

Use of a Tailored AI Support App and Students' Feelings of Connection, Belongingness, and Agency at a Small Liberal Arts University



Elizabeth Holt PhD, Ellie Davidson BS, Meghan Slining PhD, Gwen Hirko MS
Department of Health Sciences and Office of Student Life, Furman University Greenville, SC 29613

Background

Colleges and universities are increasingly exploring AI-supported tools to supplement student well-being and initiatives to boost students' feelings of connection and belonging. At small liberal arts institutions such as Furman (n~2550 students), students may benefit from supports that are personalized, easily accessible, and grounded in the campus context. The Furman University Well-Being Coach, embedded within the Wayhaven app, was developed to deliver Furman-specific guidance related to well-being, goal-setting, and navigation of campus resources. Examining how students engage with this tailored AI tool, and how its use relates to students' feelings of connection, belongingness, and agency, can inform future implementation of digital well-being supports.

Purpose

To explore the usage and potential impact of a Furman-tailored AI-based app

Research Questions

- How do first-year students engage with the Furman Well-Being Coach within the Wayhaven app?
- How satisfied are students with the AI coaching experience?
- How do students describe the app's influence on their feelings of connection, belongingness, and agency?

Methods

Introduction of app

- First year students at Furman University were introduced to the app at orientation (summer), and later in Fall 2025 during Pathways

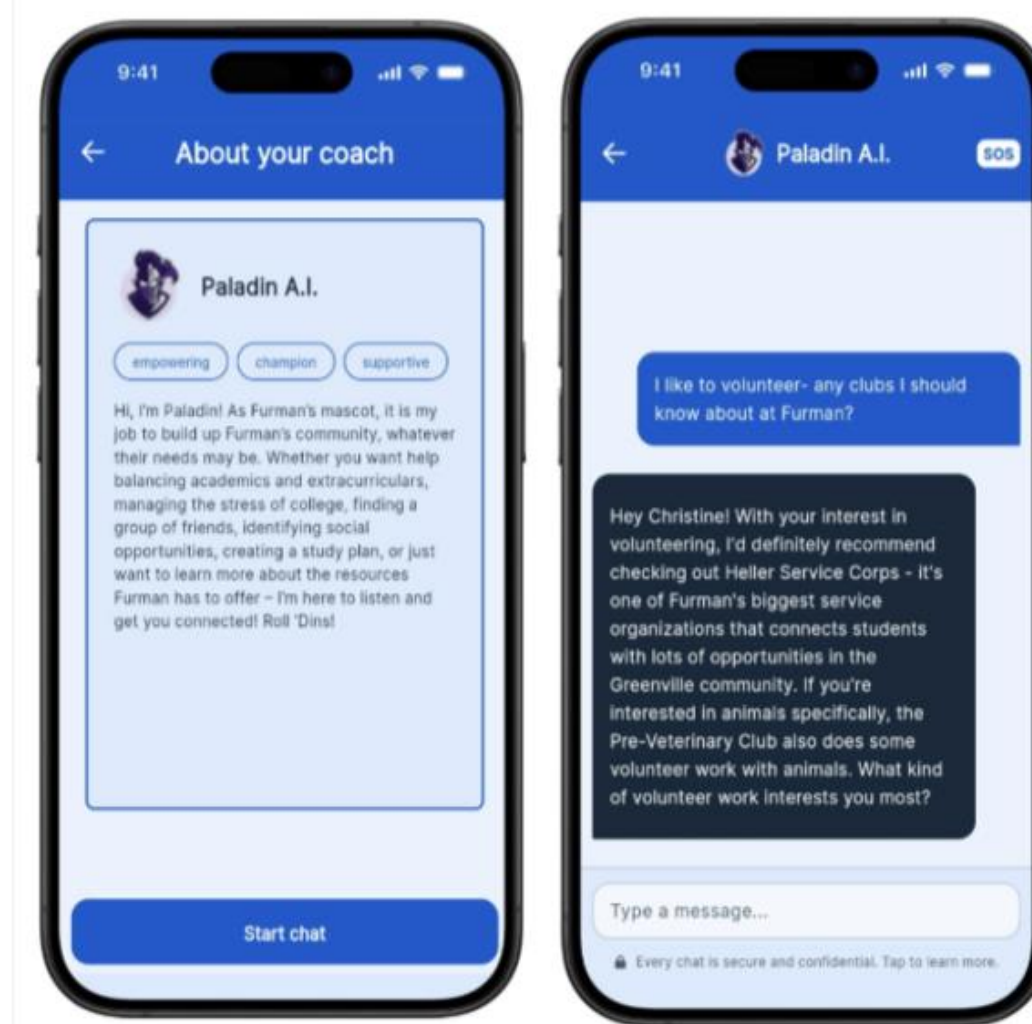
Recruitment:

- Students were invited by course instructors to complete an optional anonymous Qualtrics survey during Fall 2025, no incentive was given

Respondents:

- Surveys sample: First-year Furman University students enrolled in Pathways co-curricular courses (n = 74 survey respondents)

App Engagement



Paladin AI Well-being Coach

Last year the most frequent searched topics were:

1. Stress Management
2. Personal Growth
3. Life Transitions
4. Health Questions

Most students stated they are familiar / comfortable with general AI tools, however initial uptake of the Furman Wayhaven app was low

- ~53% of surveyed students reported using AI chatbots (ChatGPT, Gemini) frequently or occasionally
- Only ~8% use Wayhaven a few times a month or more
- 75% said they rarely or never use Wayhaven

Amongst the n= 17 Wayhaven Users – top reasons

- Stress management (18%)
- Personal growth (18%)
- Life Transitions (12%)
- Health Questions (12%)

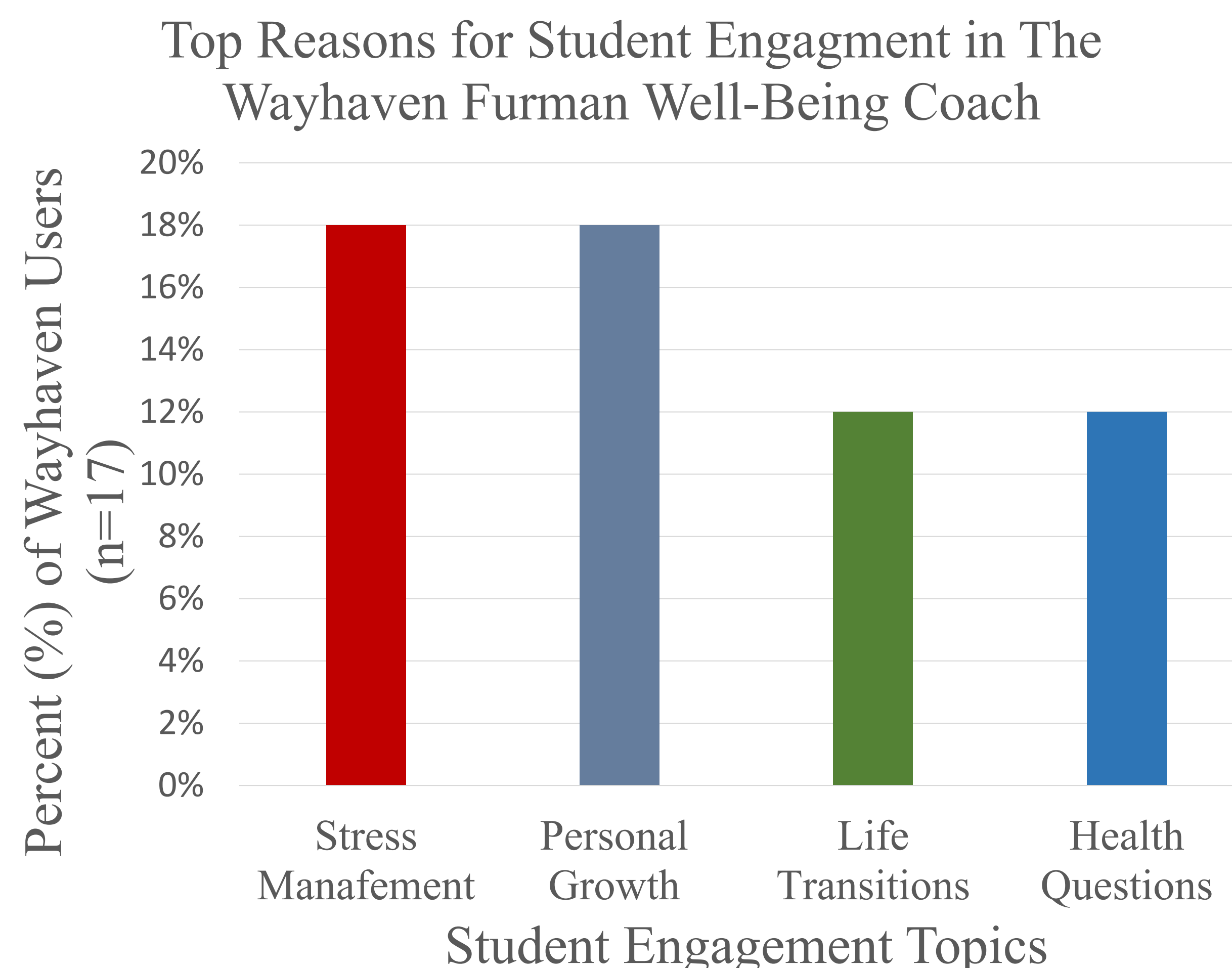


Figure 1. Primary reasons for student engagement emphasize stress management and personal growth. Percentages of users (n = 17) reporting primary engagement topics, with stress management and personal growth (18% each) reported more often than life transitions and health questions (12% each).

Key Takeaways

Connection & Belongingness:

Survey (n=74 students) did not show a link between Wayhaven chatbot usage and student belonging or connectedness

- 78% of the first-year students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed they feel they belong at Furman
- However, 87% said usage of Wayhaven was NOT connected to those feelings of belongingness

Perceived Usefulness of Wayhaven App (Fall 2025)

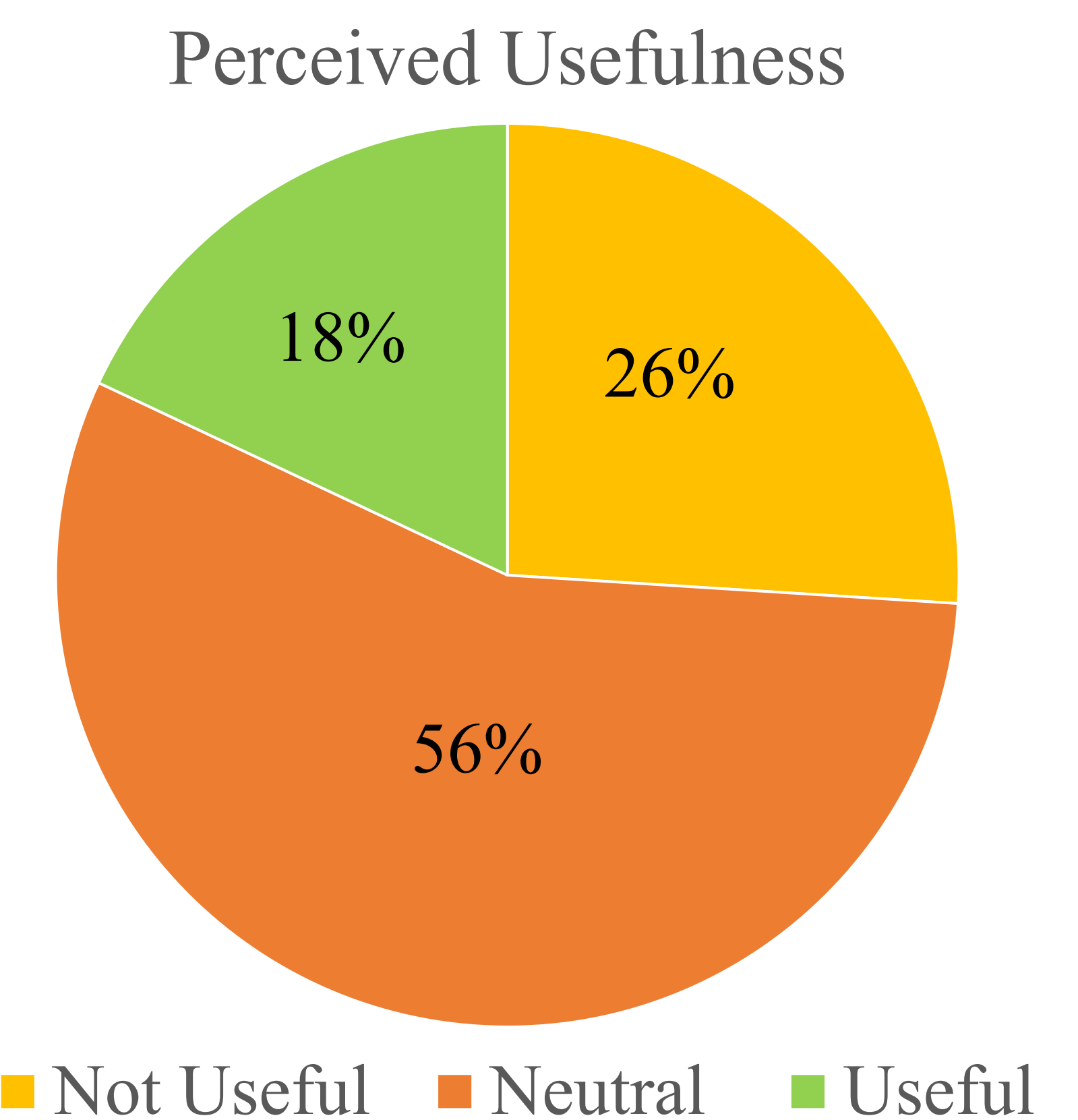


Figure 2. Student perceptions of usefulness are predominantly neutral. Distribution of perceived usefulness ratings, with 56% neutral, 26% not useful, and 18% useful. Fall 2025

Future Directions

- Continue to collect and share follow-up data on student usage of the app as Student Life increases initiatives for student uptake.
- Work with Wayhaven staff to increase **app relevance and familiarity** for Furman Students (ex: sync academic/athletics calendars to app)
- Examine subgroup analyses of the role of app use in improving students' sense of campus belonging and connection.