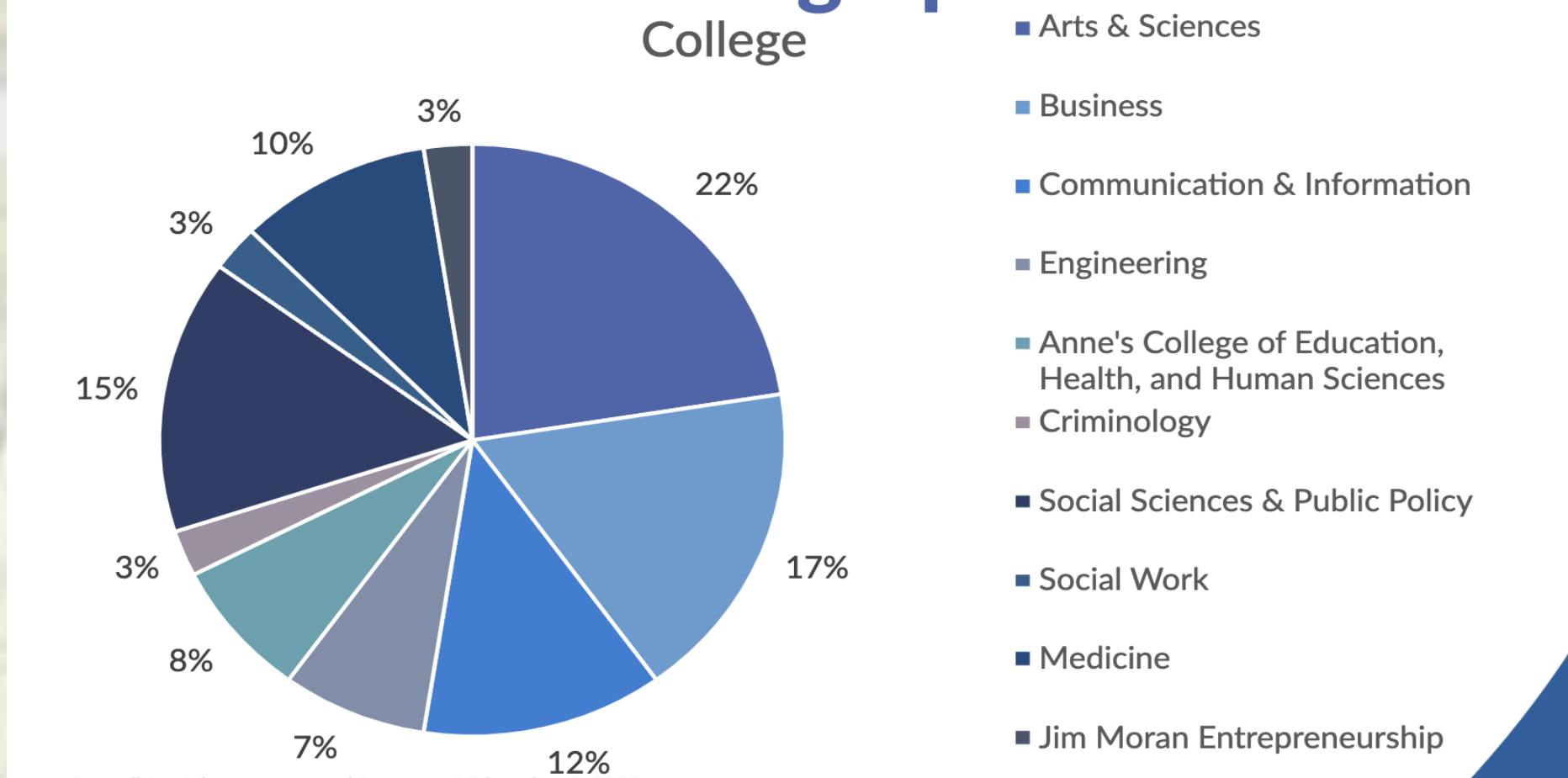


Figure 3. Interviewee Demographics – Students as presented in *Amplifying Alumni Voices for Student Success* by Jacey Darrah at the Southeast CASE District III Annual Conference.

Interviewee Demographics - Students

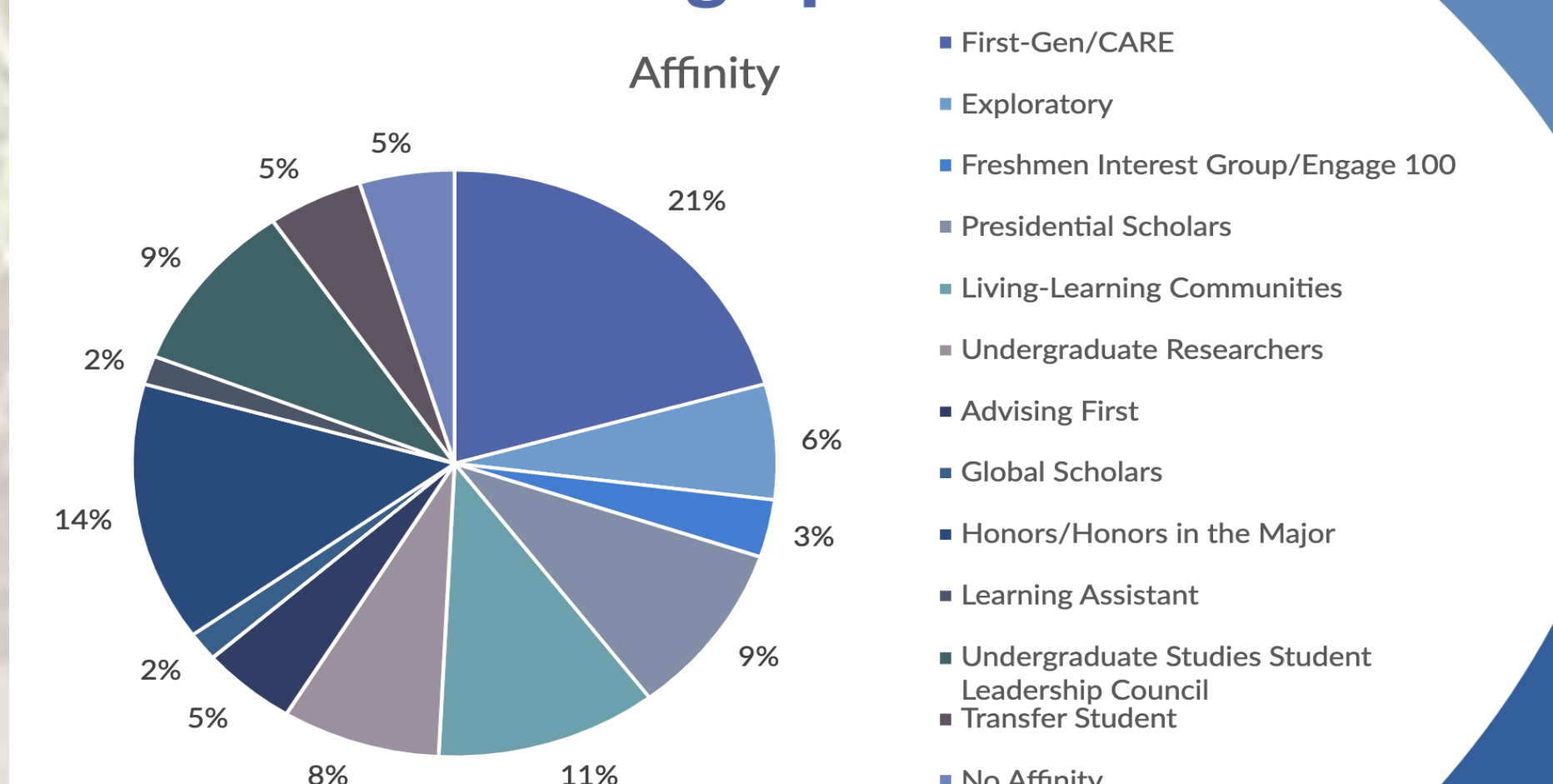


Figure 4. Interviewee Demographics – Students as presented in *Amplifying Alumni Voices for Student Success* by Jacey Darrah at the Southeast CASE District III Annual Conference.

Results

Alumni

- Prefer bite-sized information about students.
- Are more likely to open emails from UGS affinities they were involved with.
- Want to stay informed about campus happenings.
- Like mentoring students and offering career-related guidance.
- Want to know exactly where their monetary donations go.
- Value recognition and incentives for their contributions.
- Need to see the impact of their volunteerism on student success.

Students

- Need bite-sized content and quick engagements.
- Seek a sense of belonging within a community or affinity program.
- Students who don't feel like they belong are less likely to engage.
- Need information delivered multiple times in a short, digestible format.

Major themes

- Affinities are important.
- Recognition is key – personalized amplification.
- Everyone is busy – create engagements that are bite-sized and easy to engage with.
- Engaged students become engaged alumni who become engaged donors.

Outcomes

- UGS Student Leadership Council – 30 students representing each of the UGS identified affinity programs and engaging with alumni and donors.
- Who You Can Become Webinars – Successful alumni talking about their careers and their experiences at FSU to students.
- Targeted Alumni Emails and Newsletters – higher open and response rates.
- Student to Alumni Pipeline Building – welcoming graduating students to the alumni family through targeted outreach.
- First-Generation Alumni Network – aims to cultivate an engaged group of first-generation alumni who advocate for the needs of first-generation alumni and support students through community-based initiatives.



Figure 6. References for *Alumni Engagement and Student Success Through Shared Affinities*.



Figure 7. Jasmeen Santos-Ramirez, Emily Tully, Jacey Darrah, Members of the Student Leadership Council and Members of the First-Generation Alumni Network participating in the 2024 Homecoming Parade.