New research has found that university students either do not gain weight or do not maintain gained weight throughout their college years, supporting the theory that overweight school leavers entering university remain at that level.

The study, published in the Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners analyzed Body Mass Index (BMI) of students over a 4 to 5 year period of college with an average gap of 3.88 years between assessments.

The rate of overweight and obese individuals rose from 25.6% upon admission to college to 32% in senior or graduate year, a 25% increase. In freshman year 22.4% of students were considered overweight and 3.2% were obese. In the second test 25.6% were overweight and 6.4% were obese.

These results challenge the ‘Freshman 15’ idea, by showing that any weight gain is not maintained or is not enough to change the students’ status to overweight or obese. Rather, those who came to college in the overweight or obese BMI categories, stayed there in this population.

“What is concerning is the rise in proportion of overweight or obese individuals in this small sample. However, if this is multiplied across the total college population, it is a call to action,” said Dr. Jo Ann L. Nicoteri from the University of Scranton. “If these statistics are reflective of college students across the country, then weight gain prior to entering college and during the college years is a major public health problem, which will require a broad based public health approach.”

Full Citation: Jo Ann L. Nicoteri, Mary Jane Miskovsky, Revisiting the freshman “15”: Assessing body mass index in the first college year and beyond, Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners, DOI: 10.1002/2327-6924.12108