

Denison University

Denison Digital Commons

Faculty Publications

2017

Denison Grit

Paul A. Djupe
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/facultypubs>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Djupe, Paul A., "Denison Grit" (2017). *Faculty Publications*. 1846.
<https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/facultypubs/1846>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Denison Digital Commons. For more information, please contact eresources@denison.edu.

Denison Grit

Paul A. Djupe

October 30, 2017

By Paul A. Djupe

From stories in the news about college students these days one might be lead to believe that blizzards had hit every campus because there are so many snowflakes. Students (oh my, y'all are millenials too) are described as psychologically frail creatures who can't handle arguments and to whom even the idea of grades sends them into paroxysms. While some anxiety about these things is normal, from my experience, snowflakeism is WAY overblown – I have no idea what the heck these stories are talking about. But it would be great to answer them with data.

Fortunately, like the sand that you can never get out of your car after a beach visit, “Grit” is everywhere these days. It probably couldn't be more timely to talk about it than directly after midterms. While I hope that courses are going swimmingly and those first tests of your mettle glanced off the armor of your knowledge, the reality is that education by design is a series of challenges that may not immediately reflect your genius. Put differently, the values of perseverance (if you're going through hell, keep going), and resilience (“thank you ma'am, may I have another!”) are in high demand; it is this confluence of values that psychologist Angela Duckworth packaged as Grit.

My senior seminar just asked questions (thanks for taking the survey!) that Duckworth recommends to capture Grit (the parenthetical is the answer that would suggest “grittiness”):

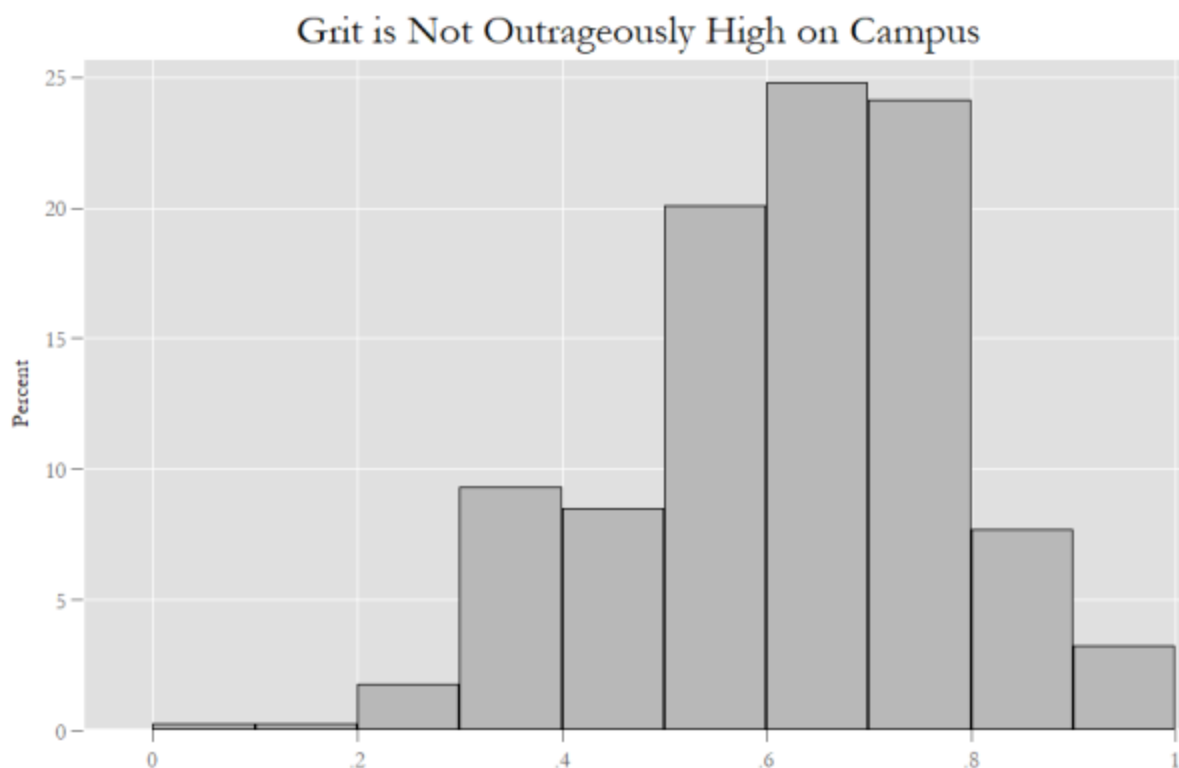
New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones. (disagree)

Setbacks don't discourage me. I don't give up easily. (agree)

I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one. (disagree)

I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete. (disagree)

I would think that many of these items are socially desirable and scores would be inflated, but the average is just .62 (on a condensed 0-1 scale) and there are Grit scores from the highest to the lowest (see the figure below).



As a parental unit myself, I can tell you that my species is constantly castigated for helicoptering and bulldozing practices that are stunting the growth of our offspring. We're supposed to let them run wild, experiencing life's ups and downs for themselves, learning all of life's lessons as nature apparently intended. I have lots of thoughts about that, but I was more interested in what the data would tell us about this cultural truism.

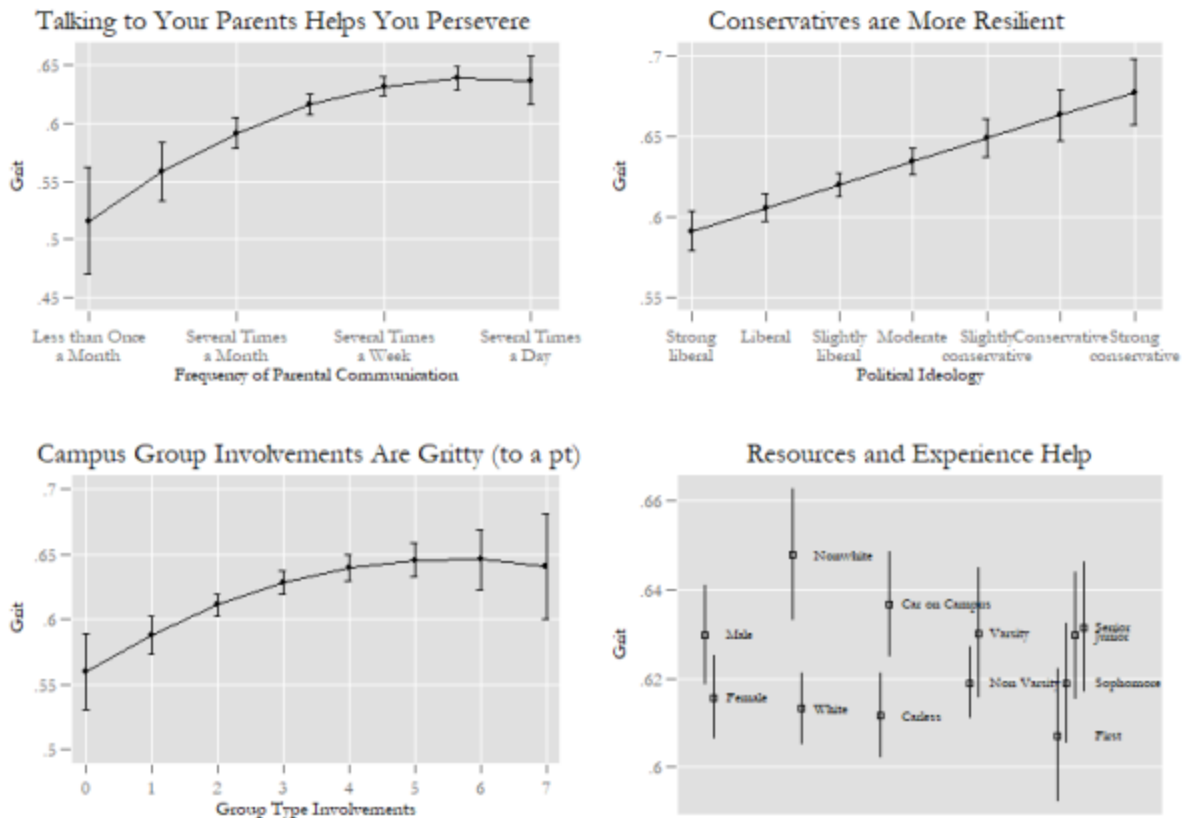
We asked a simple question – how often do you communicate with your parents? – that is very highly correlated with much longer question batteries capturing parental helicoptering.[1] On a scale from “less than once a month” to “several times a day,” Denison students average just below “several times a week.”

I can't say that I'm surprised, but Grit is *positively* linked to parental communication (see the figure below for these results). I talked to my mom 1-2 times a week pretty consistently through college and I still remember some of those conversations. I could see how that might get overwhelming depending on the relationship with the parent, but hearing some straight up supportive words without lolz is nice and helps you keep slogging through.

Nonwhites (by 4%) and conservatives (by 10%) express a more gritty self-concept. Contradiction? I think not. At Denison, both are minorities and the training that they receive as a result encourages perseverance and resilience.

I think our athletic program would pride itself on the Grit that they instill in their participants; our athletic program is very good and that is built on dedication and talent. But they just don't stand out in the crowd given all the other experiences Denison students may have that would

encourage them to stick to it. Instead, and this may seem paradoxical, the greater diversity of groups that students belong to, the more Grit they indicate.[2] That diversity of experience mandates focus, drive, and organization to handle it all. And the lesson is *not* more is better, but instead, just like vitamins, that some is excellent (the effect tapers rapidly after 3 types).

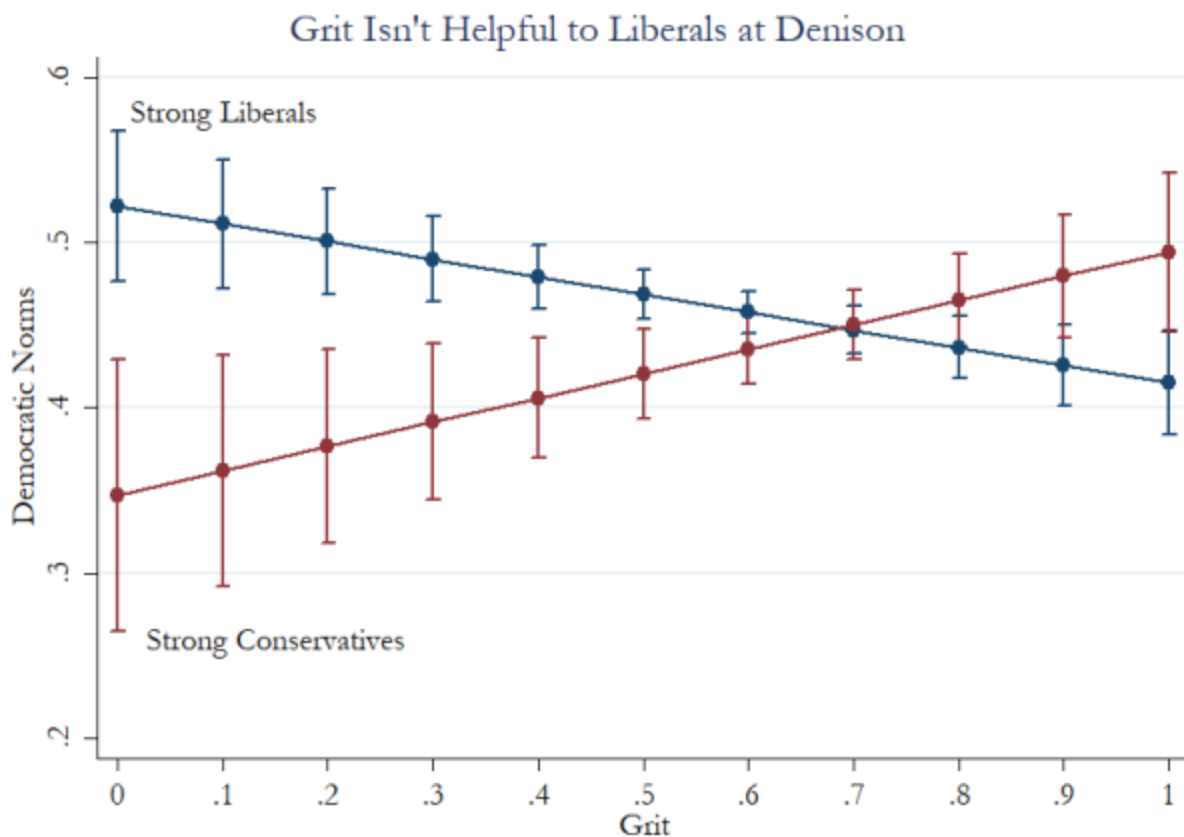


I also checked some other things – upperclassmen are slightly more Gritty than first-years, which is no surprise given the types of assignments and greater independence given to older students (but the differences are not significant). Men are insignificantly more Gritty than women. But those who have a car on campus claim more Grit. My best guess is that resources are useful to enable you to stick to your own goals. It is interesting, then, that these resources are useful, but social support is not linked to Grit. Of course, friends are great, but one thing friends are often not useful for is reinforcing goal orientation; friends are good for distraction. You probably need to get away from them to get something done and then get back to them to recharge and vent.

There's plenty of debate, of course, about whether Grit is good. Well, for what? A natural outcome is academic achievement. All else equal, the most Gritty (compared to the least) have a higher GPA by .4 points – that's a lot. Moreover, the most Gritty complete about 16 percent more homework than those with the least Gritty self concept. This makes sense to

me, but I also appreciate the less than absolute amount of Grit that students tend to have. Being driven to achieve should not outweigh being open to explore new, cool options that come up on the fly.

A colleague at another school raised doubts about whether Grit was good for democracy.^[3] Simply put, being committed to your own goals sounds a lot like dogmatism (putting the blinders on), whereas effective democracy entails being open to new ideas and new questions. It turns out that the most Gritty are not significantly different in their “democratic norms,” which captures notions like “You can only be sure whether an opinion is correct or not if people are free to argue against it.” But there might be some conditions where Grit is linked to openness and I tried one: ideology. Ideology cannot be dissociated with place at Denison – there simply are not many conservatives, so they are a conspicuous minority. And it turns out that Grit helps conservatives persevere and maintain democratic norms and I believe it – it’s hard work. On the other hand, Grit among liberals is linked to less openness to the other side. They are somewhat more dogmatic given their majority status.



The more I do this social science stuff, the more impressed I am with the minority experience. This isn't a Marvel comic with the isolated individual battling everyone, but the well-supported person who endures diverse and constant (mostly minor) challenges. I

wouldn't advocate sending everyone through the Civil Rights Movement South to develop Grit, but it pays off to be exposed to a wide range of individuals who do not always make it easy and thus encourage you to reflect on and embrace what is truly important.

Paul Djupe is a local cyclist who happens to have taught political science at Denison since the Harry Potter series was first published. You can learn more about his work at pauldjupe.com.

Notes

1. See Milita, Kerri, and Jaclyn Bunch. 2017. "Helicopter Parenting and the Policy Attitudes of College Students." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 50(2): 359-365.
2. We asked if students belonged to the following variety of group types: Varsity Sports, Club Sports, Campus Governance, Employment, Performing/ Art groups, Greek Life, Community Service, Social Justice/ Advocacy, Religious/ Spiritual Life, Cross Cultural Engagement, and Other Extracurriculars.
3. See Tampio, Nicholas. 2017. "Teaching 'grit' is bad for children, and bad for democracy."