

Now that I'm here,
it doesn't seem that bad:
A discourse analysis of student stories
about starting college



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Tom Moss
University of Illinois at Chicago

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Introduction – the Problem

We know that students who engage with their academic lives tend to be retained, that students who are retained, tend to graduate . . .

. . . but what can be learned about some of the anxieties students have about starting college even before they arrive?

Overview of current study

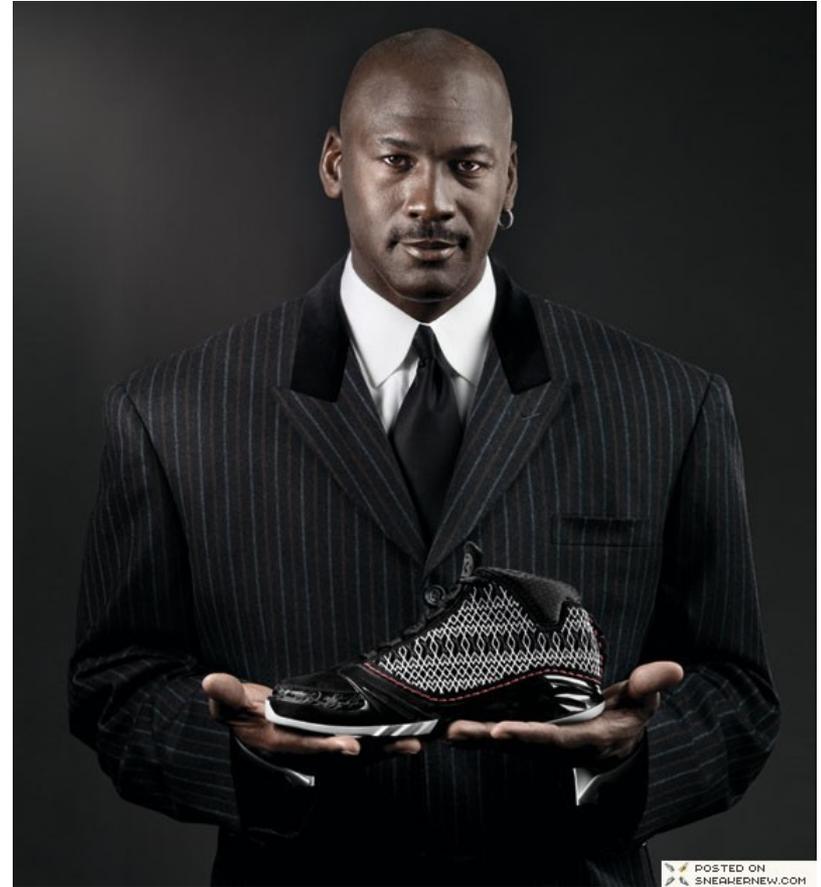
- ❑ Conducted through lens of cognitive linguistics
- ❑ Students prompted to narrate the story of their anxieties about starting college.
- ❑ Analysis of those stories revealed patterns and categories.
- ❑ May help us understand our FY students better than we do.

Situated Cognition

- Humans learn within situations by performing activities predicated on a desire.
- Language only has meaning if the communicator and the audience are “speaking the same language”—are situated in a context that makes sense to both.

□ Gee, 1999

“I can't play basketball. I don't have any shoes.”



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Situations...

- How do we learn the language we share?
- Experience...

Structures of Expectation

[O]n the basis of one's **experience of the world** in a given culture (or combination of cultures), one organizes knowledge about the world and uses this knowledge to **predict interpretations and relationships regarding new information, events, and experiences.**

(Ross qtd. In Tannen, 1975)

Three components of the study

- Frames
- Positions
- Configurations

Frames

- Frames are “memory structures”
- Think of a picture frame, which says “look at this and not that.”
 - “A frame is a structure comprising slots; the structure remains stable, while the slots may be filled with a variety of information.”
 - Sosnoski, 2009
- For example...

Imagine yourself in Paris

You are in Paris for the first time.

You need to get back to your hotel.

You're walking down the street looking for a subway station.

Having never seen the Metro,
what do you look for?



METRO

Wolfgang Puck
Wolfgang Puck

café

METRO

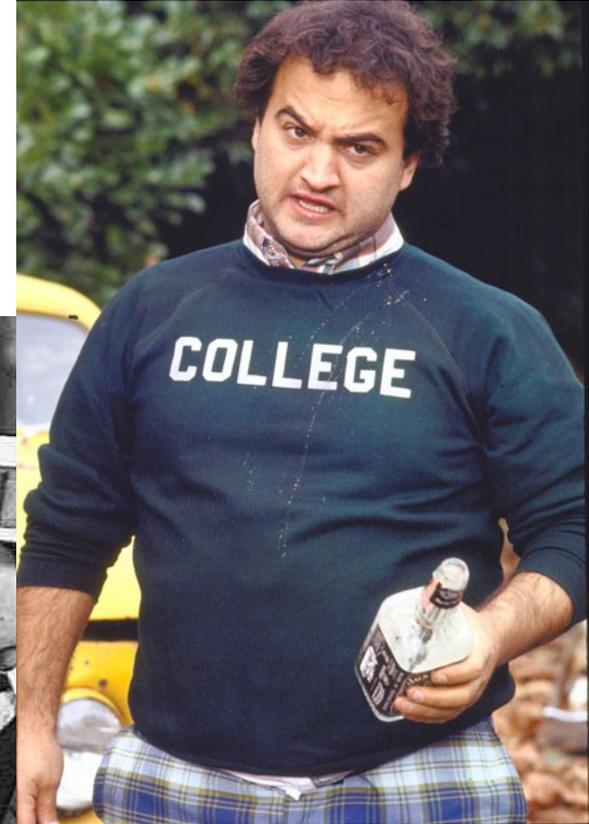
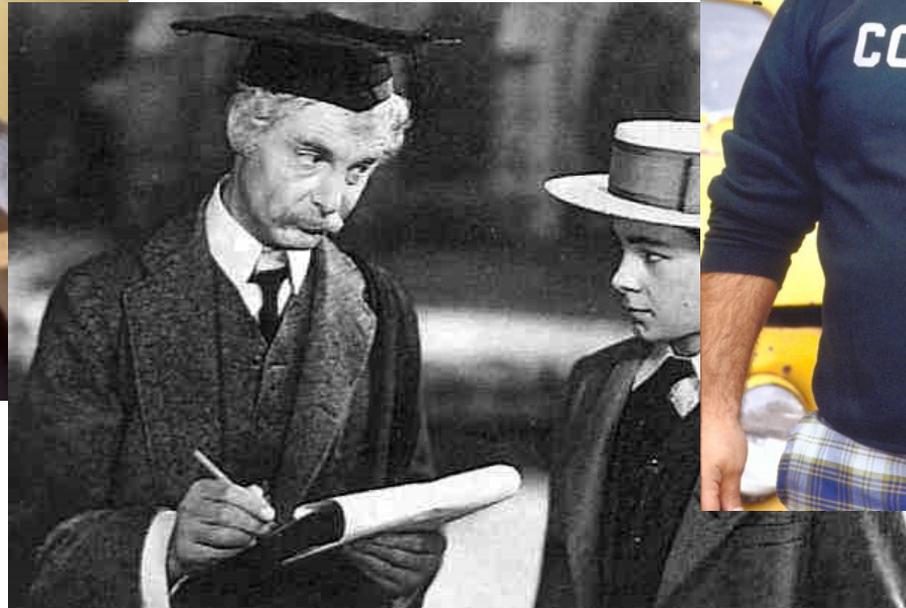
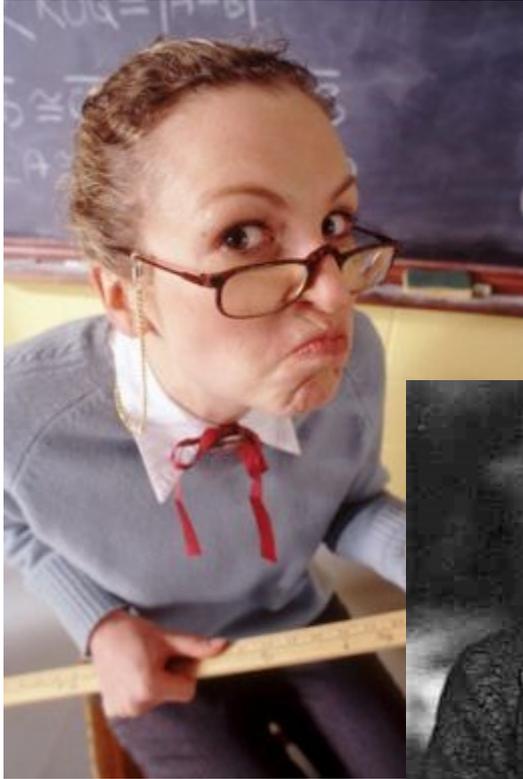


LINE



So how might students in transition form frames about

?



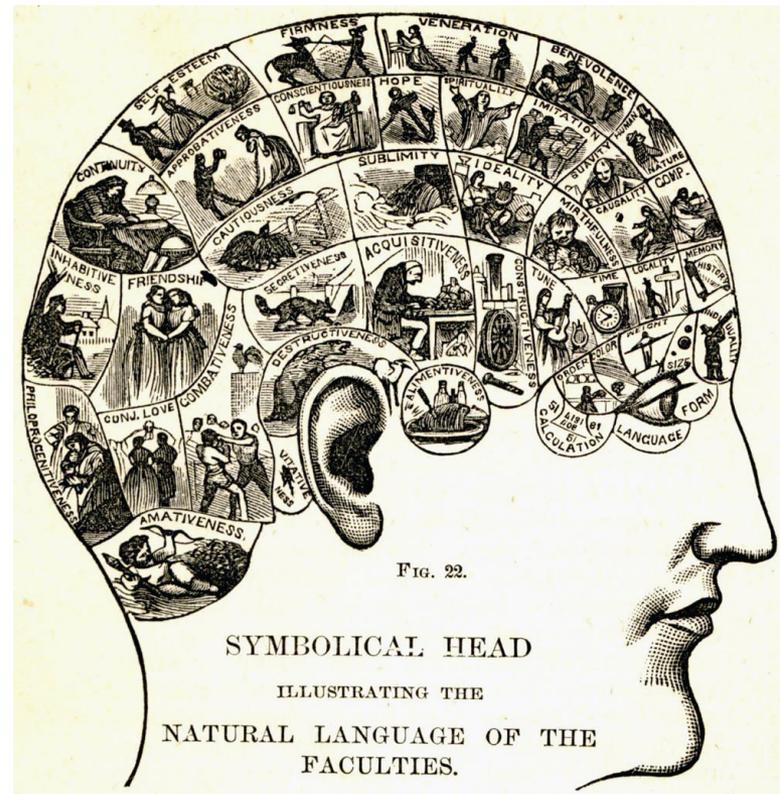
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Positioning

- Positioning is a process in which one's subjectivity is constructed through the language one uses to express relationships with other people...
 - Current relationship –
“presenter and listener”
 - Soon enough–
“colleague and colleague”
or perhaps “performer and critic”

Configurations

- Frames and positions combine to construct a “configuration”



Configurations are...

“...representations...which enable us to conceptualize and understand every piece of language we encounter.”

Gavins, 2007

Methodology

- ❑ Students participating in the Summer Enrichment Writing Workshop – a five-week bridge program for students who had been placed into preparatory writing classes.
- ❑ The workshop is voluntary and tuition free.
- ❑ Eligible students were those placed into non-credit preparatory courses.
- ❑ Response rate: 74%

The Prompt

Think back to the last semester of your senior year in high school. When you thought about starting college, there were probably a number of things that worried or concerned you. Think of the one thing that concerned you most, and describe your experience in a narrative—when you first began to be concerned, how your concern developed between then and now, how you feel about it now that you are on campus. Describe how you thought about it in high school, over the weeks before this event, and conclude with how you are thinking about it now. You have twenty minutes to write.

Configurations

- Prompt was constructed to elicit
 - An initial state
 - A pivotal event
 - A final state of affairs

- For example...

Initial state:

“I remember when cousin* called me about the orientation to tell me should I bring. ... She also told me that the shower was where everyone had to take together. ... I thought it would be where every guy can see each other showering. ... Also this is going to be my first time living somewhere that I don't know anyone is.”

*All text represented as handwritten by the students.

Pivotal event

Student actually attended Orientation

Final State

“I found out it wasn't as bad, because I barely in my room with my roommate because we are mostly outside. The thing I didn't expect was that the shower was inside the washroom.”

Configurations

Analysis revealed five distinct categories about college expectation and individual identity.

1. Over my head



Configurations

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What students said...

- ❑ I was concerned whether I will be able to survive in college. I was most worried about whether I will be able to have the ability to catch up in my classes and to understand the instructors/professors.
- ❑ I freaked out on my senior year in high school. There were rumors that college was super hard.
- ❑ The first thing that concerned me the most was if I would understand all the material I would be taught.

2. On my own



Configurations

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What students said...

- ❑ Whatever happens would be all on me and there would be no one else to blame.
- ❑ One of the things I was most worried about was not being able to find my class and where everything was.
- ❑ I was excited to be in college because I would be treated as an adult and I will be responsible for all decisions or actions I make. However, I was worried at the same time because I would have to be used to a new environment and people.

Priced out



Configurations

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What students said...

- The one thing that concerned me the most was not being able to pay for college. I started being concerned about this when I noticed that my parents were struggling with money more than they were when my older sister started college.

4. Means to an end



Configurations

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What students said...

- ❑ One of the things that had me worried was getting into a good nursing program because that was my goal.
- ❑ I made up my decision to attend UIC because the College of Engineering offered me more options whereas in DePaul it was mostly computer classes that caught my interest.
- ❑ I personally think the only reason I am at college is to earn a degree so I can have job security.

5. Another world



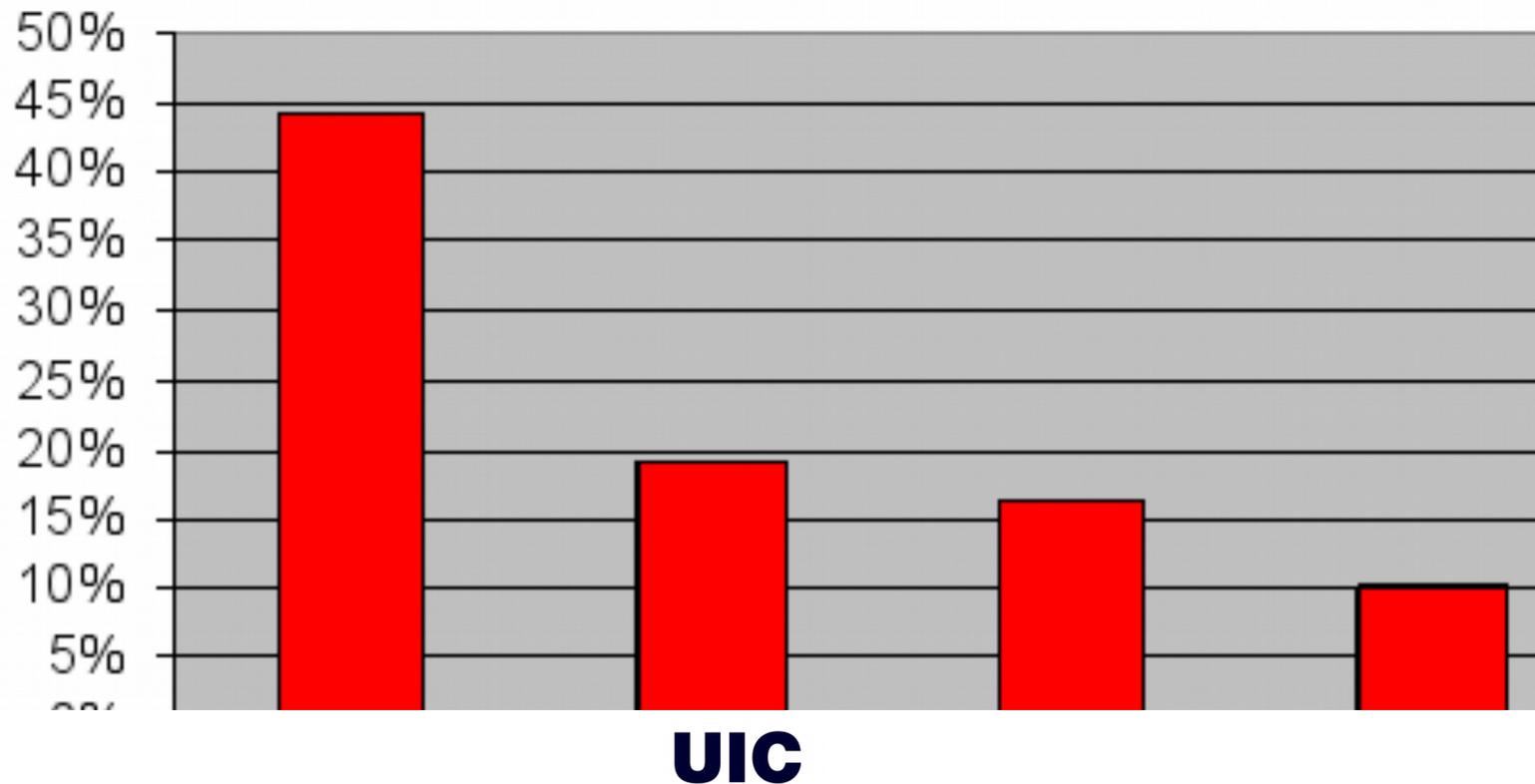
Configurations

What students said...

- ❑ I was pretty much terrified. Not only would I be submerged with people I didn't know I would have to commute on a daily basis to and from school.
- ❑ When I was still in high school, my main concern was having a roommate that was nasty and that steals.
- ❑ I remember looking into her eyes and having this feeling run through out my body. ... It may seem weird that this is my biggest fear, but I really like her, and I'm afraid to lose her.

The numbers...

Frequency of Configuration



Positions

- How students identified themselves in relation to the institution.
- They position or situate themselves “vis a vis” the university.
- Students described their positions within their new situation in six distinct ways:

1. Worker vs. Demanding Boss



GREGORY

"I'd like your honest, unbiased and possibly career-ending opinion on something."

Positions

What students said...

- ❑ It all seemed fiercefull and hard. My main worry to start college was college level work and getting use to it.
- ❑ ...all that I heard about it was that it was going to be hard.
- ❑ Starting college means I have to become my own date planner I have to know when my class starts and how much time I have to put into my homework.

2. Immigrants vs. Natives



IMMIGRANT HISTORY REVISITED
JACK LEMMON SANDY DENNIS
A NEIL SIMON STORY
THE OUT-OF-TOWNERS

Positions

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What students said...

- When I began to realize that I was going to UIC alone, I got frightened. I thought to myself that I was going to be alone and not have any friends.
- I think the one think that worried me was that I was on my own. I had to do all my classes and it was all on me. If I enrolled in a wrong class, it would be my fault. I was worried about finding my way around the campus.

3. Debtors vs. Creditors



Positions

What students said...

- ❑ I don't know if I should attend to college! I don't have the money for it and I doubt there's anyone out there who is willing to help me in my condition!
- ❑ I had a 4.0/4.0 scale. And still got "zero" scholarships. I don't know what I did wrong, but now I'm trying to figure out how college is going to get paid for.

4. Shopper vs. Commodity

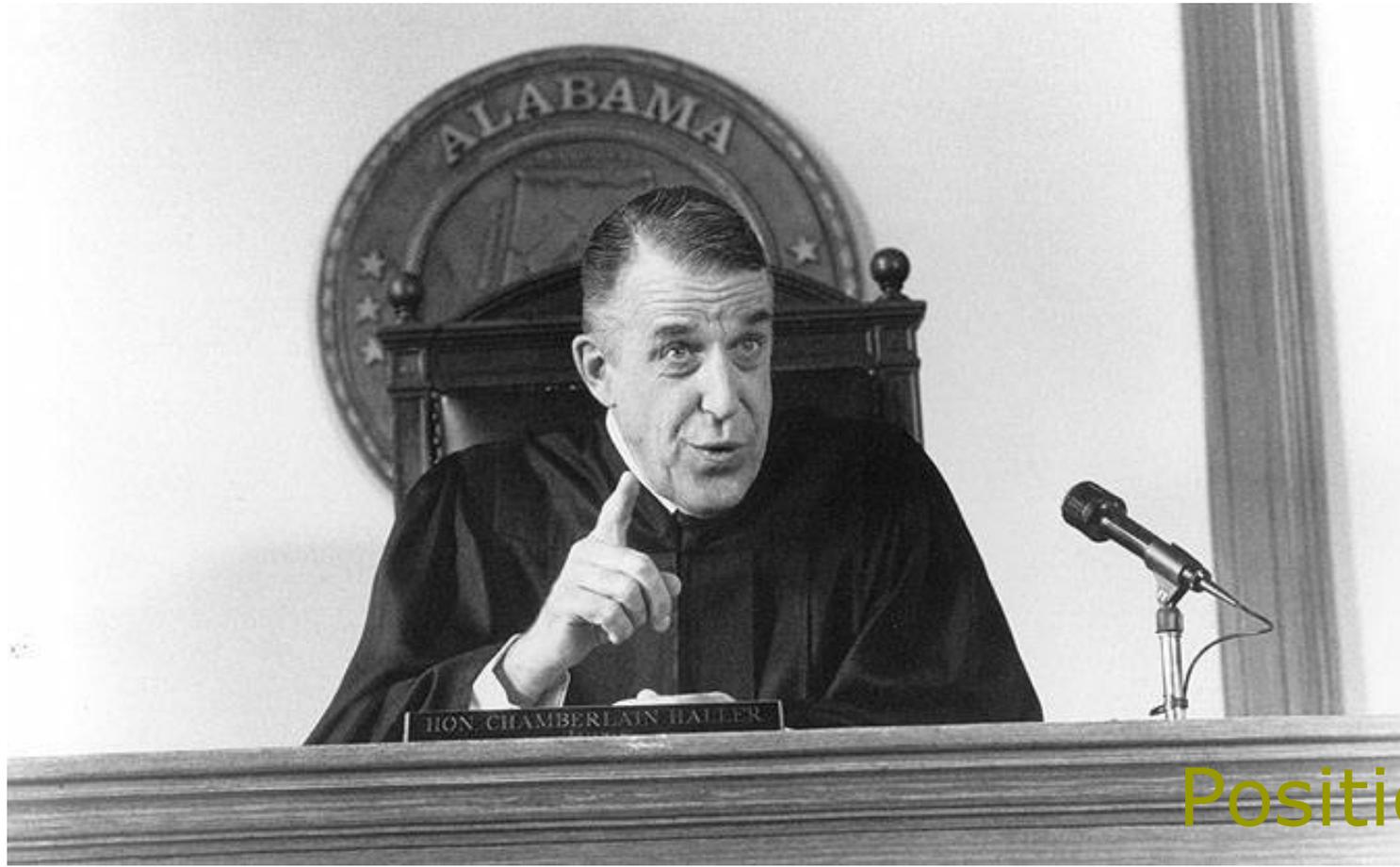


Positions

What students said...

- ❑ I decided to still pursue my college experience in UIC this time with another career in mind, pharmacy.
- ❑ My parents always push me to go to medicine but I don't want to do any major that I am not interested in. That why, during my associates I will explore what UIC can offer me and what best suits me.
- ❑ ...but what most stood up in my head were which college is right for what I want to study.

5. Judged vs. Judge



Positions

What students said...

- ❑ I was just worried about what the college would think of me.
- ❑ I thought of UIC because I didn't want to get rejected with my final grades on my transcript. I worked my hardest to get my F's to at least a C, and I made it.
- ❑ My biggest concern was being a failure.

6. Novice vs. Expert



Positions

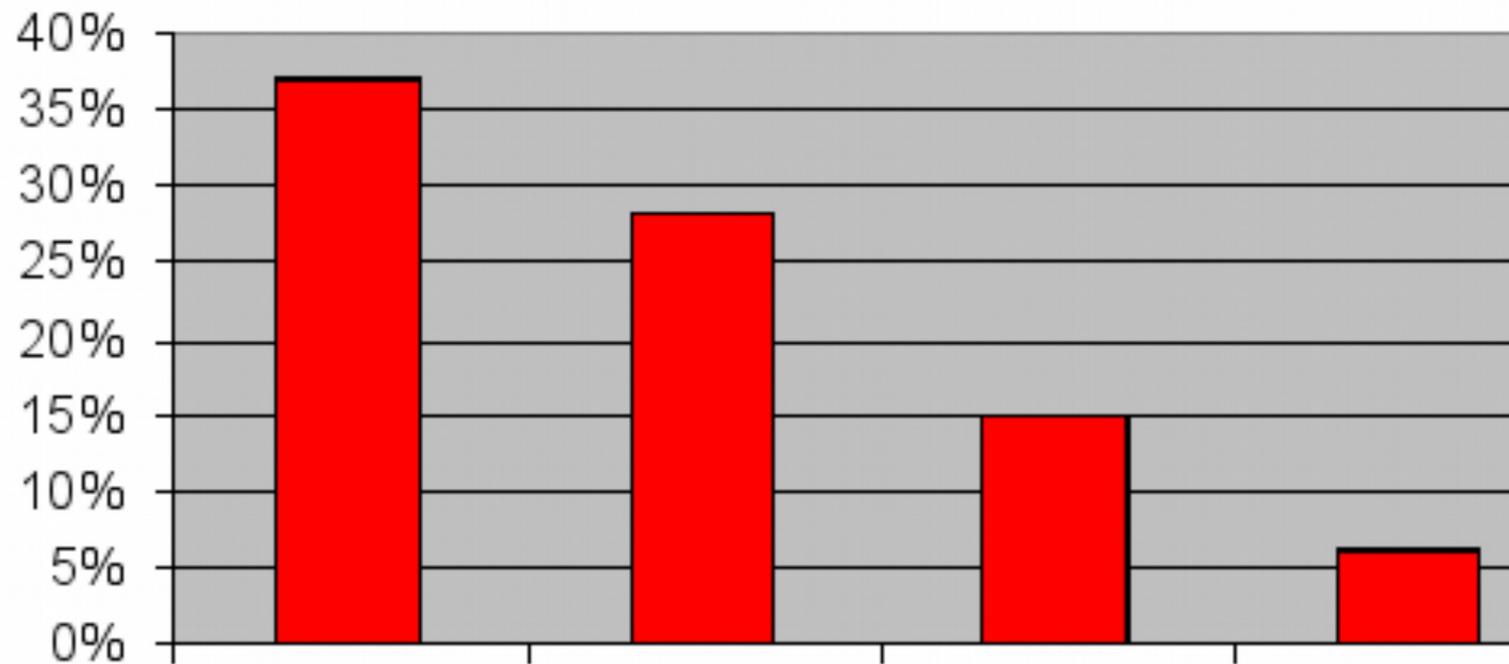
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What students said...

- ❑ I was predominantly concerned about the way a professor teaches in a classroom than a teacher in high school because most of my teachers in high school talked about their experiences in college. They talked about that some of their professors were not cooperative and syllabi were mostly given on the first day.
- ❑ I feel lost because I do not know what I am expected to do. I still am concerned about how I will fit in education wise. How bad or good my writing is.

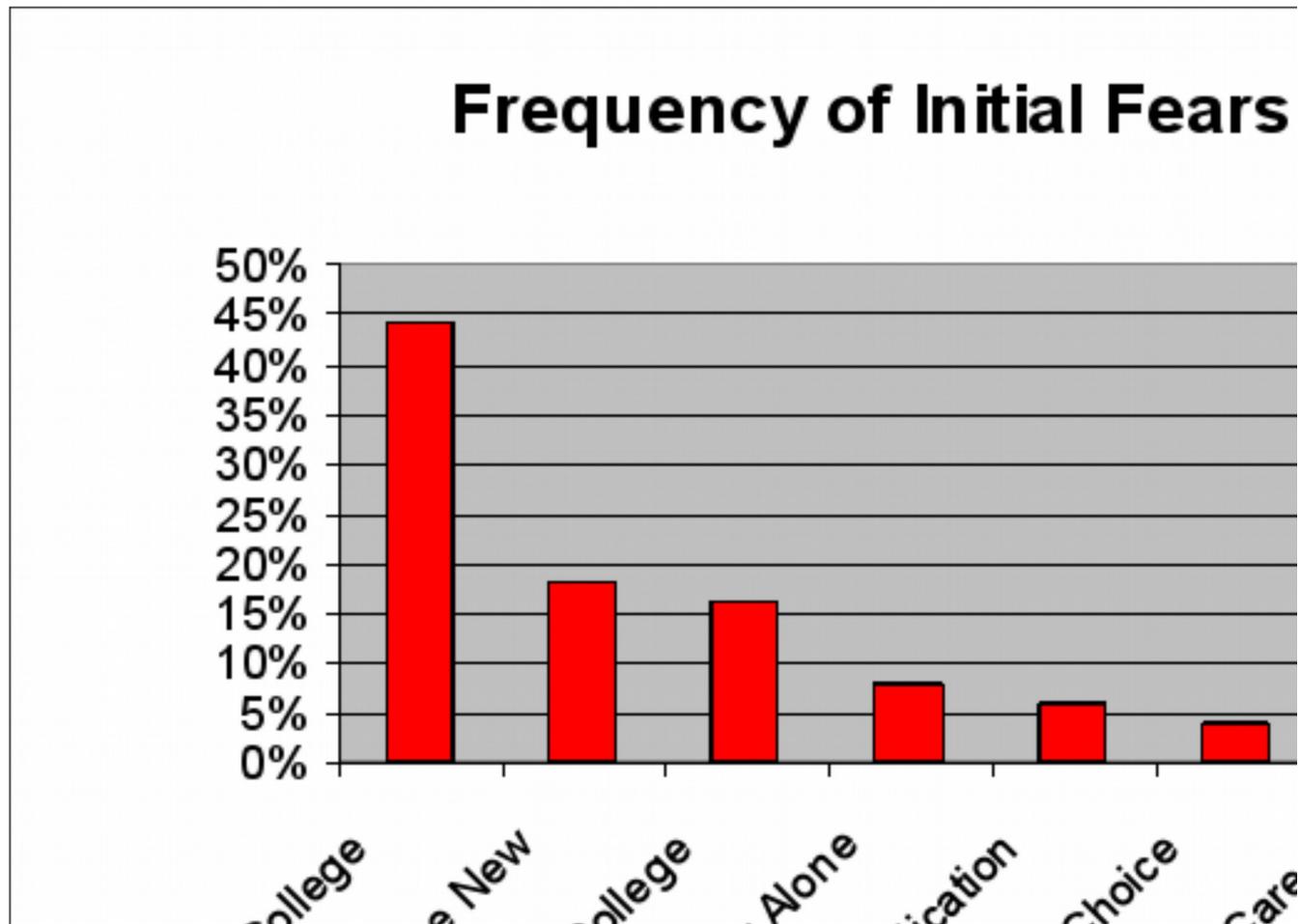
The numbers

Frequency of Positions



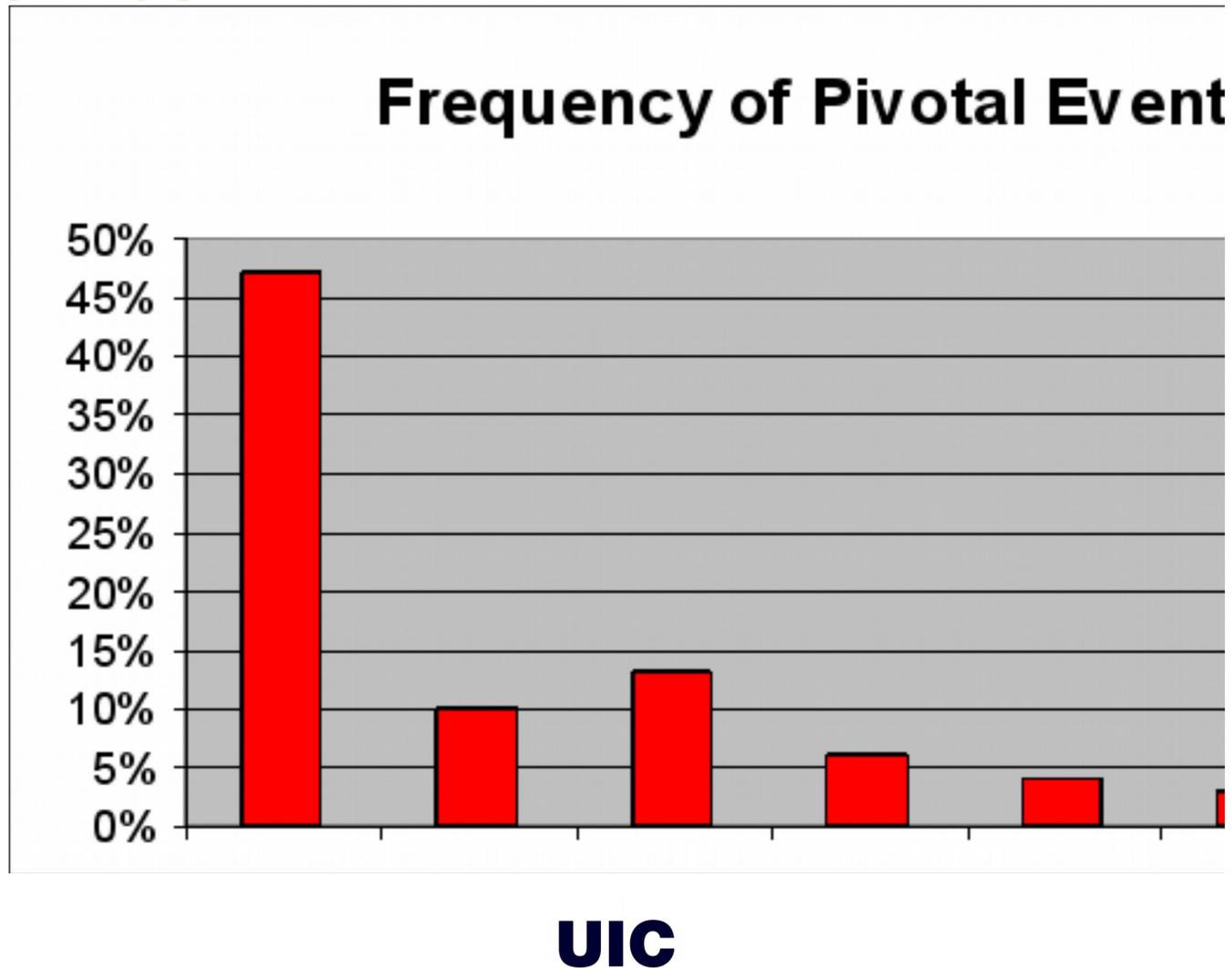
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The numbers - Initial State

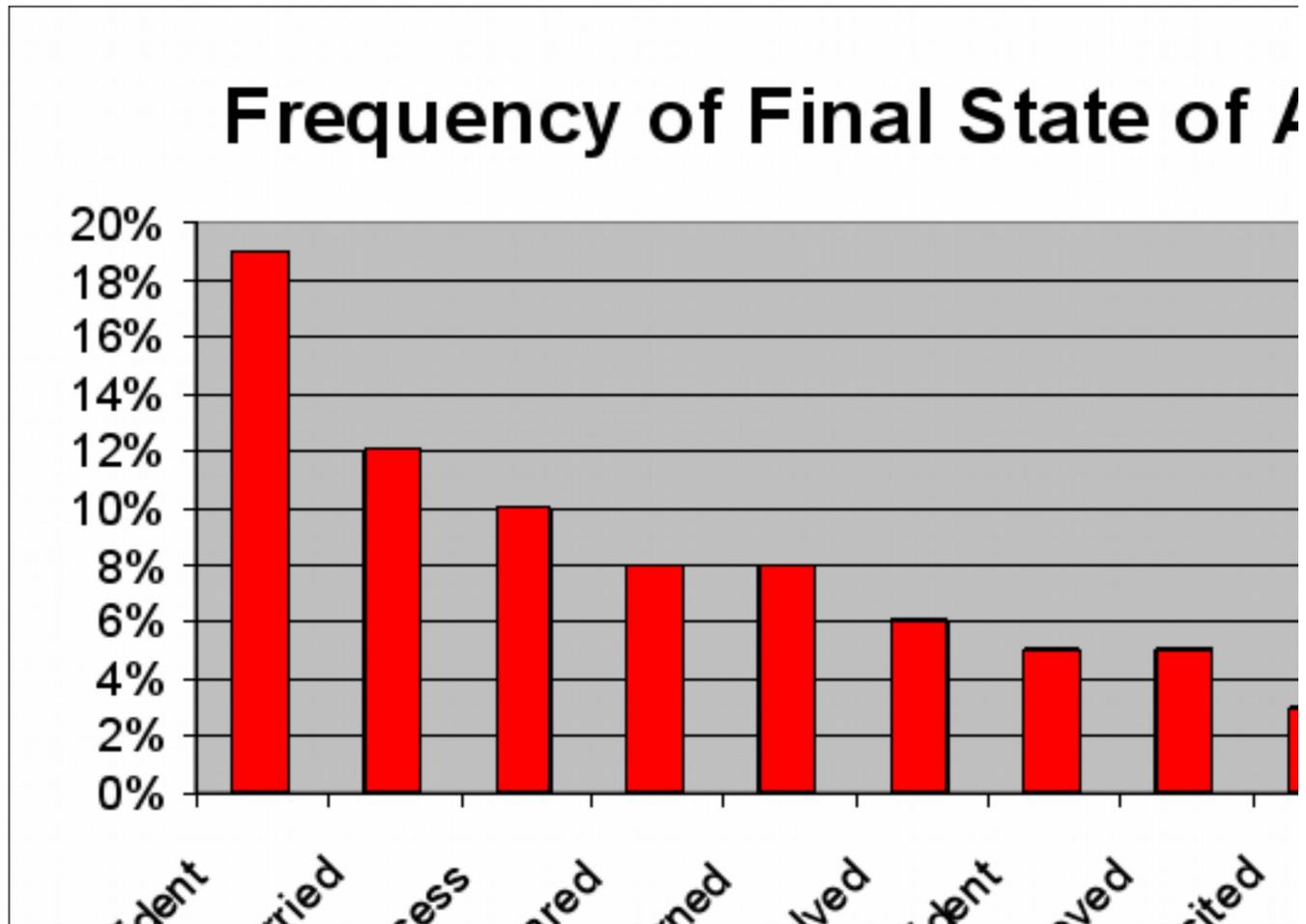


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The numbers - Pivotal Events



The numbers - Final State



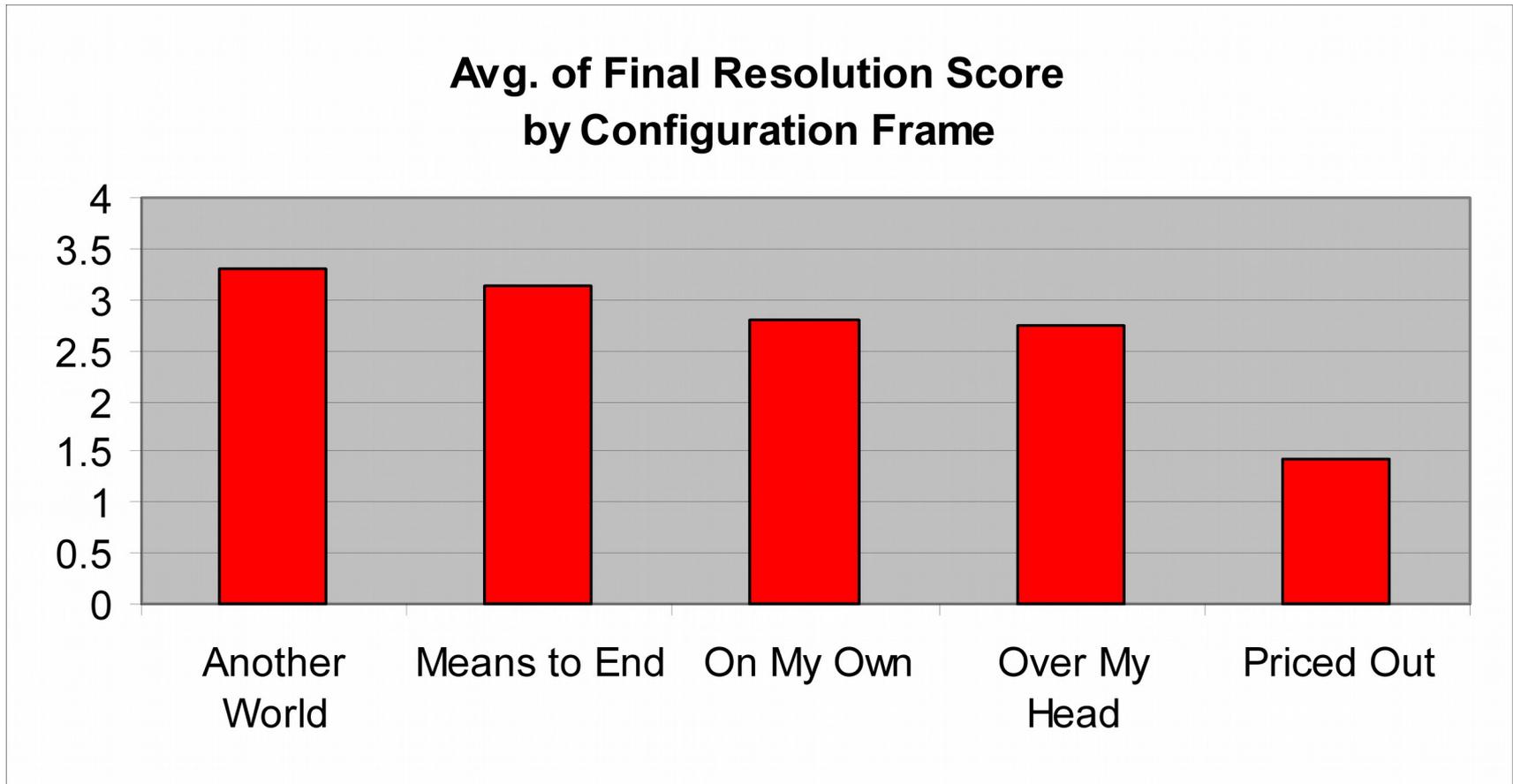
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Measuring final state ~~resolution~~

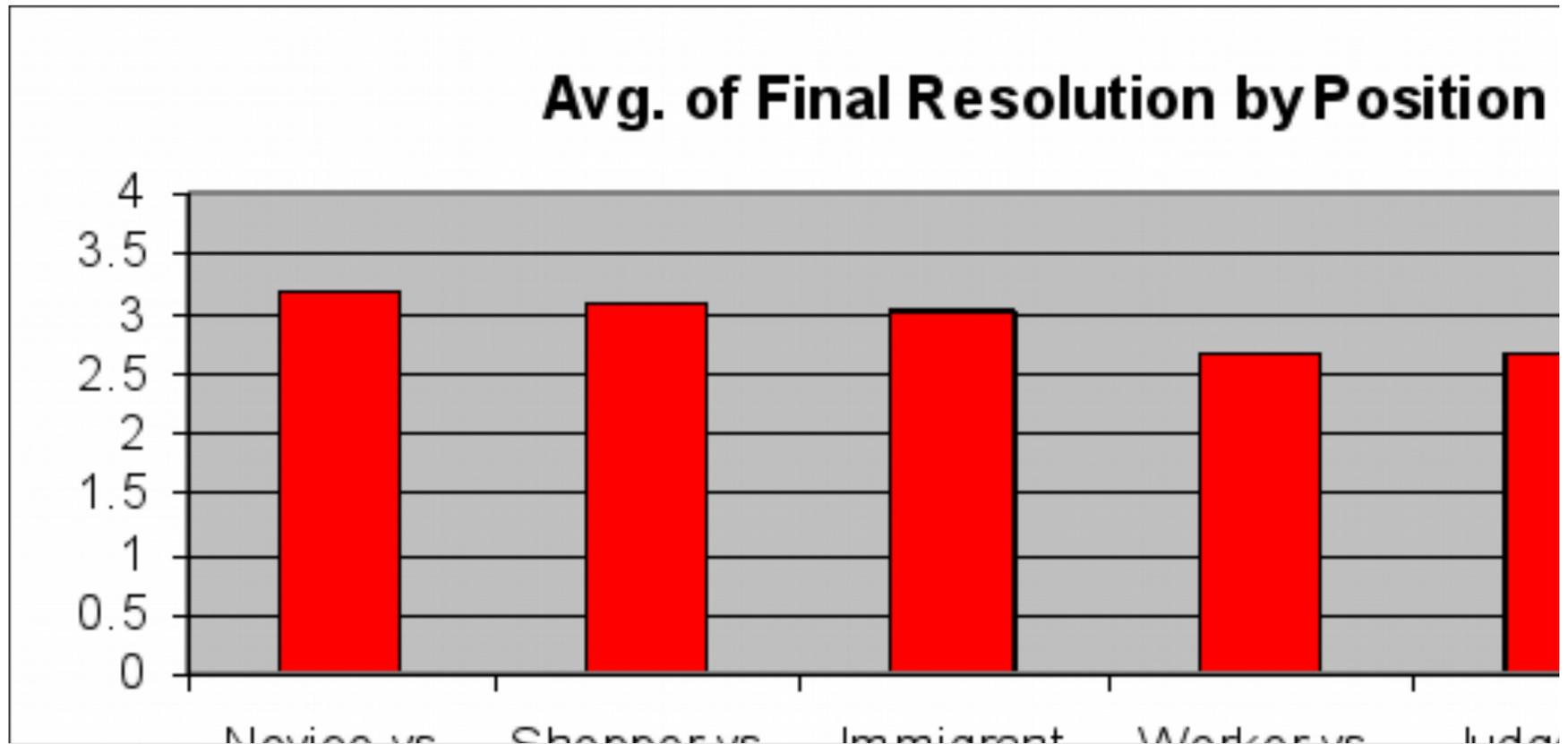
Key word analysis

1	2	3	4
No resolution	Weak resolution	Resolution	Strong Resolution
<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Still concerned—Still worried—I still think, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Hopeful—Prediction of overcoming fears, etc.—Switch to second person (indicating distance between description of final state and the student him- or herself)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Fear subsided—Less nervous—Less afraid—Relieved—Getting used to—Things are better now, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">—Confident—No problem—Feeling capable—No concerns—Ready for challenge, etc.

Strength of Final Resolution by Frame



Strength of Final Resolution by Position

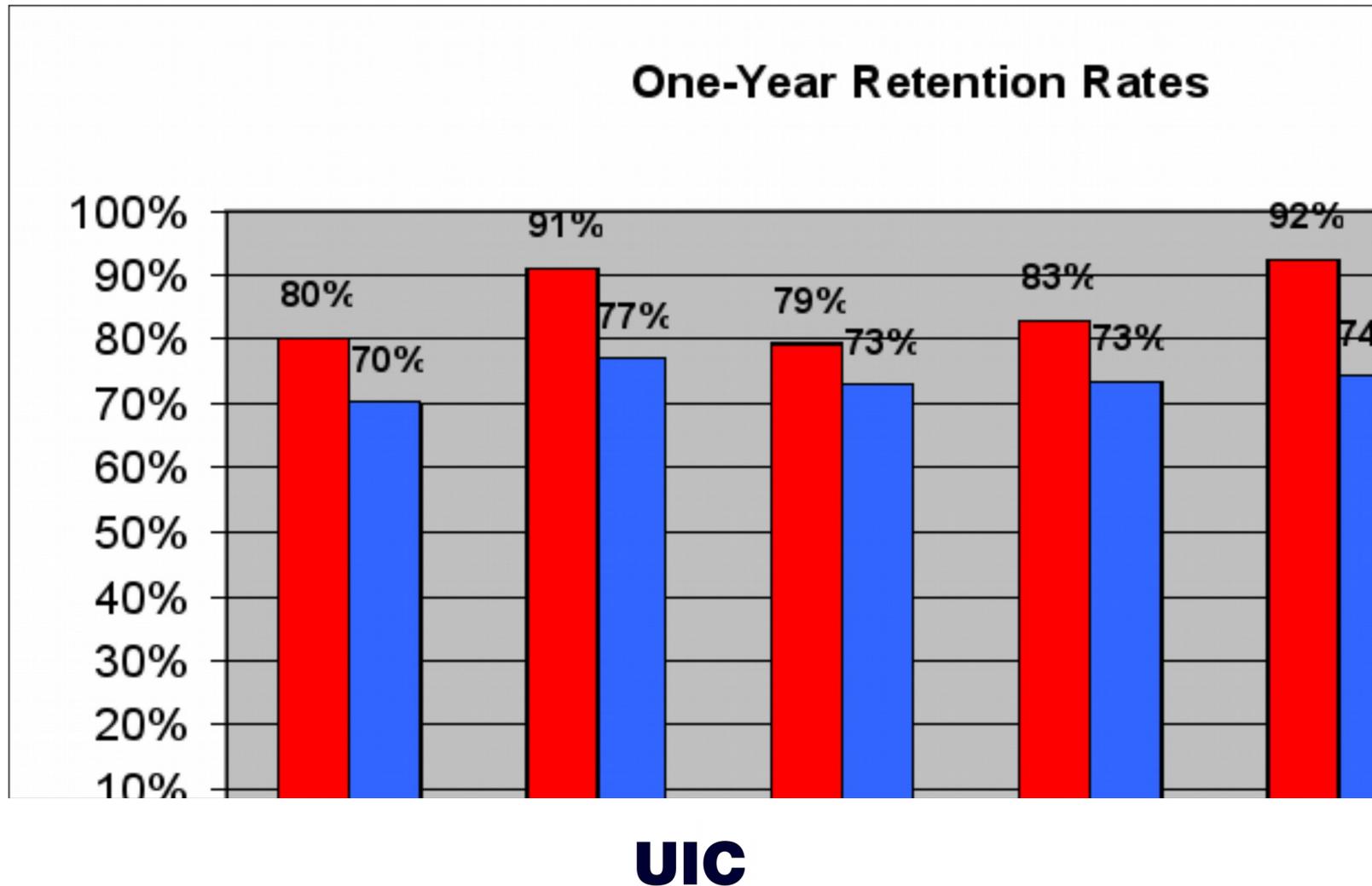


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So What?

- ❑ We should remember that, without exception, these high school seniors were anxious about something as they thought about starting college.
- ❑ Most students were nervous about the workload or getting lost, which was resolved by simply participating in an academic activity and experiencing the campus.
- ❑ Students with financial worries were least likely to have their fears resolved.

One last set of numbers...



What's at stake?

Now that I'm here it doesn't seem that bad, and I'm getting use to the school, and I have also met some friends already.

Tom Moss

tommoss@uic.edu

Special Projects Coordinator
Office of the Vice Provost for
Undergraduate Affairs
University of Illinois at Chicago