

CSS Methodology Change Note 2024

Prior to 2024, the Continuing Student survey asked many satisfaction and perception questions on 5-point Likert scale with a Neutral option; a no basis to judge option was also provided. Beginning in 2024, the midpoint option was removed for Likert scale items.

This change was made for the following reasons:

1. From a decision-making standpoint, the neutral option provided limited information.
2. There is literature supporting that, particularly for college age students, social desirability bias contributes to respondents selecting neutral.^{1,2}
3. Respondents do not necessarily interpret mid-point responses the same way researchers do. They may select the mid-point when their true opinion is not neutral.^{3,4}
4. In general, there is concern that with a mid-point, participants will choose “a minimally acceptable response as soon as it is found, instead of putting effort to find an optimal response”.⁵

While the neutral option was removed for Likert Scale items, in keeping with best practices⁵ the No basis to judge option was retained.

In evaluating the CSS data from 2024 in comparison to prior years, the percent of responses in the bottom two categories (e.g., Disagree or Strongly Disagree) was relatively consistent, while the percent of responses in the top tier (e.g., Agree or Strongly Agree) increased considerably when the neutral option was removed. The percent of students selecting “No basis to judge” also increased substantially compared to prior years. Students selecting this response are removed from the final calculations. The increase in the percent of students selecting “No basis to judge” likely increases the accuracy and quality of the data, as students may have been previously selecting “Neutral” to reflect not knowing or feeling the question was not applicable.

¹ Raaijmakers, Q.A.W., van Hoof, A., 't Hart, H., Verbogt, T.F.M.A., & Vollebergh, W.A.M. (2000). Adolescents' midpoint responses on Likert-type scale items: Neutral or missing values? *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 12(2), 208–216. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijpor/12.2.209>

² Garland, R. (1991). The mid-point on a rating scale: Is it desirable? *Marketing Bulletin*, 2, 66–70. Available at: http://marketing-bulletin.massey.ac.nz/V2/MB_V2_N3_Garland.pdf

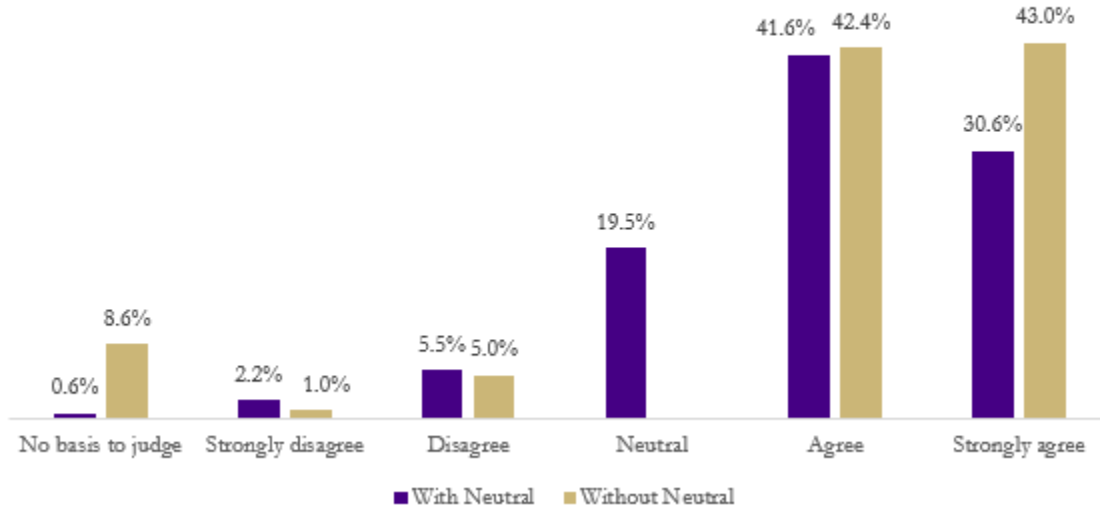
³ Kulas, J.T., & Stachowski, A.A. (2009). Middle category endorsement in odd-numbered Likert response scales: Associated item characteristics, cognitive demands, and preferred meanings. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43(3), 489–493. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2008.12.005>

⁴ Nadler, J.T., Weston, R., & Voyles, E.C. (2015). Stuck in the middle: The use and interpretation of mid-points in items on questionnaires. *The Journal of General Psychology*, 142(2), 71–89. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221309.2014.994590>

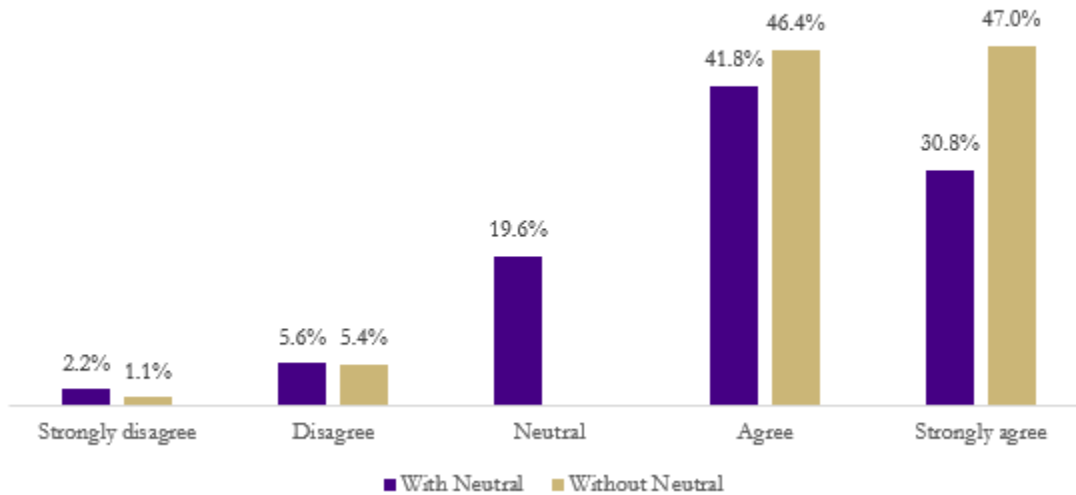
⁵ Chyung, S. Y., Roberts, K., Swanson, I., & Hankinson, A. (2017). Evidence-based survey design: The use of a midpoint on the Likert scale. *Performance improvement*, 56(10), 15-23.

The following graphs show the data distribution to the same question when a midpoint is available and when it is not. The first graph also shows the percent of respondents indicating “No basis to judge.” The second graph excludes respondents indicating “No basis to judge.”

I Feel Welcome in the Harrisonburg Community



I Feel Welcome in the Harrisonburg Community



No basis to judge respondents are excluded

As a result of these changes to the survey moving forward, “top tier” categories in historical data will include neutral, when applicable. This will allow decision makers and stakeholders to more accurately observe trends in data over time. Data collected in 2024 and forward will not include the neutral category.