



# **The Master's Thesis: An Endangered Species in Social Work Education**

**Is it worth saving?**

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# Background

- Lipidus (1987) estimated that nearly 70% of all master's degrees were non-thesis degrees.
- Stanford (1987) found within the CSU system only 15% of the programs system-wide required the completion of a master's thesis.



# Background

Commenting on the zeitgeist of graduate education generally, Glazer (1986) stated:

The dominate paradigm is practitioner oriented, emphasizing training in skills, career development, and pragmatic goals. It is linked to the needs of students and the demands of the market place and driven by externally imposed standards....The master's degree is overwhelmingly professional, is largely terminal, and is practice oriented. (p. 83)



# Purpose

- To examine the thesis requirement/option in MSW Programs across the country.
- To capture participants' views on the value and limitations of the master's thesis in social work education.
- To stimulate dialogue about the role of the master's thesis in social work education.



# Method

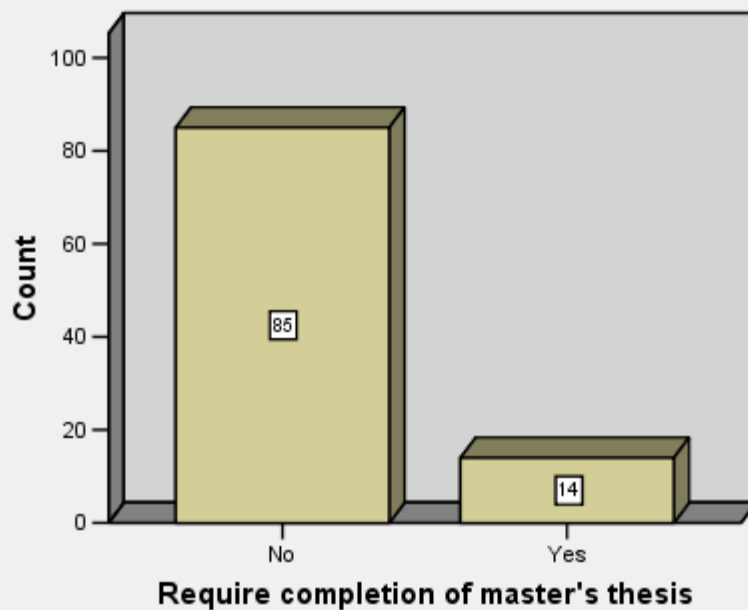
- Targeted 189 accredited and in-candidacy programs
- Mailed a 19 item survey to the Directors/Chairs of the MSW Program
- Received 99 completed surveys (52%)



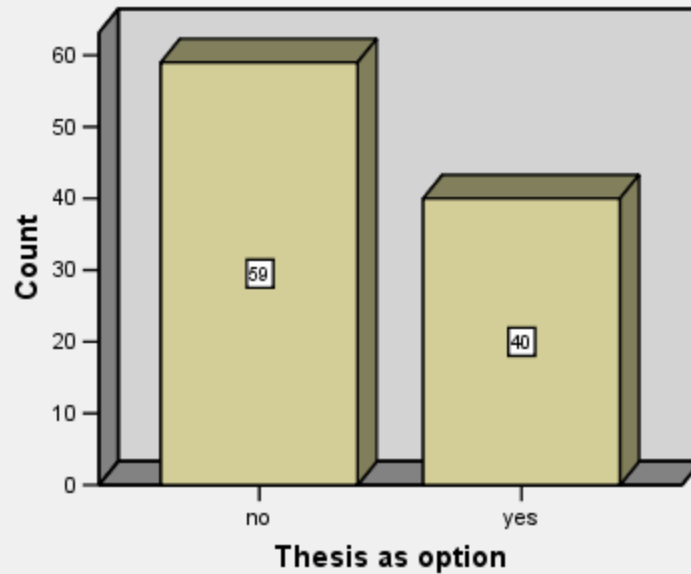
# Results

- Numbers related to the use of the thesis in MSW programs
- Participants' ratings surrounding various aspects of the master's thesis as a culminating activity in social work education
- Themes and descriptions associated with participants' ratings

# Thesis as a Requirement



# Thesis as an Option





# Thesis option: A closer look

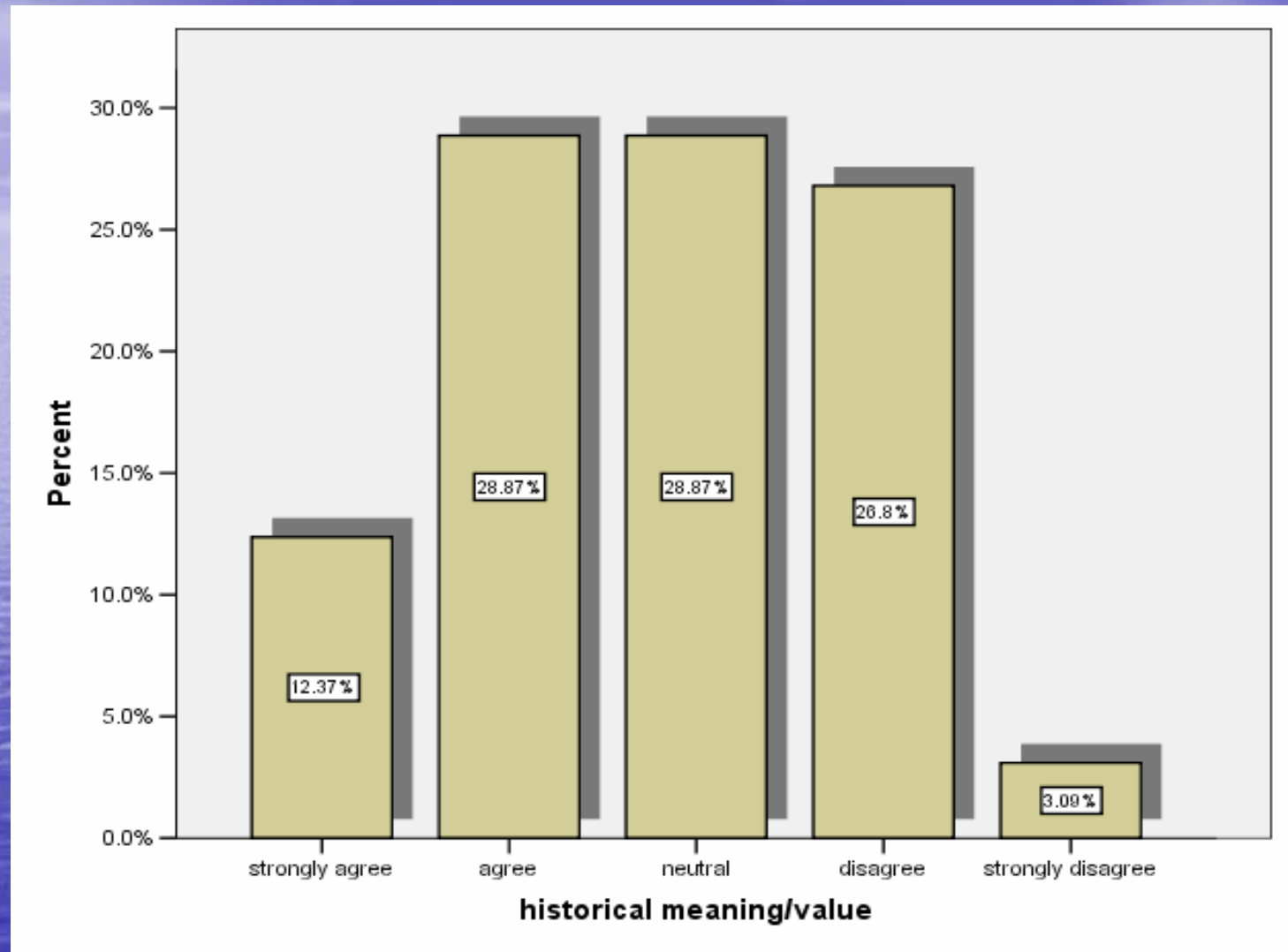
Percentage of Students Opting for Thesis

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	.00	63	63.6	63.6	63.6
	1.00	6	6.1	6.1	69.7
	2.00	4	4.0	4.0	73.7
	5.00	6	6.1	6.1	79.8
	10.00	4	4.0	4.0	83.8
	15.00	1	1.0	1.0	84.8
	40.00	1	1.0	1.0	85.9
	95.00	1	1.0	1.0	86.9
	100.00	13	13.1	13.1	100.0
	Total	99	100.0	100.0	



# Alternatives to Thesis

	no		yes	
	Count	%	Count	%
Research Project	67	68.4%	31	31.6%
Comprehensive Exam	84	85.7%	14	14.3%
Portfolio	87	88.8%	11	11.2%
No Culminating Experience	70	71.4%	28	28.6%
Other	77	78.6%	21	21.4%

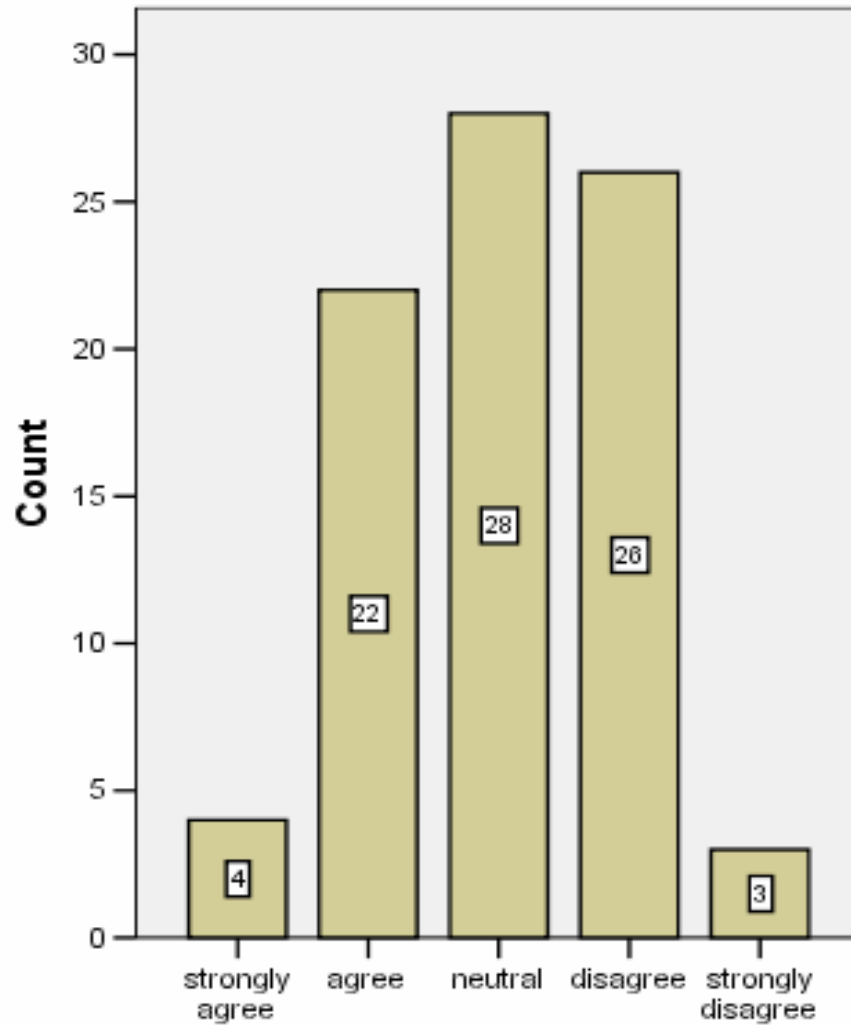


The master's thesis has historically played a meaningful role in social work education.



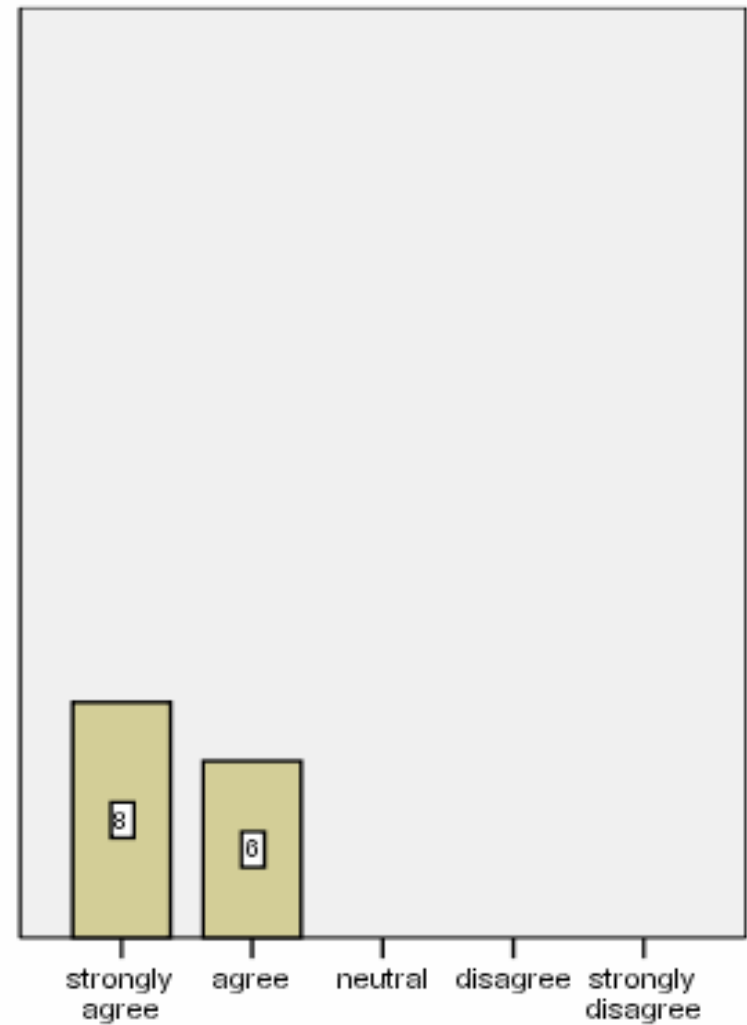
## Require completion of master's thesis

No

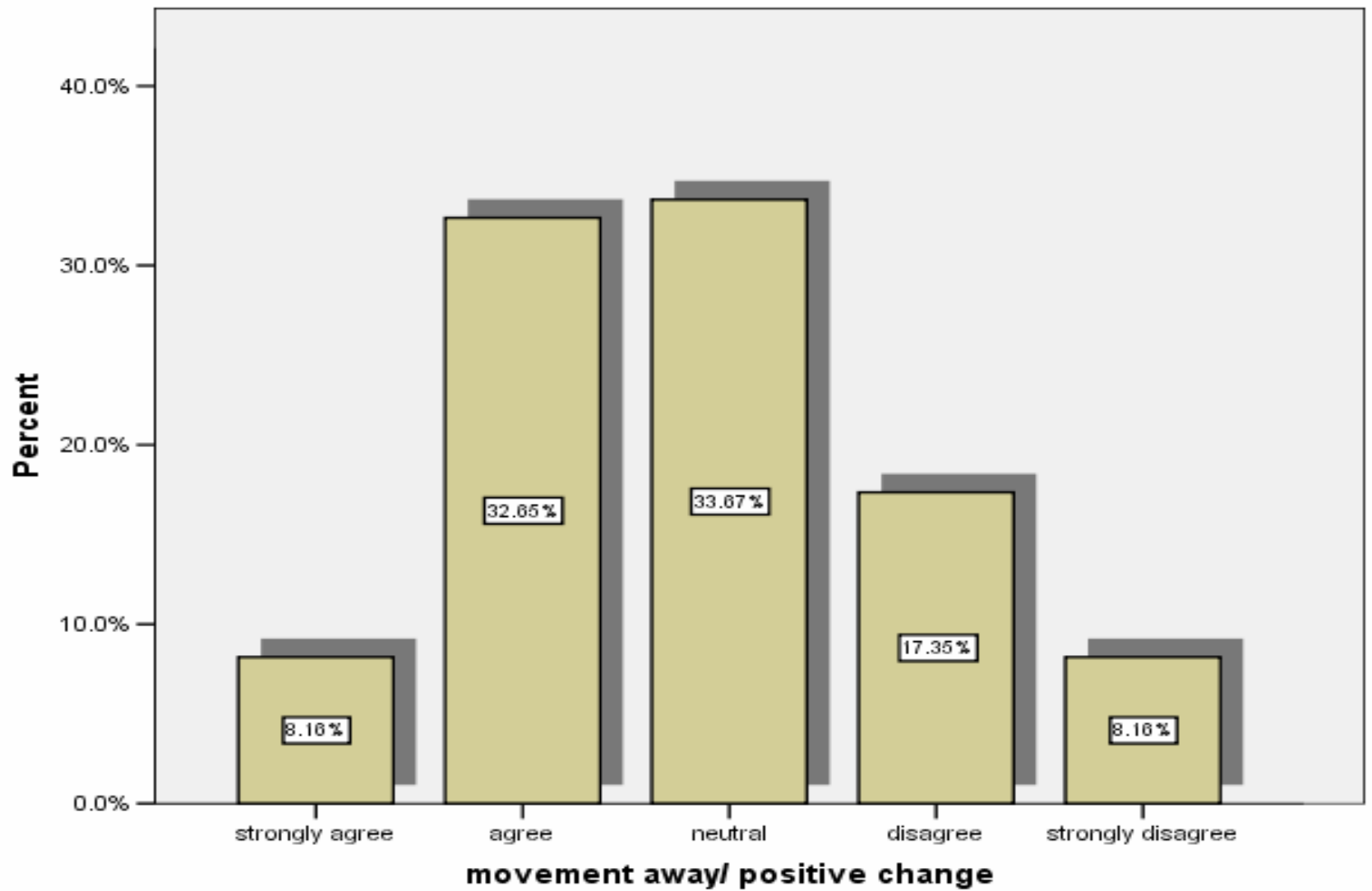


historical meaning/value

Yes



historical meaning/value

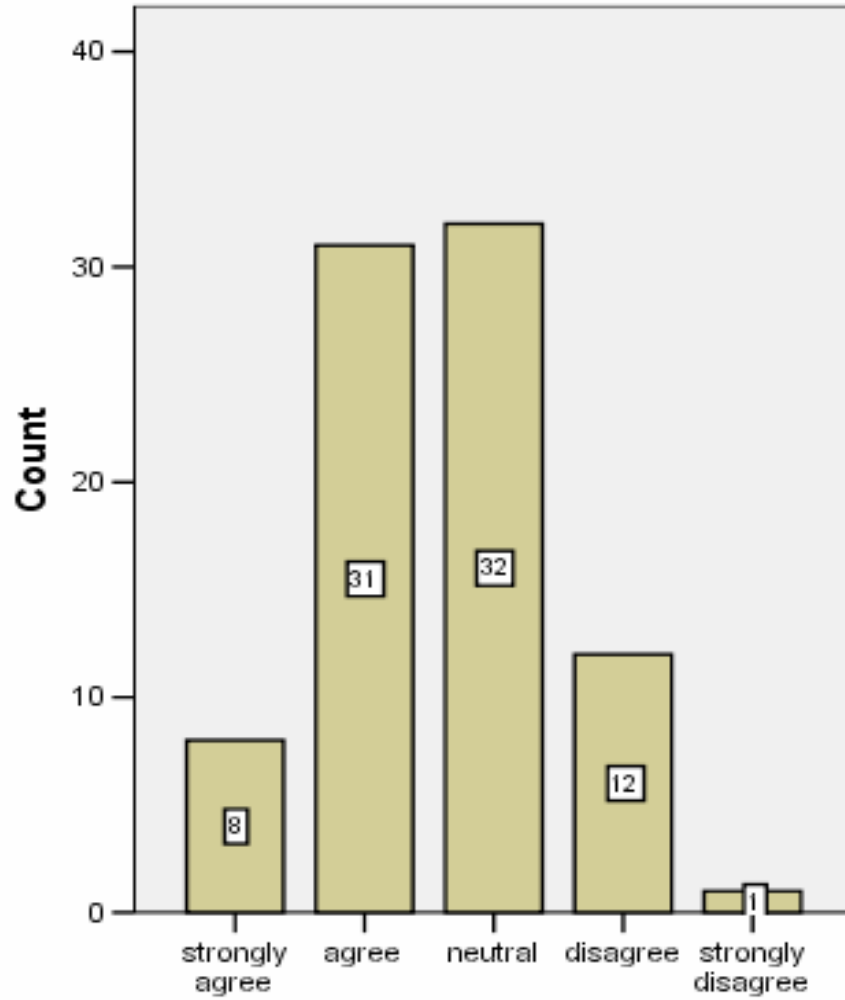


The movement away from the master's thesis is a positive curriculum change.



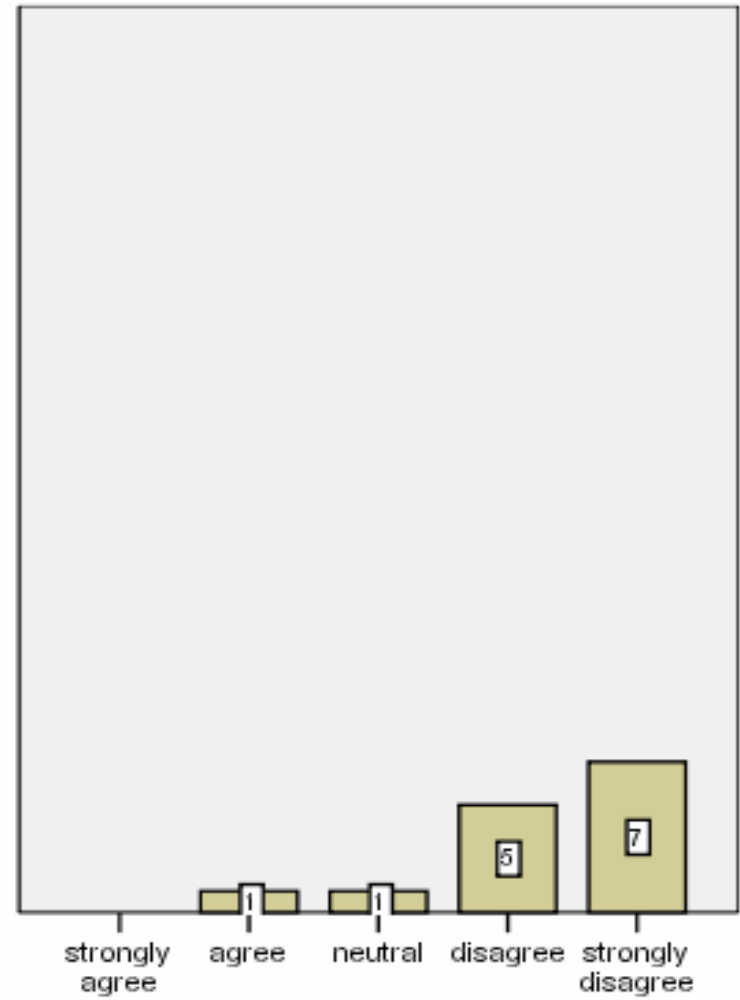
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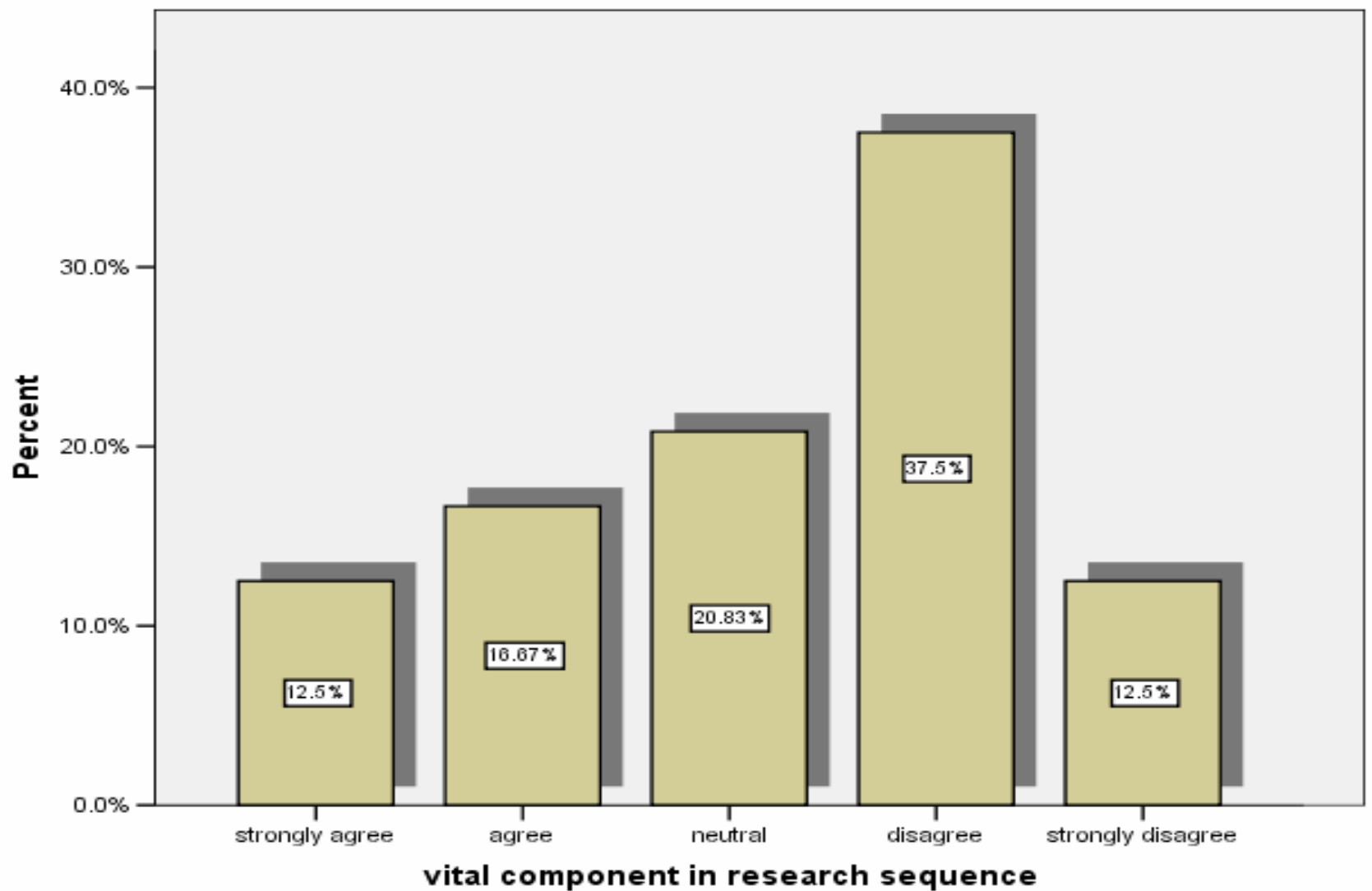


**movement away/ positive change**

Yes



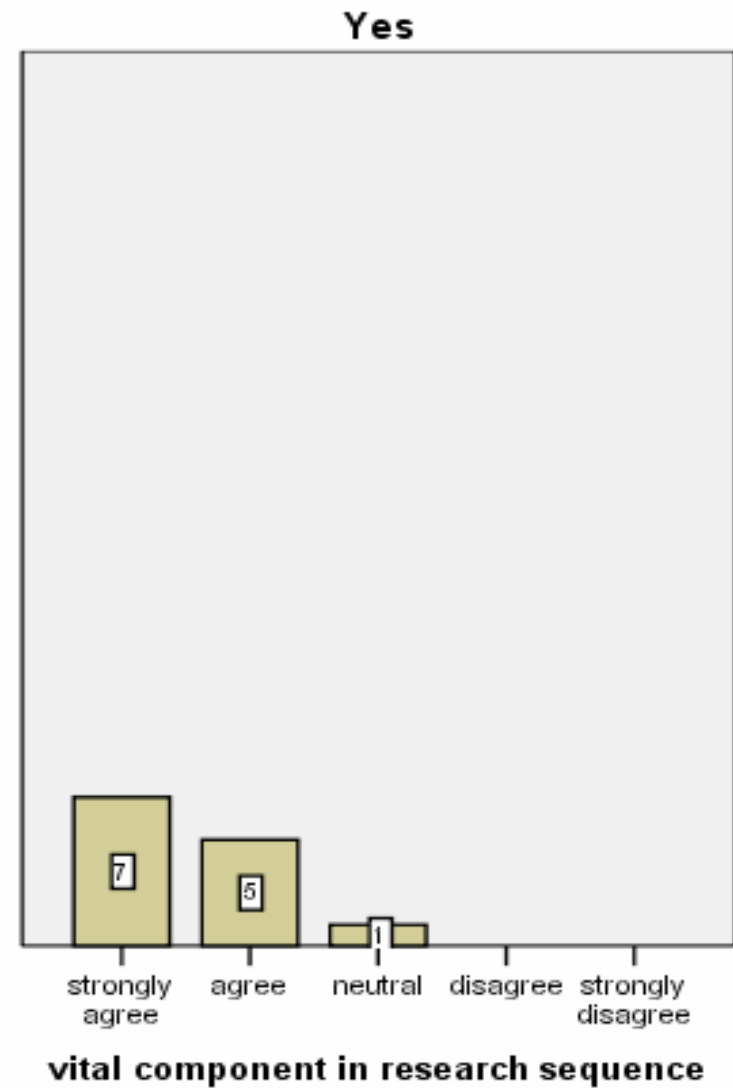
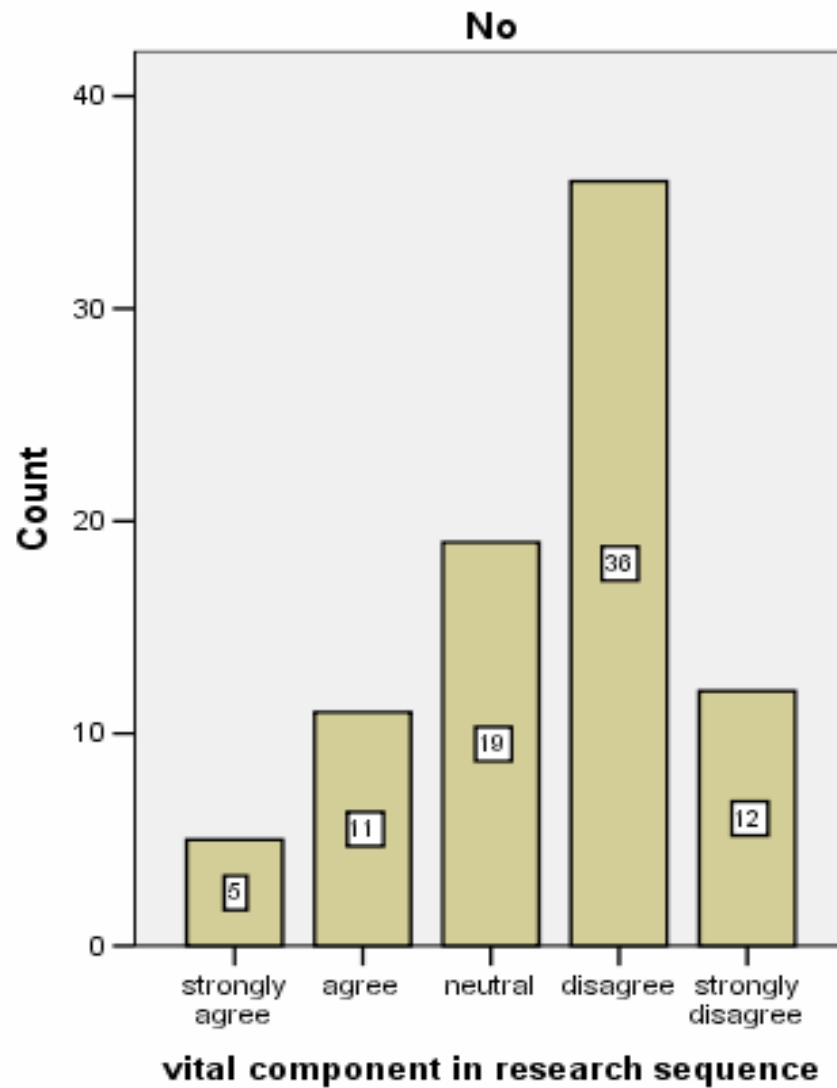
**movement away/ positive change**



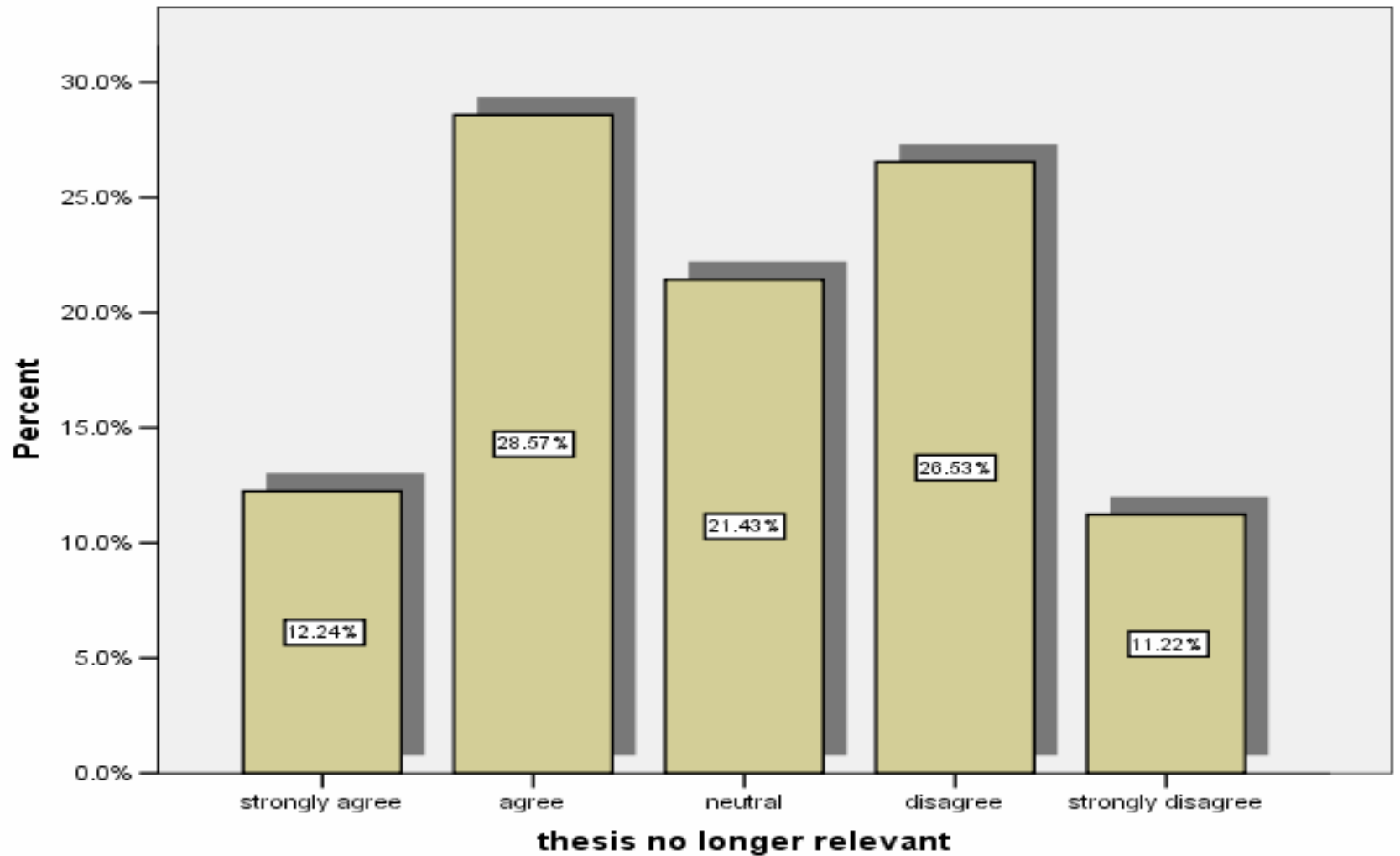
**The master's thesis is a vital component to the research sequence in graduate social work education.**



## Require completion of master's thesis



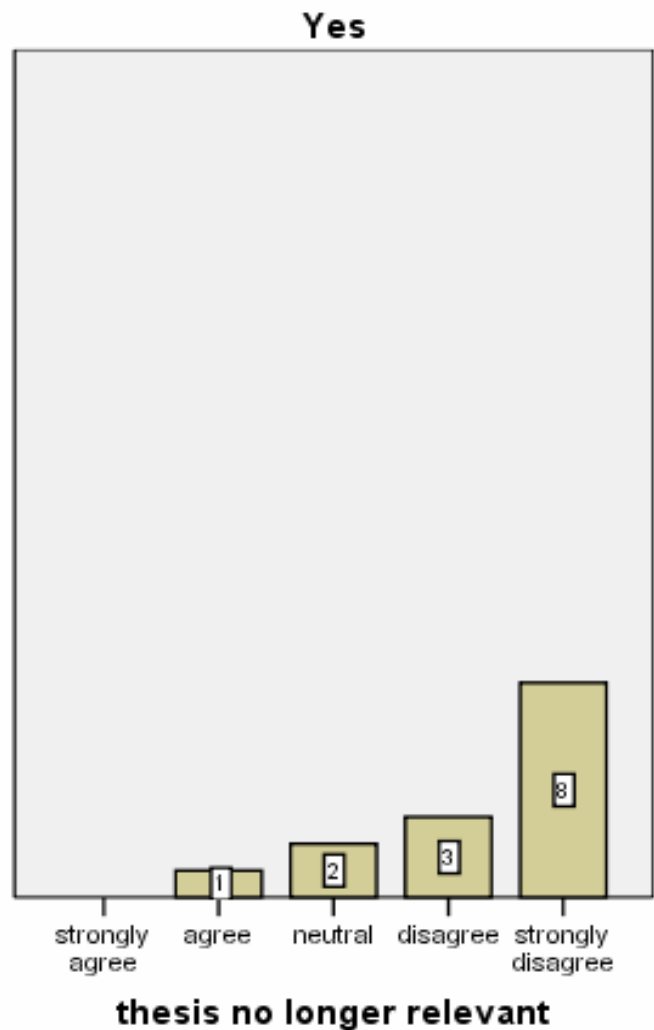
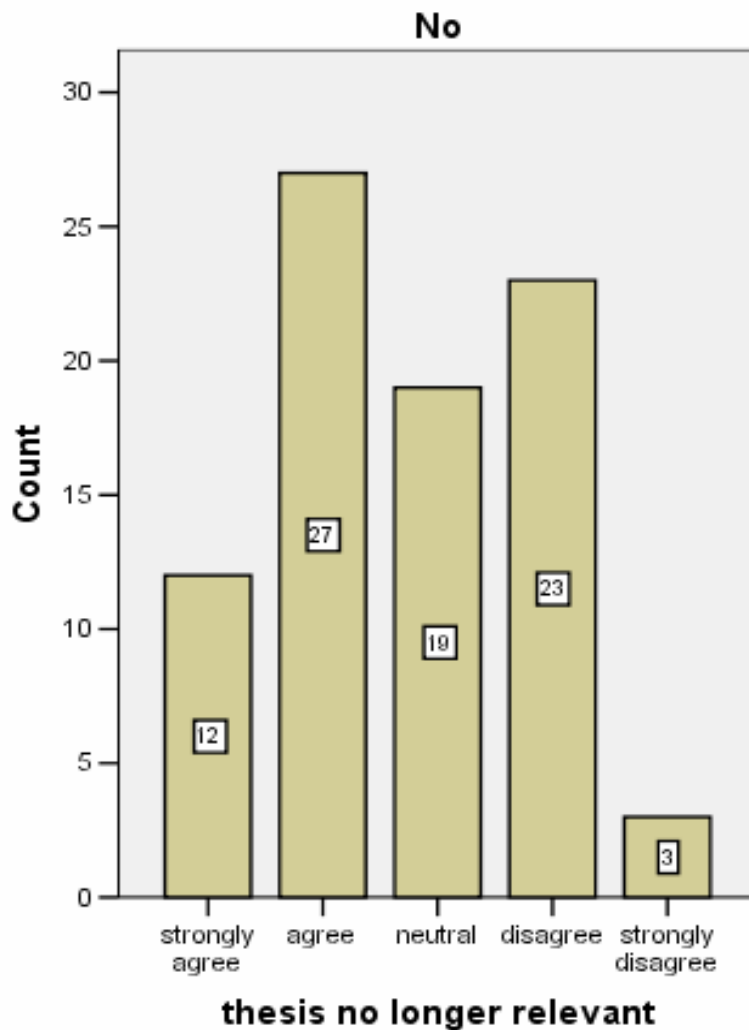


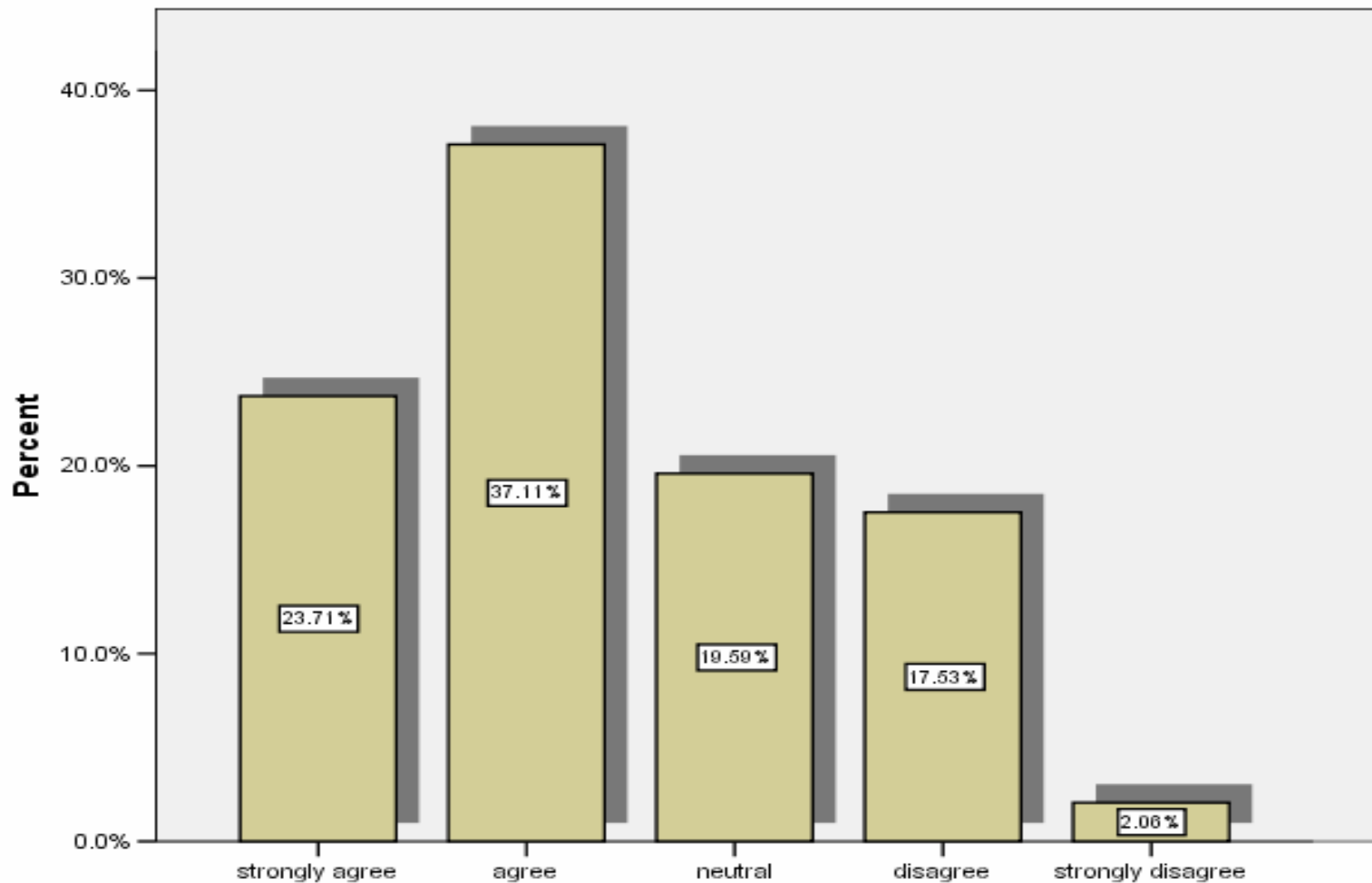


**For the majority of social work students, the master's thesis is no longer relevant to the mission of graduate social work education.**



### Require completion of master's thesis

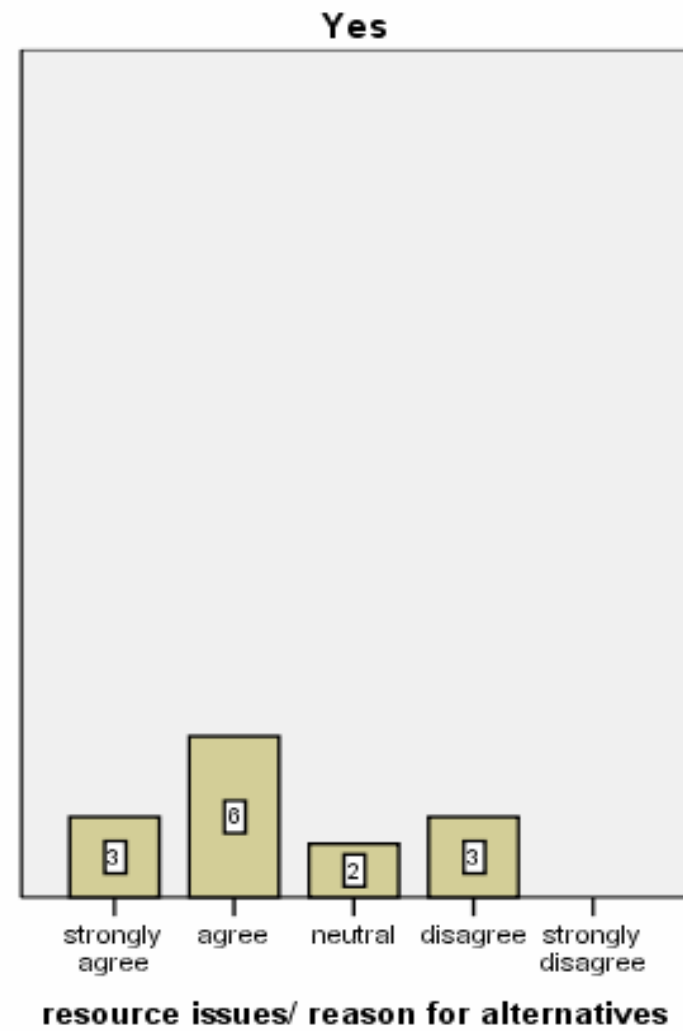
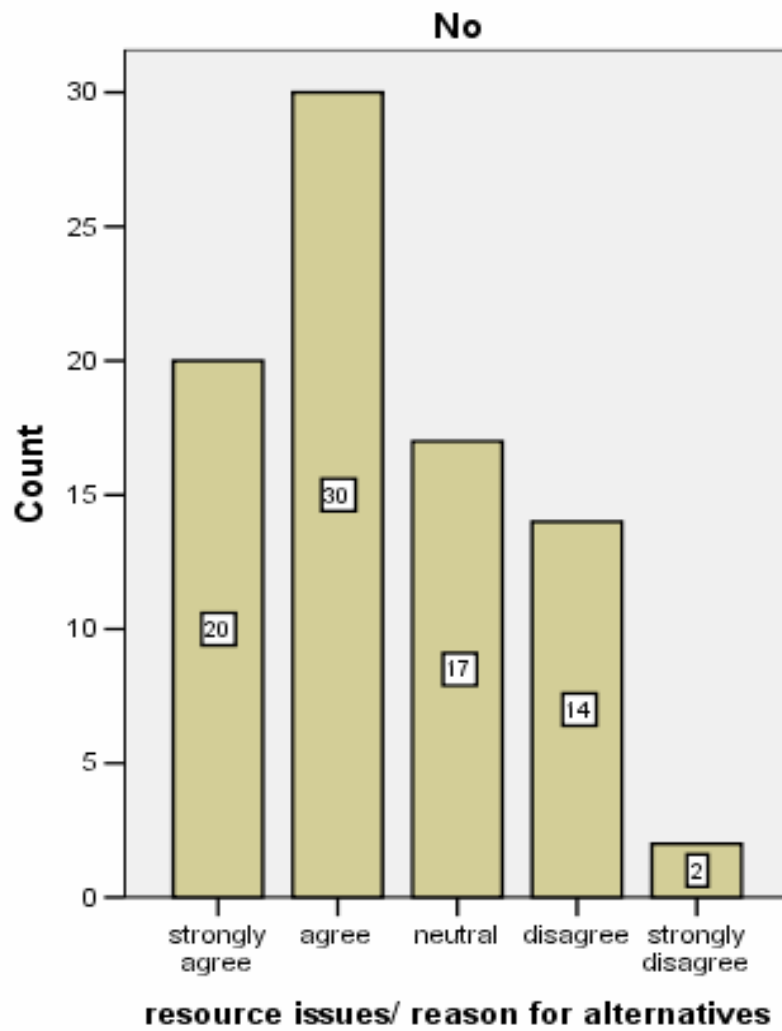


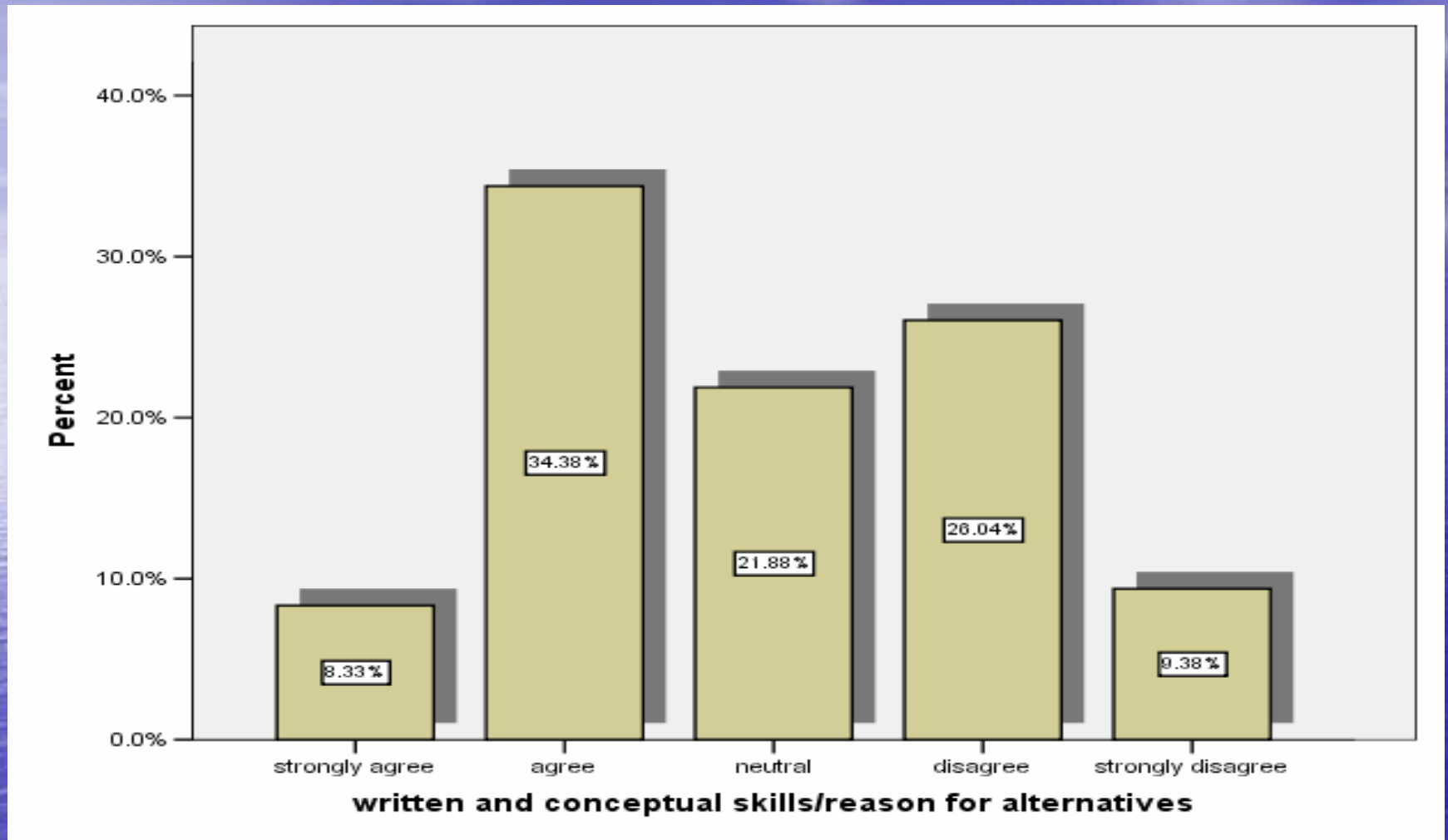


**Resource issues are the primary reason graduate programs are creating alternatives to the master's thesis.**



## Require completion of master's thesis

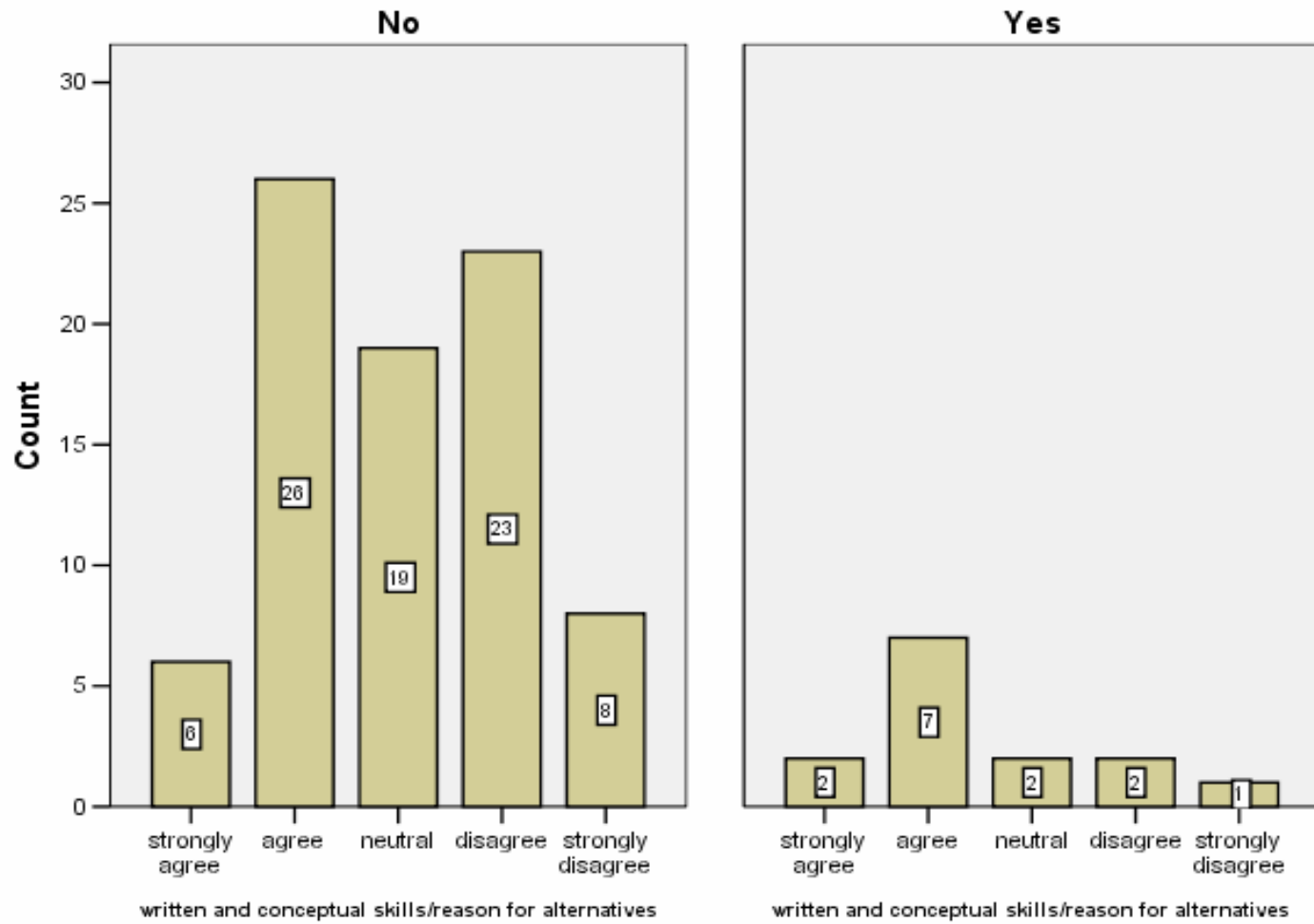


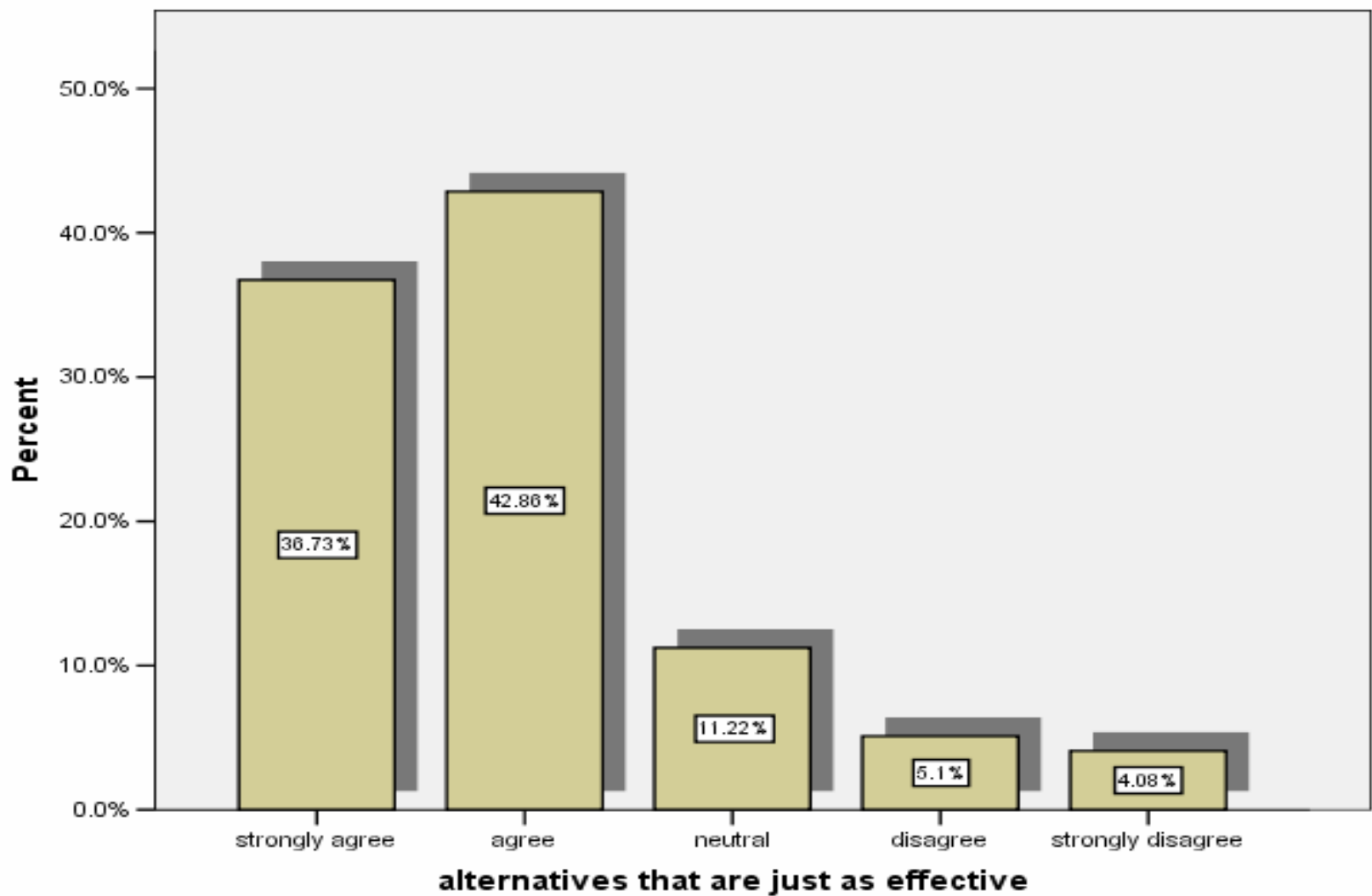


**Concerns surrounding students' written and conceptual skills have played a role in graduate social work programs' creating alternatives to the master's thesis.**



### Require completion of master's thesis

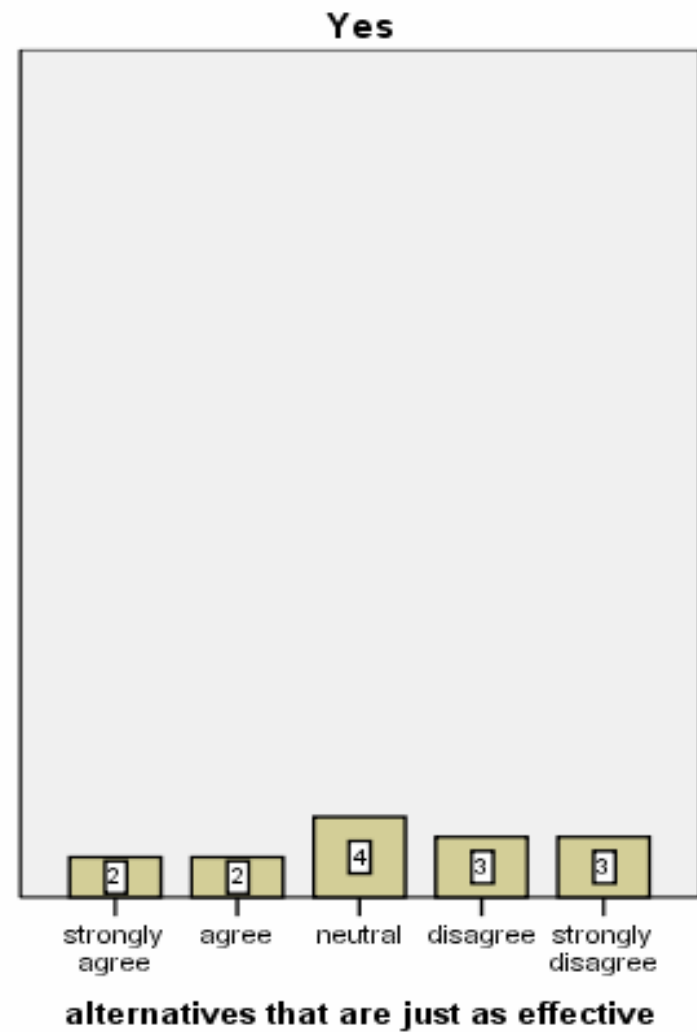
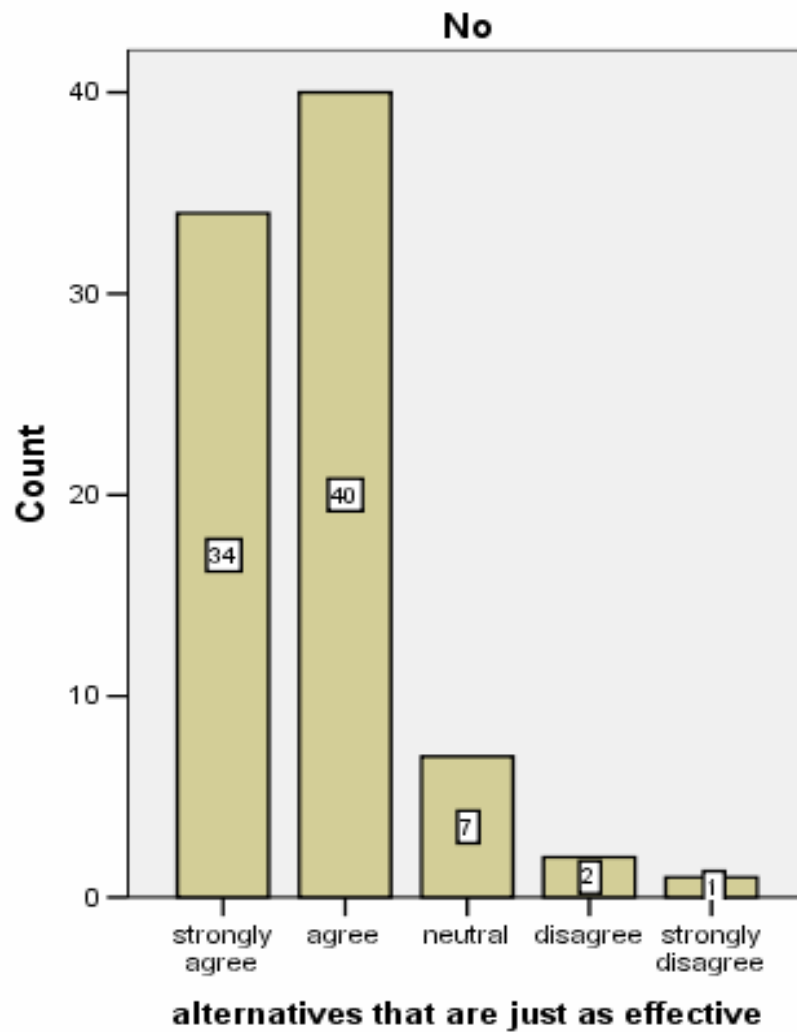




There are alternatives to the master's thesis that are just as effective in preparing graduate social work students for practice.



## Require completion of master's thesis







# Camp 1: Opposed to Thesis

- Not Applicable
  - Not Relevant
- Limited/No Value

# Camp 1: Examples

- “Little applicability. The final graduation requirement should be one that brings knowledge, skills and practice together.”
- “Not relevant. Students are better off with a more practical integration of learning and field practice.”
- “It’s a useless exercise and a hold over from grad programs where students are assumed to be moving towards a Ph.D.”



# Camp 2: Pro Thesis

- Development & Demonstration of Skills
  - Critical Thinking/Conceptual Skills
  - Written Skills
  - Research Skills
  - Preparation for Ph.D.
- Tool for Integration and Synthesis

# Camp 2: Examples

- “Should be mandatory—demonstrates critical thinking, ability to conceptualize, understanding of analysis, research methods and ties theory and methods to practice.”
- “A concrete way to help students integrate content. Provides a sense of competence.”
- “Extremely important. Serves to consolidate curriculum content—Builds confidence—Prepares students for research and support of evidence-based practice.”



# Camp 3: Neutral

- Feasibility/Resource Issues
  - Faculty time/Workload
  - Student-Faculty ratio
  - Faculty support
  - Less “intensive” options
  - Graduation delays
  - Requires too much structure

# Camp 3: Examples

- “Faculty are not adequately compensated and union workload makes it cumbersome to balance out workload credit.”
- “Time: 1) the curriculum is 61 hours long. 2) Practice forums or curriculum. 3) Faculty time to supervise.  
Accountability: 1) the CSWE standards do not support. 2) State licensing requires practice hours. 3) Students’ interest or lack of.”
- “Difficulty in establishing equivalency with M.A. thesis requirements in social and biological science program on campus. In a nutshell, would our program’s thesis have equivalent rigor to other programs?”



# Implications

- Increase Dialogue: Transition is too quiet!
  - How are resource issues addressed?
  - What alternatives appear to be successful culminating options?
  - What are students' needs related to culminating experiences?
- Increase Knowledge Building:
  - Programmatic decisions must be connected to quality data and committed dialogue.
  - Resources must be available to allow for serious/rigorous (intense) assessment.

# Thesis Definition

- The California State University Education Code (Title V, Section 40510, p. 473) defines a thesis as

. . . the written product of a systematic study of a significant problem. It identifies the problem, states the major assumptions, explains the significance of the undertaking, sets forth the sources for and methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished project (product) evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization and format, and thorough documentation.

A thesis is an original contribution to knowledge resulting from the systematic study of a significant problem or issue.