

Introduction

- Literature has shown that medical students with higher USMLE scores apply into more competitive specialties.
- On January 26, 2022, the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE) Step 1 exam transitioned to a pass/fail (P/F) grading system
- USMLE scores were often used as “cut-offs” to help programs decide who to offer interviews to, especially for competitive specialists such as ENT.
- This study explores how changing USMLE Step 1 to P/F has influenced students' perceptions of their competitiveness for ENT residency and their decisions to pursue dedicated research year(s).

Methods

- A 26-item REDCap survey (QR code below) was distributed to medical students who participated in ENT research programs in 2023 and 2024.
 - 23 ENT research programs were identified online and surveys were sent to each research year program to distribute to their research fellows
 - 34 participants completed the survey.
- Participants provided information on demographics, academic achievements, and motivations for taking a research year.
- Specific questions assessed the influence of Step 1 P/F on their decision-making.

Results

Figure 1. Race/Origin

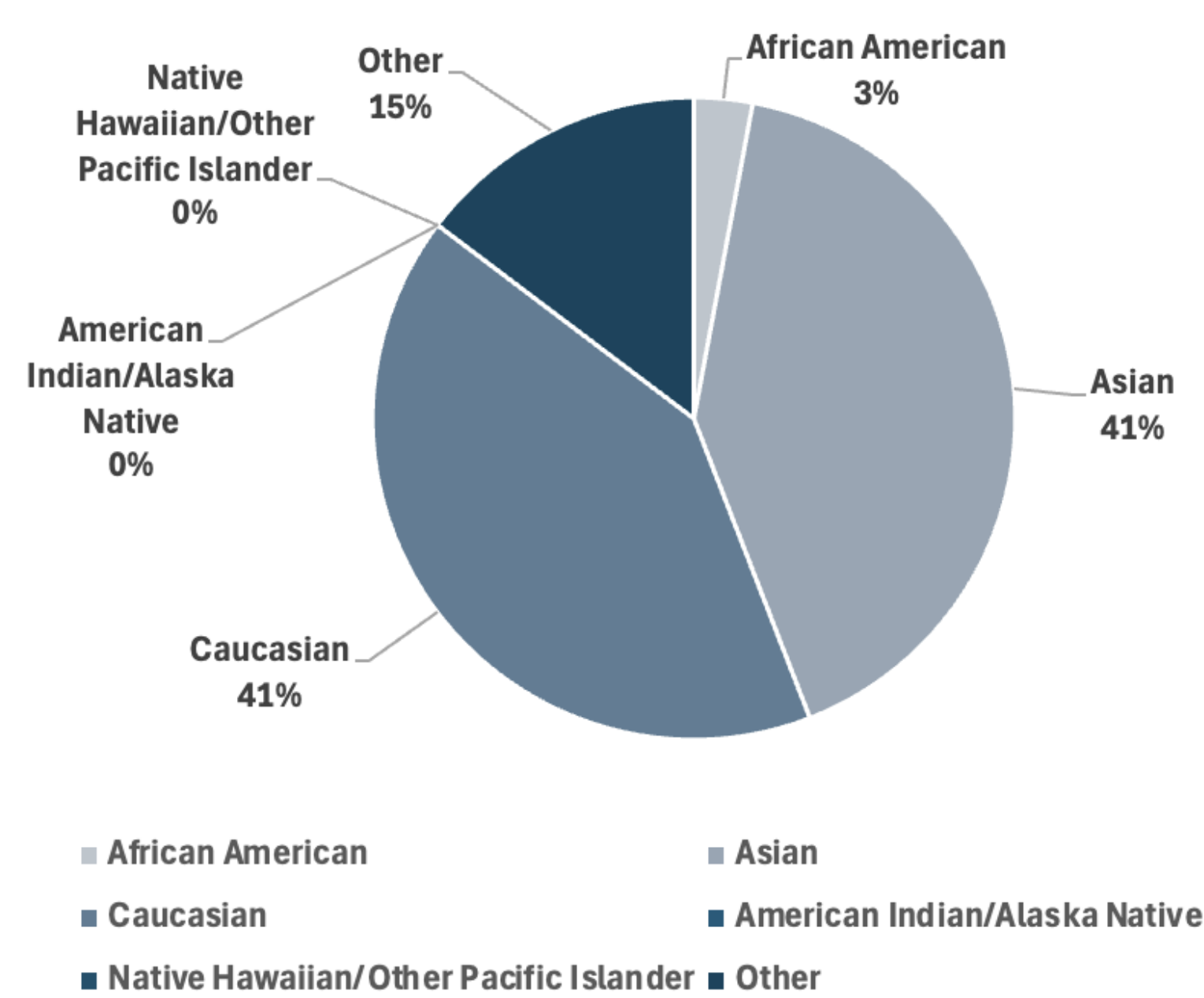


Figure 2. Did Step 1 becoming Pass/Fail encourage your decision to take a research year?

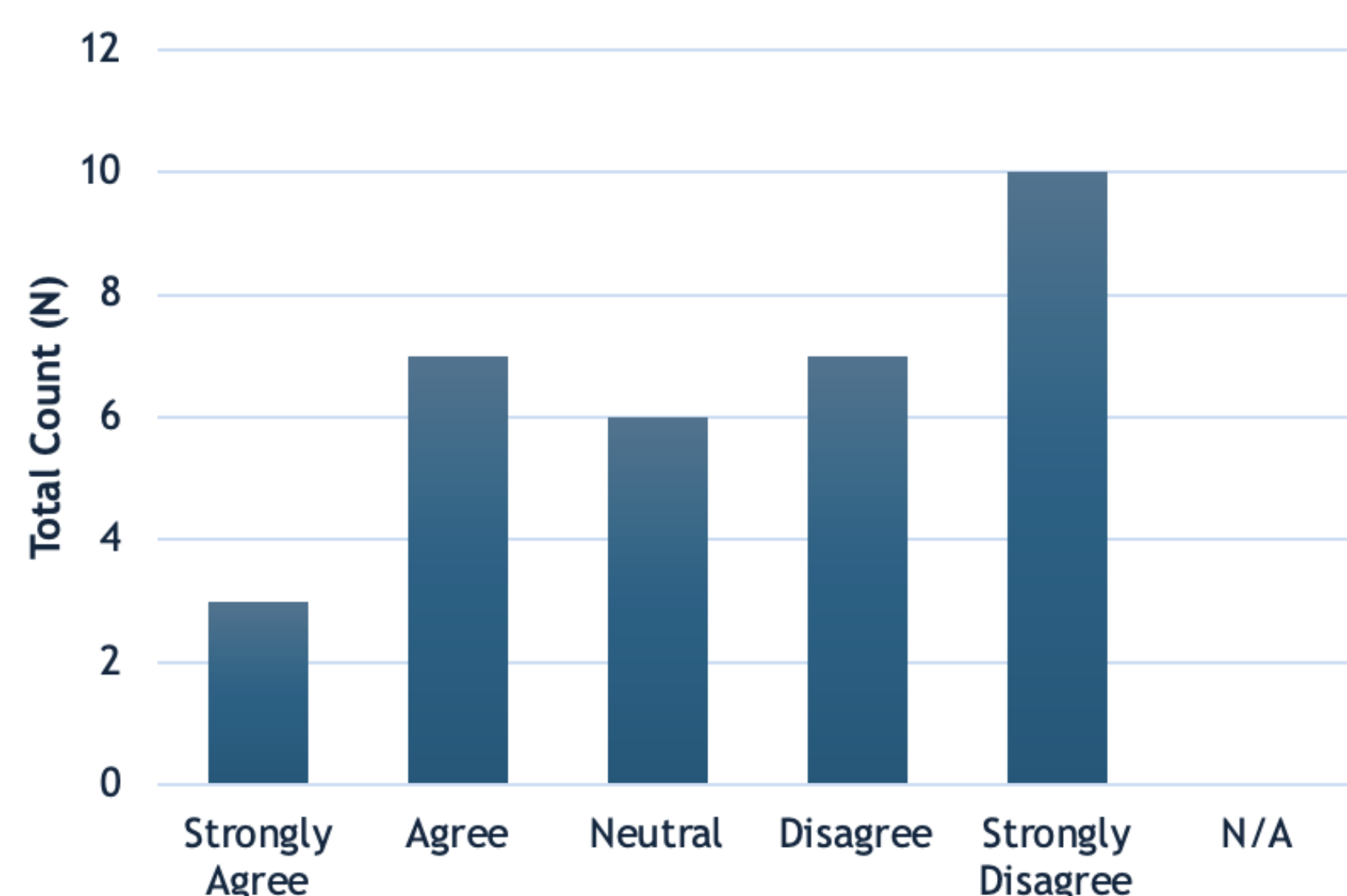
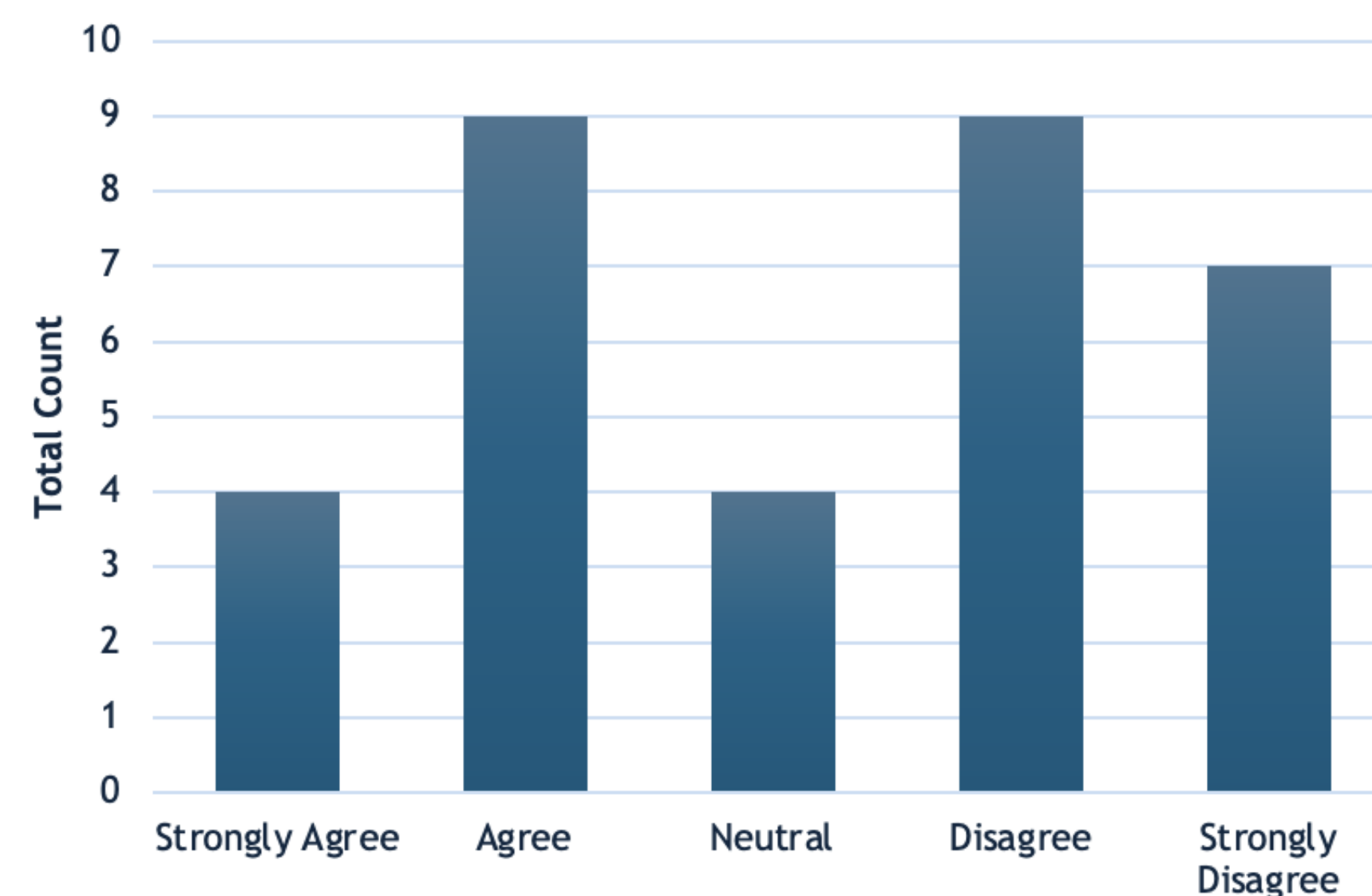


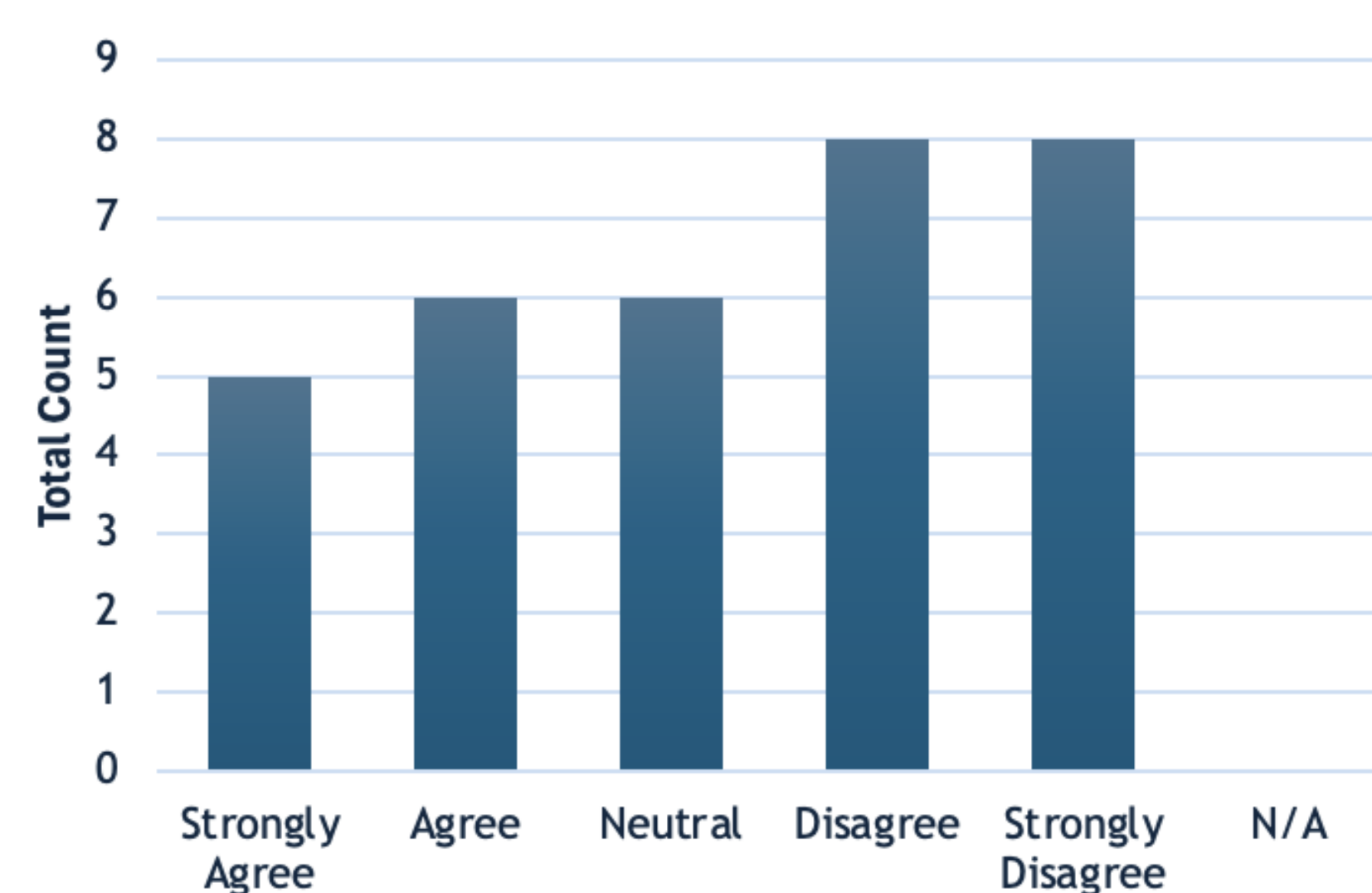
Figure 3. Did you take a research year as a change of pace from medical school?



Among 34 respondents (Figure 1):

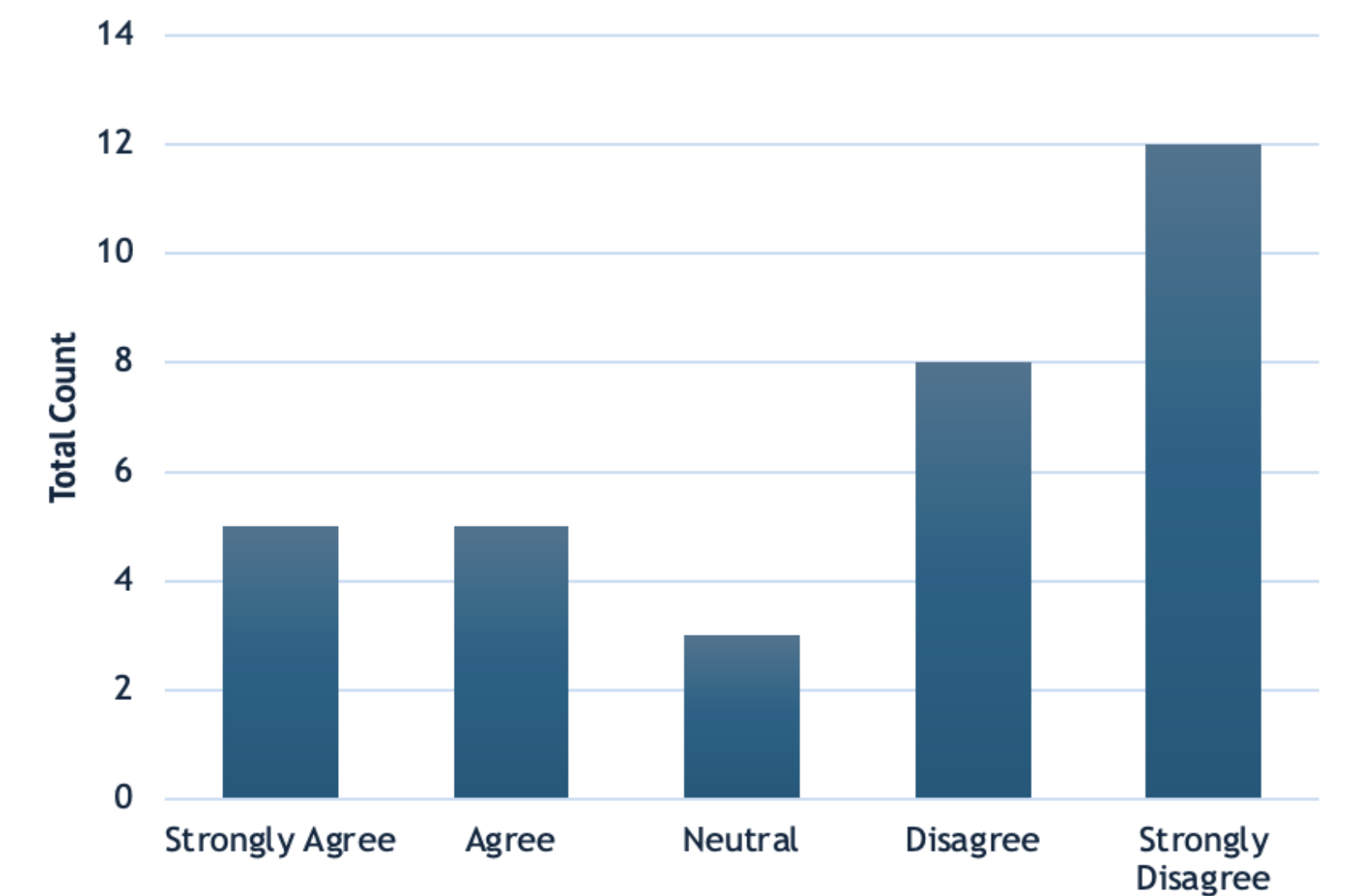
- Hispanic (4, 11.8%), Non-Hispanic (29, 85.3%)
- Female (20, 58.8%), Male (14, 41.2%)
- 57.6% decided to apply into ENT during their M3 year, 18.2% during M2, and 24.2% during M1
- 29.3% did not have a home ENT program, all of whom reported this as a factor in their decisions to pursue a research year
- 100% took a research year to become a more competitive applicant
- # of publications prior to research year: None (9, 26.5%), 1-4 (22, 64.7%), 5+ (3, 8.8%)
 - 64.7% agreed that their number of publications influenced their decision to take a research year
- # of presentations (podium or poster) prior to research year: None (5, 14.7%), 1-4 (21, 61.8%), 5+ (8, 23.5%)
- 2 respondents reported taking a research year due to an unsuccessful ENT match year

Figure 4. Did you take a research year because you were unsure how competitive you were as an applicant with a Pass/Fail Step 1?



- 94.1% took Step 1 pass/fail
- 6.3% attempted Step 1 twice
- 30.3% indicated that Step 1 becoming P/F influenced their decision to take a research year, while 51.5% disagreed
 - Other motives for taking a research year included: uncertainty of competitiveness (33.4%), desire to build connections (96.9%), and solidifying interest in ENT (57.5%)

Figure 5. Did you take a research year because you were unsure how you would perform on Step 2?



Discussion

- Our study provides insight into how the transition of Step 1 to a P/F system has shaped medical students' decisions to pursue dedicated ENT research years.
- 30.3% of medical students who took research years directly attributed their decision to Step 1 P/F
- It is possible that this change has created new uncertainties regarding competitiveness.
 - This was especially evident among students without a home ENT program, who were more likely to report that Step 1 P/F factored into their decision-making.
- These findings align with prior literature suggesting that loss of a standardized numerical score has shifted emphasis toward other components of the residency application, including research productivity, letters of recommendation, and program connections.
- Notably, the majority of students (96.9%) cited building connections as a primary motivator for taking a research year, highlighting the value of mentorship, networking, and institutional support in the absence of numerical Step 1 scores.
- Students from non-research-intensive programs were less likely to feel Step 1 P/F influenced their decisions
 - This may suggest that institutional culture and available opportunities play a mediating role in how this policy change is experienced.
- As otolaryngology and other competitive specialties adapt to the Step 1 P/F grading system, structured pathways for early engagement in specialty-specific research, especially for students at resource-limited institutions, may be beneficial.

Conclusion

- Ultimately, while Step 1 P/F has not universally driven decisions to pursue ENT research years, it may be contributing to an evolving culture in which research productivity and professional networking are perceived as increasingly vital.
- Future studies should assess how these dynamics influence actual match outcomes and long-term career development, and whether they contribute to or mitigate inequities within the ENT applicant pool.

Contact

Jaehee Kim, BA
Thomas Jefferson University Hospital
Department of Otolaryngology - Head and Neck Surgery
jxk893@case.edu
(201)874-5265

Study Survey



Poster Handout



References

