

Defining Success

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RESEARCH QUESTION

How is success defined by Palo Alto High School (Paly) students?

INTRODUCTION

Palo Alto has long been well-known for its excellence in academics — and for its tragic suicide clusters. Administrators and parents of students in the Palo Alto Unified School District have been searching for better ways to support students both emotionally and academically. Many studies have been conducted to show how drive, affluence, grit, and different mindsets affect the way students learn and how adults undertake tasks. Previous works identified the differences between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as external accomplishments in the culture of affluence that emphasizes competition (Duckworth, Dweck, Levine, Pink, Tough). Through this research project, we hoped to discover what the Paly student body, teachers, and administration think about what attributes make up success and what behaviors and traits lead to success. By understanding the definition of success of those involved in the school community, we hope to aid the Palo Alto community in creating a better learning environment for future students.

MATERIALS & METHODS

Our research was conducted through a series of surveys filled out by students, teachers, and the Palo Alto High School administration. The surveys followed similar patterns, asking the individual to rank traits on a scale from one to four, one meaning the trait isn't important and four meaning it is highly valued.

Initial findings taken from a preliminary survey of thirty juniors at Paly consisted of six open-ended questions, the first of which asked students to describe the Paly student body in three words. The responses were coded by hand. The four most frequent terms were then used in the final survey: stressed, competitive, driven, and hardworking. The next question asked what was necessary for one to succeed, and similar responses were put into categories. This resulted in four frequent ideas: drive, intelligence, happiness, and perseverance. When asked about the five traits of successful people, the four most frequent terms were: intelligent, hardworking, charismatic and happy. The initial survey asked about the students' guardians' and peers' definition of success. The most frequent responses for their guardians definition included academic strength, a stable occupation, attending a prestigious college, and happiness. Meanwhile, responses for their peers definition included the same four traits. The most frequent responses were taken to form the final survey.

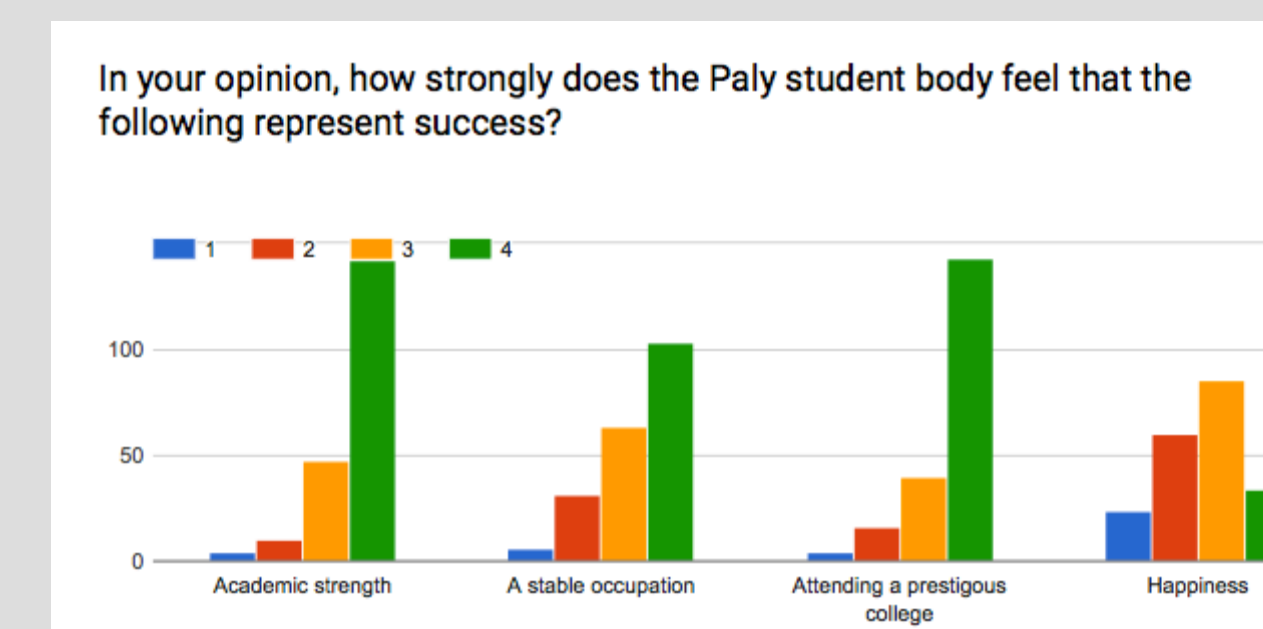
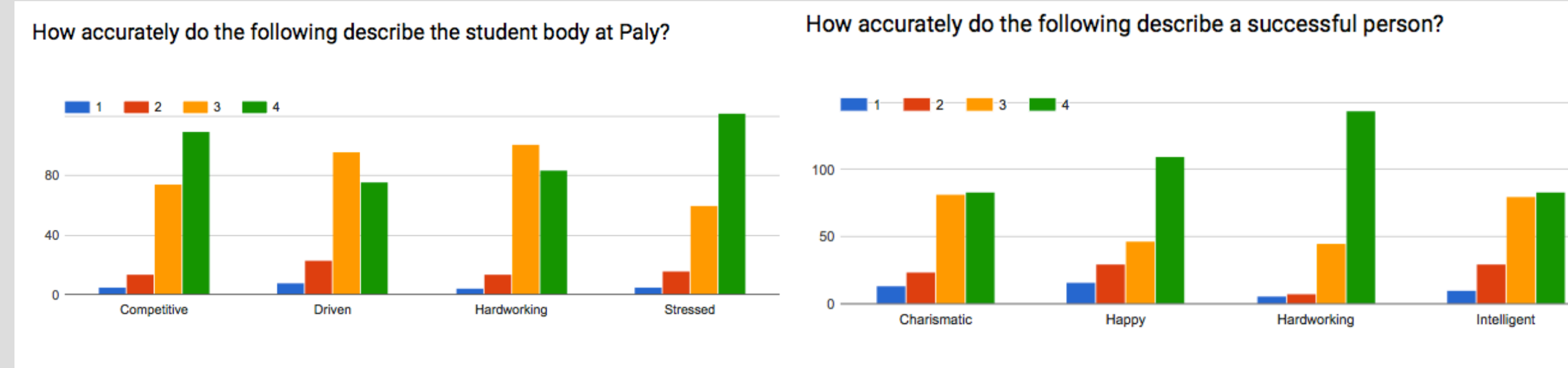
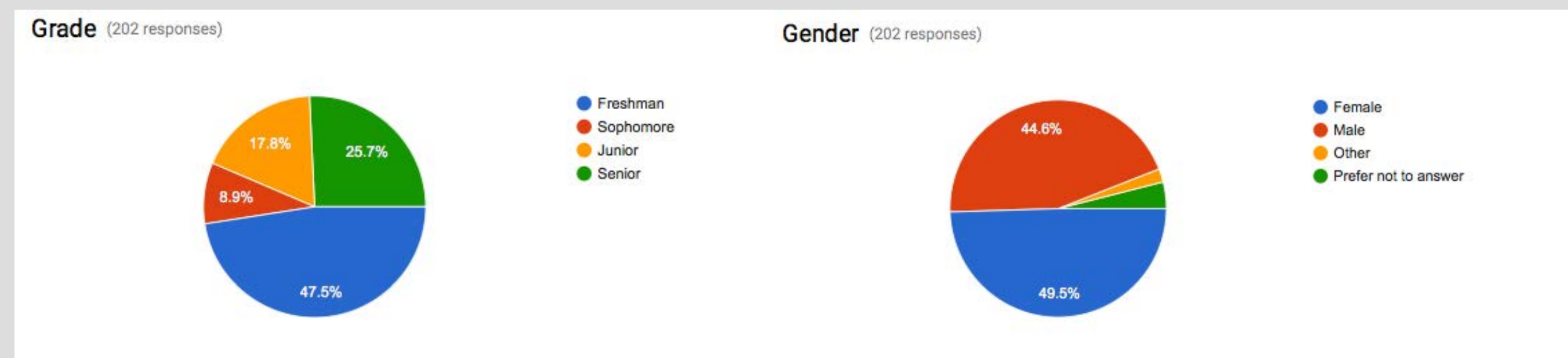
A sample of thirty students were surveyed from each grade: freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. According to the Central Limit Theorem — which states that the sampling distribution of the mean of any independent, random variable will be approximately normal if the sample size is large enough — the responses of thirty students would mimic the responses of the entire population or grade. All students completed identical surveys, which included twelve multiple choice or scale questions and one open-ended question that allowed them to explain or add information they would like us to consider. Of the twelve questions, six questions of the final survey were based on the findings of the preliminary survey. The remaining five were sociodemographic questions that would allow for statistically meaningful conclusions.

CONCLUSION

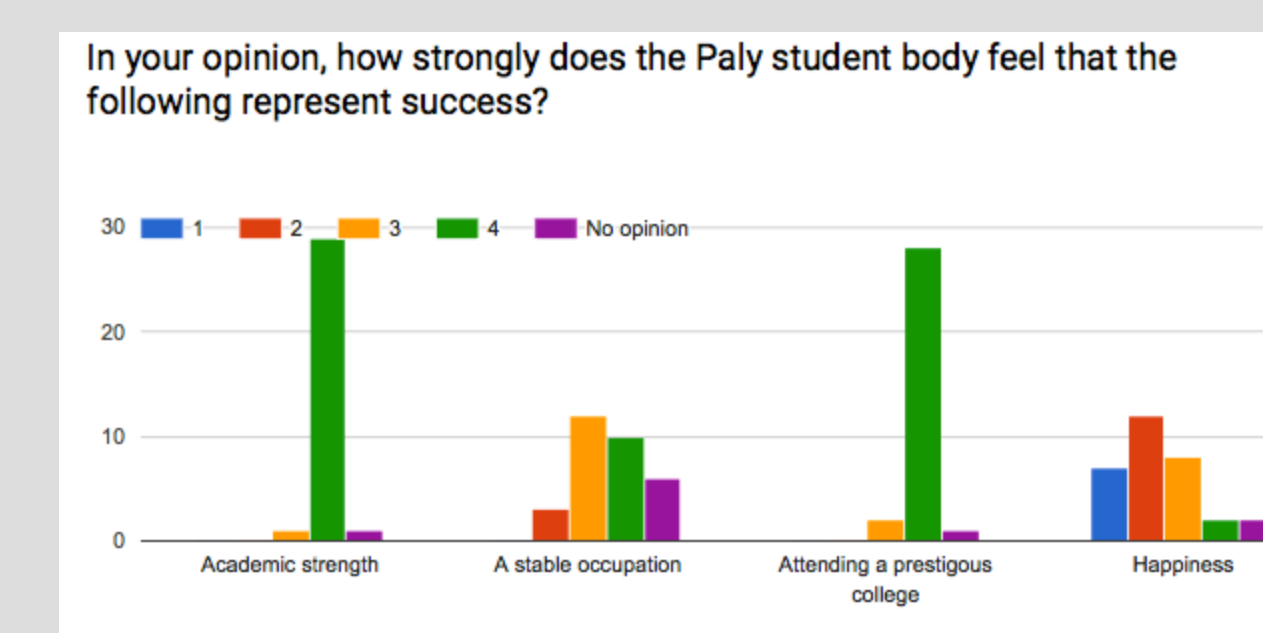
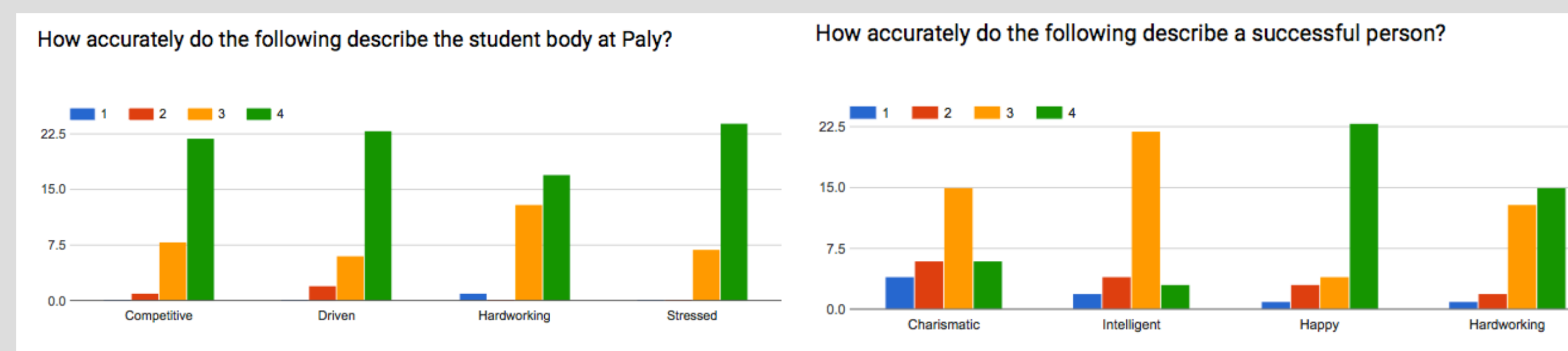
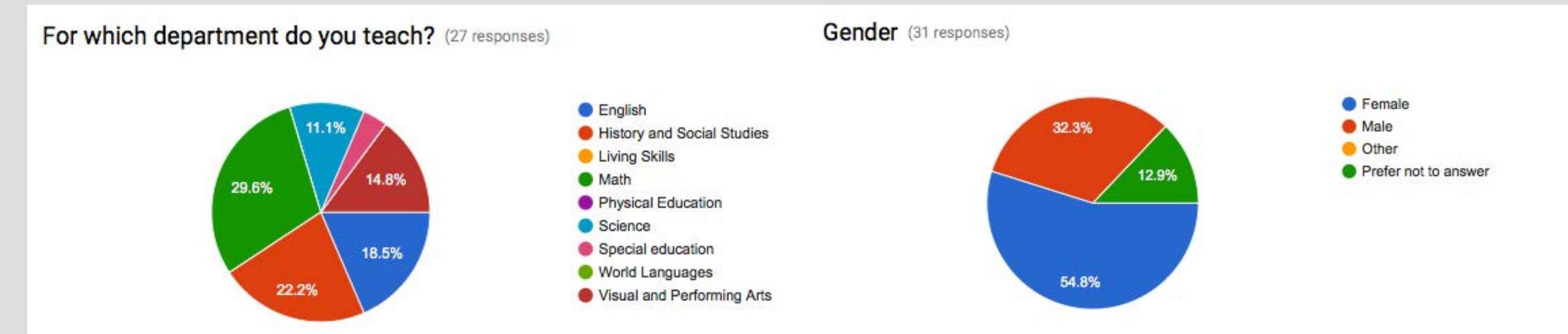
Surveying students revealed a disparity between traits students associate and find representative of success and successful people and how accurately they describe the general student body at Paly. Similar discrepancies can be seen between the perception of success in the eyes of teachers and those of their students in regards to specific traits as well as representations.

Expanding on this experiment would include further research into why the discrepancies exist through focus groups. Finding an explanation as to why a sample size of students don't identify the general student body at Paly to exemplify the same characteristics associated with success could provide an understanding of the Silicon Valley image that overshadows the student life. In addition speaking directly to parents, and continuing with teachers and administration through the survey as well as focus groups to identify the sources of the definition of success could prove beneficial. Exploring the same groups but for Gunn High School and comparing how the students, teachers, parents, and administration differ or overlap across the districts high schools could further the identification of the varying sources of the cemented perception of success.

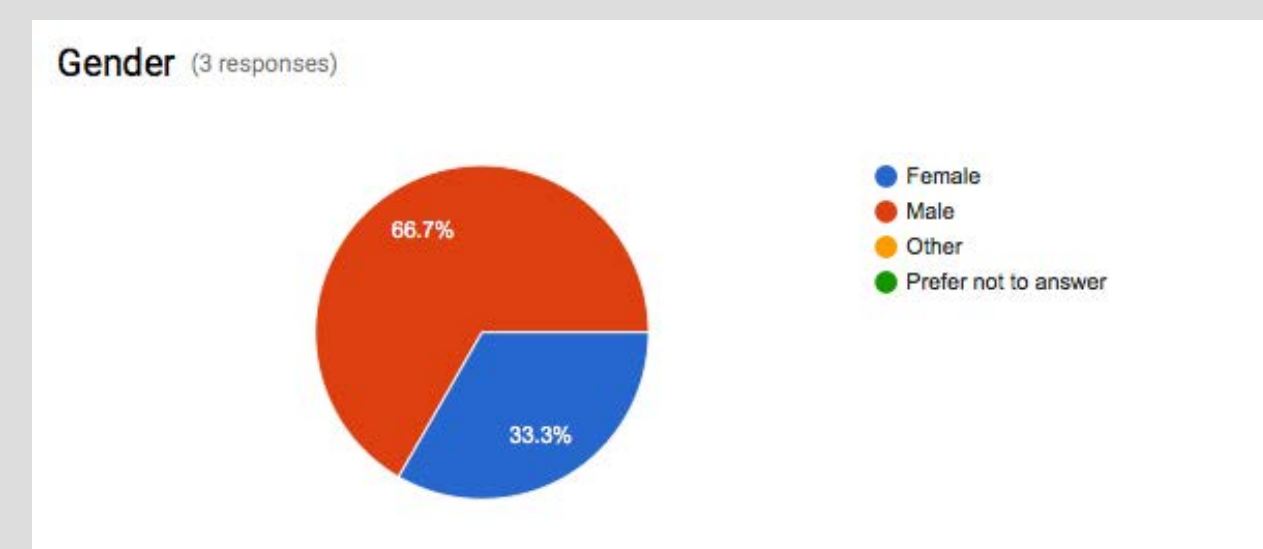
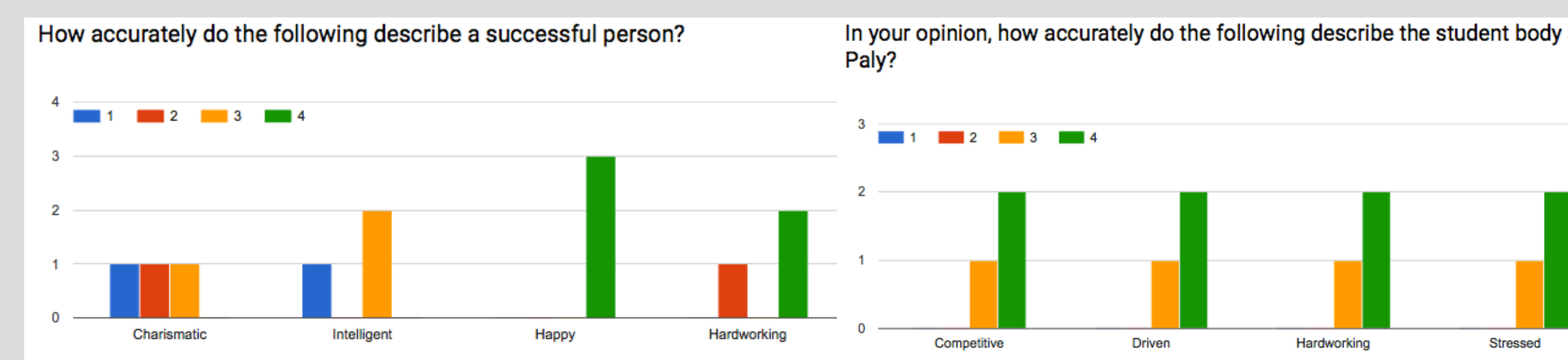
Student Survey Results



Teacher Survey Results



Administration Survey Results



DISCUSSION

Student Survey

When given the four traits that occurred most often in the preliminary survey — competitive, driven, hardworking, and stressed, and were asked on a scale of one to four how accurately they describe the Paly student body, 60% of students said stressed was a highly accurate description (responded with a 4). While 55% ranked competitive as a highly accurate description, 42% of students ranked hardworking with a four as well, and only 38% said drive was a highly accurate description. The average responses for the traits were 3.4 (competitive), 3.2 (driven), 3.3 (hardworking), and 3.5 (stressed).

The four traits accurately describing a successful person that occurred most often in the preliminary survey were charismatic, happy, hardworking, and intelligent. Paly students ranked the accuracy, once again, on a scale from one to four. Hardworking was a highly accurate description, meaning a response of four, occurred in 71% of all student responses. Happy received a rank of four from 55% of all student responses. On the other hand charismatic and intelligent received an equal number of highly accurate responses; 41% of students felt that they, on a scale from one to four, require a ranking of four. The averages by trait were 3.2 (charismatic), 3.2 (happy), 3.2 (hardworking), 3.6 (intelligent).

Considering the responses to the initial two questions, the contrast between ranking the accuracy of hardworking as a trait of the Paly student body and a successful person is striking. While 71% of students felt that hardworking is a highly accurate description of a successful person, only 42% of those same students felt the trait is a highly accurate description of their peers. While it received the second lowest number of highly accurate responses (number 4 on a scale from 1 to 4) for the student body, it received the most number of highly accurate descriptions when related to a successful person. However, the mean score for hardworking in both questions was nearly equivalent 3.2 and 3.3 respectively.

When answering on their own behalf 64% of students correlated success with happiness, yet when asked about their interpretation of their peers' definition only 16% felt Paly students see happiness as highly representative of success. Similarly the average response decreased from 3.4 for their own representation to 2.6 for their peers.

When speculating on the relevance of college on behalf of their peers 64% saw it as highly representative of success, while that number shrank to 33% in regards to their parents' representation of success. Changing from the most frequent ranking of four for peers to the least frequent highly representative ranking with their parents. In addition the average response for the representation of success through attendance of a prestigious college decreased from their peers perception 3.6 to their parents' 2.9.

Of the surveyed students 50% felt that their parents strongly influenced their definition of success (required a rank of 4), while only 37% were strongly influenced by peers and 18% by their teachers. The averages were 3.3 (parent/guardian), 3.1 (peers), and 2.5 (teachers).

Teacher Survey

When given the same four traits that occurred most often in the preliminary survey — competitive, driven, hardworking, and stressed, and were asked on a scale of one to four how accurately they describe the Paly student body, 78% of teachers ranked stressed as highly accurate and 75% gave the same ranking to driven. Competitive received a response of highly accurate from 71% of teachers surveyed (a ranking of 4). While the least frequent ranking of highly accurate was given to hardworking with 17% of responses.

The following question asked teachers about their opinion of how students in their classes felt that academic strength, a stable occupation, attending a prestigious college, and happiness represent success. Attending a prestigious college was highly representative for their respective students in the eyes of their teachers receiving a rank of four from 90% of those surveyed. Academic strength received a rank of four from 80% of teachers surveyed, a stable occupation received a response of highly representative from 35%. The lowest frequency of the ranking of four was given to happiness, with only 13% of teachers assuming that their students find it highly represents success.

The same four traits were given but in reference to the entire student body. The surveyed teachers felt that academic strength was highly representative of the student body's perception of success, 93% of teachers gave the trait a rank of four. Attending a prestigious college received a rank of four from 90% of teachers, 32% felt that a stable occupation is highly representative for Paly students and 6% felt that happiness warranted a rank of four.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS / REFERENCES

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