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### Are Better Students Grittier?

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#### Recommended Citation

Djupe, Paul A., "Are Better Students Grittier?" (2022). *Faculty Publications*. 1831.  
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# Are Better Students Grittier?

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Paul A. Djupe

February 24, 2022

By Paul A. Djupe, [Data for Political Research](#)

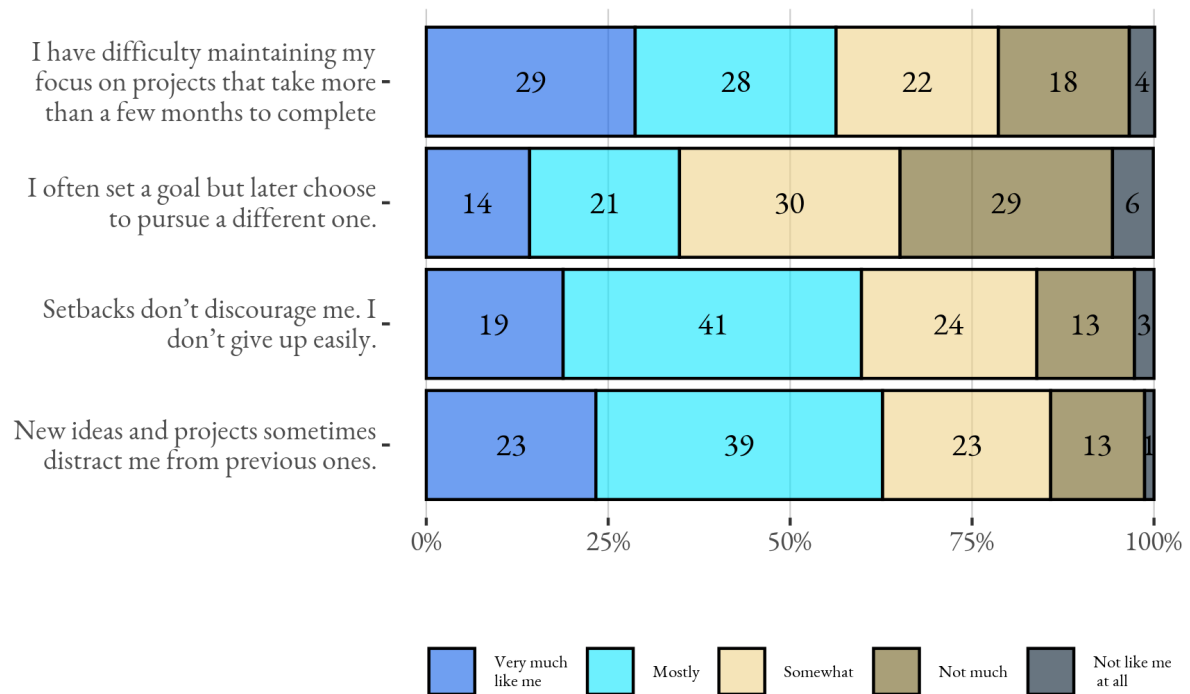
As I roll around the lab helping people add parentheses to their code, one thing I'm blown away by is the number of notifications of various kinds they are getting. Phone notifications, desktop notifications, notifications everywhere. That can't possibly help get work done. We don't have data on the effective sandstorm of notifications that many are facing, but we do have a sense of the opposite – can students shut out the distractions and doggedly pursue self-set goals?

Sometimes this is called “grit.” It was one of those buzzwords of several years ago, but has some solid research behind it. Psychologist Angela Duckworth popularized the term, suggesting that it merges:

passion and sustained persistence applied toward long-term achievement, with no particular concern for rewards or recognition along the way. It combines resilience, ambition, and self-control in the pursuit of goals that take months, years, or even decades.

We grabbed a few items capturing grit and put them on the October 2021 survey. More gritty responses are not the blue ones in the figure below except on the “setbacks” question. So only 22 percent disagree that they have difficulty maintaining focus. Only 35 percent disagree that can fend off new goals in favor of earlier ones. And only 14 percent disagree that they are distracted by new projects over old ones. The exception is the 60 percent who say they don't give up easily. That's a seriously mixed bag of grit, where people are fighting through a lot of distractions.

## Students are Modestly Gritty

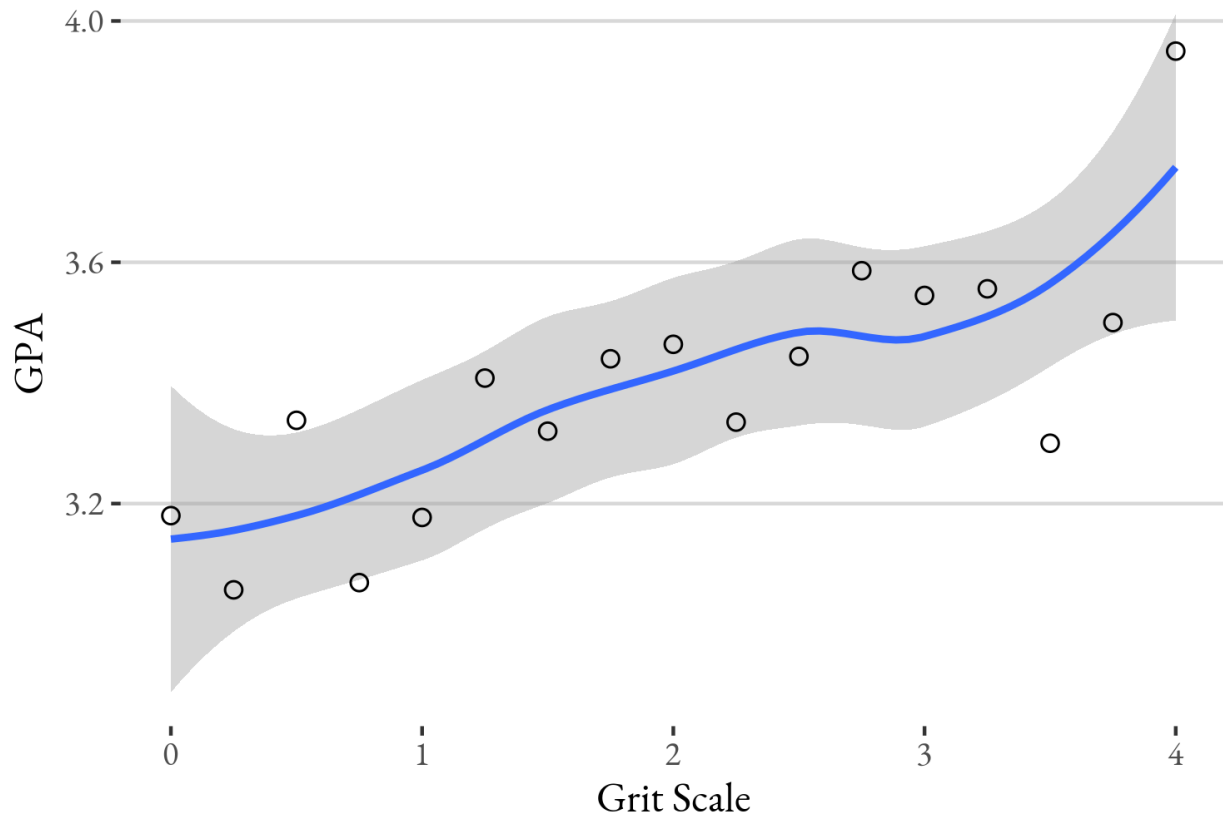


Source: October 2021 Survey.

One particularly interesting result is that the campus average grit score (.45 on a compressed 0-1 scale) is much lower than the last time we asked about grit in fall 2017 (the mean was .62 then; there are fascinating results in that post!). Perhaps students are becoming more distractable, less gritty over time.

But does it matter? Well, yeah, it seems to. As shown below, those with more grit have a higher GPA by about half a point over the range of the variable (though truth be told the tails are not highly populated). That's about the same size effect as in 2017. This makes sense – those who can block out distractions, and Denison is chock full of distractions of all kinds, nail their classes.

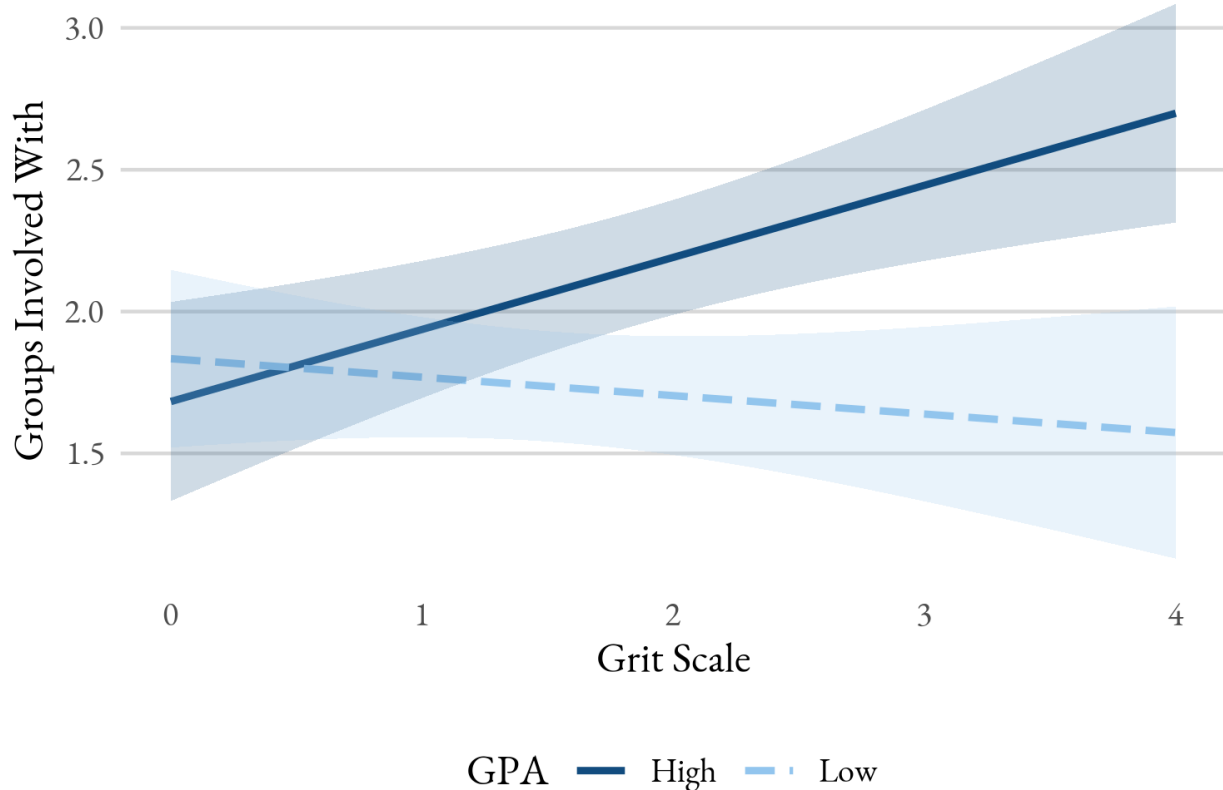
## Grit is Linked to a Higher GPA



Source: October 2021 Survey.

But perhaps grit is not always linked to academic advancement – it does not demand that academics are at the core. In fact, those with a high GPA along with a lot of grit tend to be more involved in campus orgs. Flip it around and those with a low GPA and high grit are not involved much – they are off doing their own thing that apparently does not involve classes or orgs, which are traditional measures of a successful college experience. Grit just means dogged pursuit, not that the goals are worthy ones.

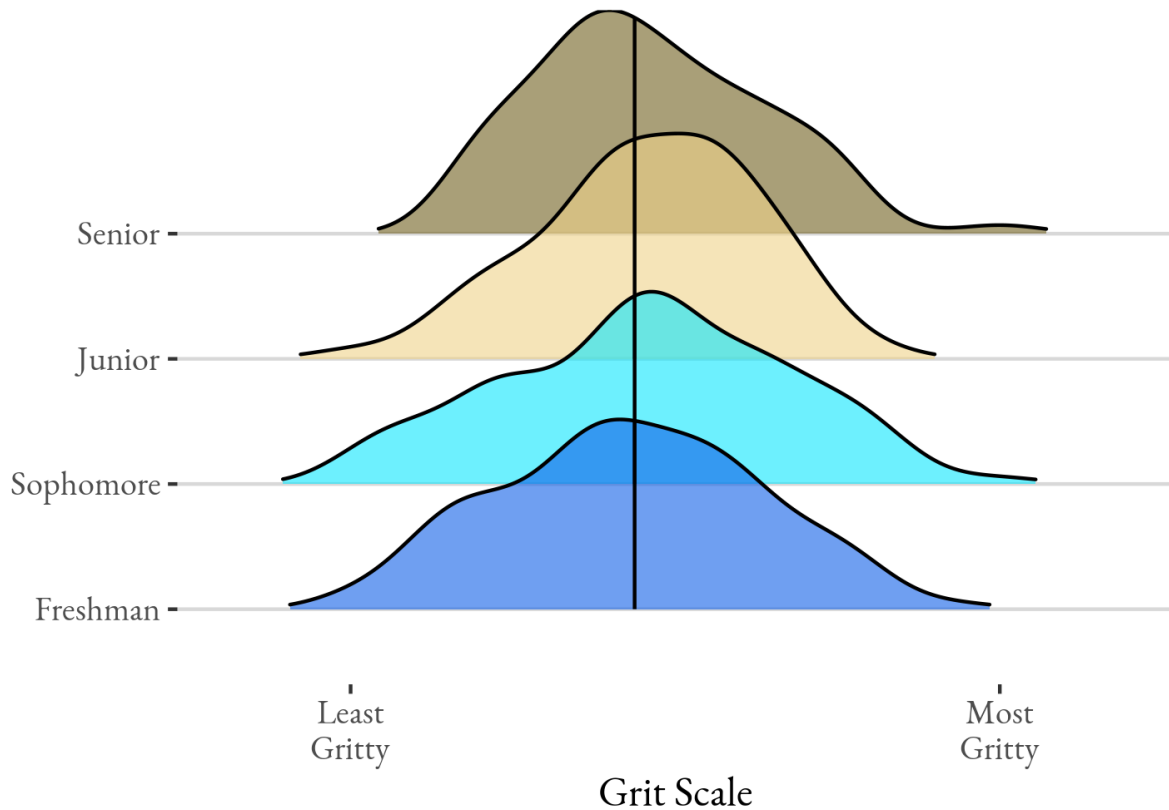
## High GPA + Grit = Involved on Campus



Source: October 2021 Survey.

I'm of two minds whether we want grittier students. On the one hand, most of what I've shown above suggests we want more – it's linked to a higher GPA and campus involvement and just seems like it involves the ability to discern what's important. On the other hand, those who shut out distractions may miss opportunities, and the ability to update goals as we learn more strikes me as important. It also seems like our coursework is set to increase grit as paper assignments get longer across time, culminating, for a select few, in a senior year research experience. Regardless, it seems clear that Denison is not creating grittier students across the four years. The median value doesn't budge across class years in this survey – see below. It's interesting that it did increase in the 2017 data, but fewer students are doing senior research these days, too.

## Grit Doesn't Change Across Four Years



Source: October 2021 Survey.  
Note: Median lines shown

Grit is how I'm wired (yes, it's ironic as I sit here writing this blog post when I have 30+ somewhat longer-term things in the queue to do). I can chip away at long-term projects until the day is long gone. That's how those books get written. But I've also tried to be aware of opportunities for other things. When there's a weather window, then I need to drop everything and get outside and ride. When there's a news event and I have data to address it, then I should bang out a blog post. Being aware of those opportunities requires a gritty sense of discipline itself, so perhaps it's not inconsistent. All of this is to say that grit doesn't have to mean putting blinders on and it sure seems linked to getting more accomplished. Maybe shut off some of those notifications.

*Paul A. Djupe is a local cyclist who runs the Data for Political Research minor. He started onetwentyseven.blog a few years ago in a bid to subsidize collective action. He's on Twitter and you should be too, along with your president.*