



A Comparative Study of Student and Professor Perceptions of the Grading System

Loriann Chávez, Cognitive Science major, Arts & Sciences
Amelia Zurcher, Director, University Honors Program and Professor, English

Introduction

The aim of our study was to uncover perceptions of the grading system on Marquette's campus and then use these perceptions to build a bridge of understanding, mutual respect, and potential action between students and faculty at Marquette, via a facilitated, civic-dialogue style conversation in spring 2026. Our goal is that mutual understanding between faculty and students will improve both teaching and learning.

Our research questions:

- “What are undergraduate student perceptions of the grading system as it is practiced at Marquette?”
- “What are professor perceptions of the grading system as it is practiced at Marquette?”

Methods

1. Anonymous, IRB-approved survey distributed to University Honors Program students in April 2025, respondents invited to distribute the survey further.

- 77 multiple choice questions, 9 free answer questions at end
- Initially distributed to 1023 students (entire Honors program), 218 respondents; response rate 21%
- Varying response rates for each question

2. Anonymous survey distributed to University faculty members in August 2025

- 50 multiple choice questions, 2 free answer questions at end
- Distributed to 87 faculty members, 63 respondents; response rate 72%
- Varying response rates for each question

The student survey followed a similar IRB-approved study that was distributed to University Honors Programs students in April 2021. We wanted to see if the pandemic skewed results in the original study.

The student survey was IRB approved to allow us to use data for more purposes than the student-faculty dialogue in spring 2026. Because we do not plan to use faculty data for any purpose beyond the dialogue, distribution was more limited, and most respondents were in humanities and social sciences. Since the faculty data is not representative, we do not report it here.

Student Participants

Respondent MU GPA, self-reported:

3.1+: 93%
3.6+: 72%

73% plan to attend graduate or professional school

“Grades will be important to my acceptance to graduate or professional school”:
--97% agree/somewhat agree

“Grades will be important in getting a job in your chosen field”:
--64% agree/somewhat agree

“What type of work are most of your college grades based on?”

- Exams and tests: 74%
- Papers and essays: 19%
- Projects: 5%

“What is the purpose of higher education?”

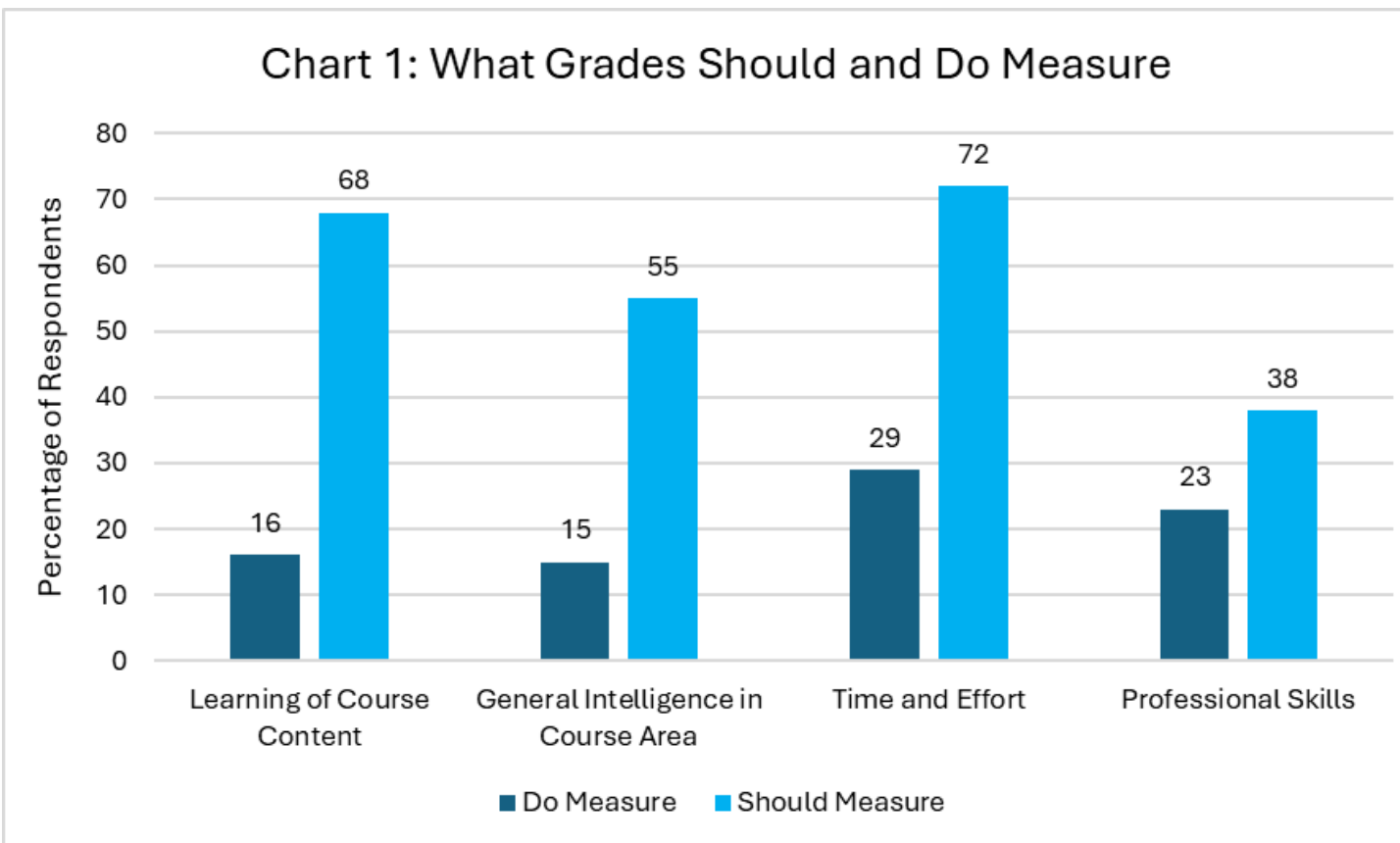
- Opportunity to engage with different cultures and perspectives: 3%
- Pinpoint an interest: 3%
- Acquire a job: 56%

Baseline Characteristic	Sample	
	n	%
Year in School		
Freshman	61	29
Sophomore	66	31
Junior	49	23
Senior	34	16
Gender Identity		
Female	140	68
Male	59	29
Non-binary/Third Gender	4	2
Prefer not to say	2	1
Race		
White	147	72
Black/African American	10	5
Asian	20	10
Hispanic or Latinx	18	9
Two or more races	8	4
Prefer not to say	2	1
Area of (Intended) Major		
Science, Technology, Engineering, Math	107	51
Social Science	48	23
Humanities	6	3
Business	27	13
Communication	16	8
Education	6	3

Student Results and Conclusions

Student Perceptions: What do grades measure? What is the purpose of the grading system?

To determine students' perceptions of what grades do and should measure and what the overall purpose of the grading system is, the student survey asked for two kinds of responses: level of agreement on a 5-point scale with statements about the grading system (Chart 1); and open answers to the two questions above, ranging from one word to several sentences.

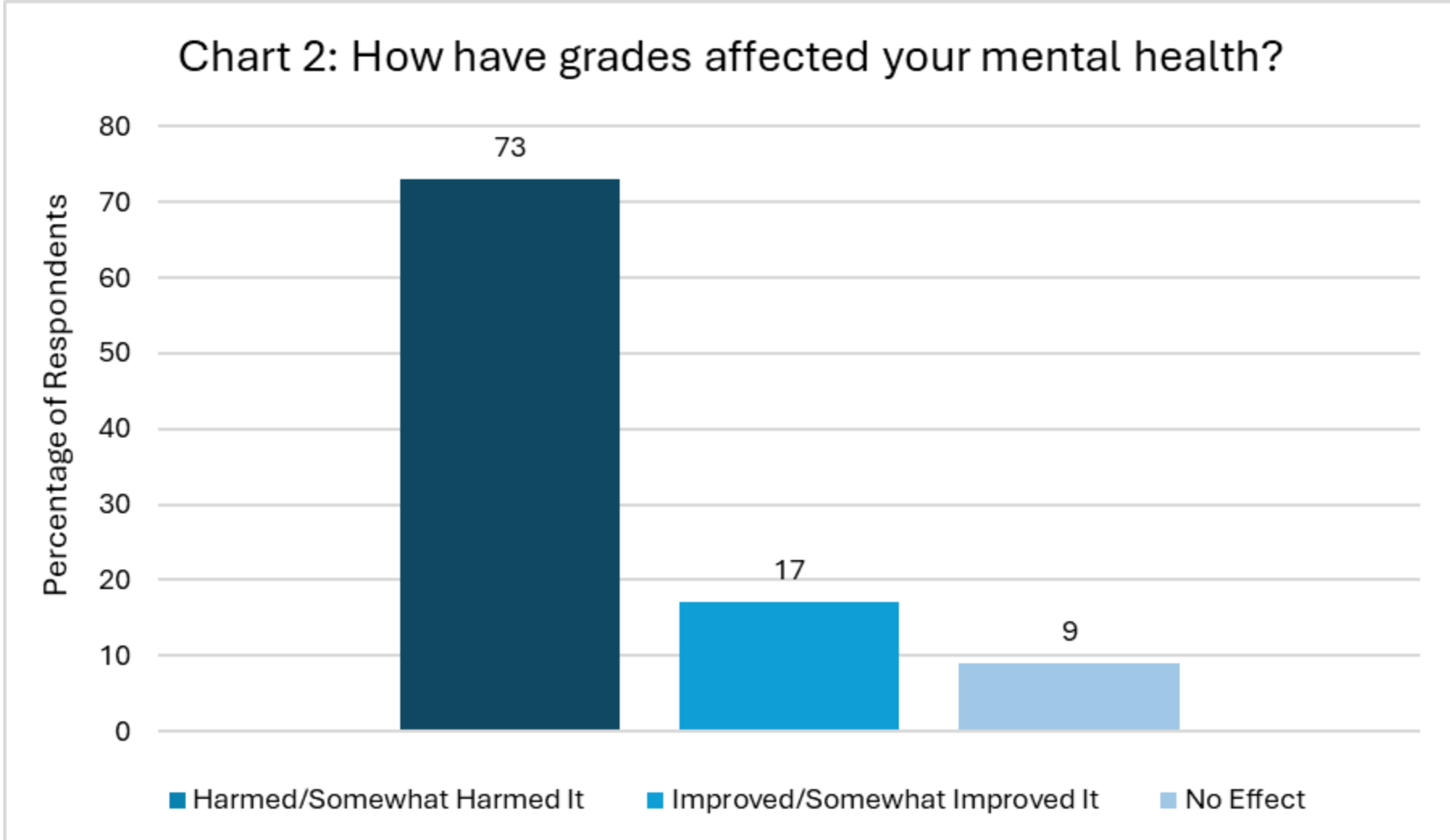


68% of respondents agreed that their grades should accurately measure their learning of course content, but only 16% stated that grades *do* accurately measure their learning of course content.

Student responses to the prompt “In your experience, what do grades measure?”:

- “Grades measure a students' ability to comply with a teacher's expectations.”
- “How much time you put into cramming class material just to blurt it out on the test and forget it.”
- “Ability to conform quickly (real life copy paste). Learning isn't learning when you just listen to words and apply them, thats not understanding that's just doing.”
- “How much time someone is willing to put into their academics.”
- “Grades measure my ability to meet the professors' expectations, but the grades do not always convey my level of understanding. ”
- “It depends on the class. In STEM, grades generally measure one's ability to regurgitate material. In the humanities, grades are usually more reflective of one's writing abilities or their perceived understanding of the course material and ability to apply it to something else in a way that demonstrates critical thinking. ”

Mental Health, Self-Worth, and Grades



- 73% of respondents agreed that grades have harmed or somewhat harmed their mental health.
- 47% of respondents agreed that grades have decreased or somewhat decreased their sense of self-worth.
- 71% of respondents agreed that they agree or somewhat agree that their own grades are an accurate representation of their intelligence.
- 79% of females stated that grades have decreased/somewhat decreased their mental health versus 58% for males.

- "I would have to say grades put a lot of pressure to succeed, especially when others inquire about them because I'm known as a 4.0 student, so I worry about losing that. "
- "When I was younger they were extremely important to me and borderline guided my life and choices as I would be wrecked when I got bad grade. Now while I want a good grade, I am ok with passing and just want to know that I have a good understanding of the material and have not messed my progression path up at all."
- "i have sobbed over a D- on a final exam and thought my 4.0 was ruined but then i emailed passive aggressively to the professor and got an A in the class. proved that it harmed my mental health almost immediately but then proved that it's not that serious because the professor hardly cared"
- "I have become more depressed. Seeing a bad grade made me feel discouraged and less than what I am. Sometimes I feel as though my hard work isn't shown or that I'm just stupid."
- "Made me feel like I'm worth less than others with perfect grades. Made my mental health take a dark turn I hadn't ever experienced before. Stressed me out, strained friendships and relationships by putting little time into relationships with people because I am focusing on a letter in a gradebook."
- "However, they have definitely affected my mental health because it has been ingrained for so long that grades mean everything. If my grade drops, I reevaluate my entire purpose in academics which impacts my ability to focus on my studies."

What counts as a good grade?

- 32% of respondents stated that an A or an A- were the lowest grades that counted as "good" grade.

- "Again, because of the notion that good grades = successful individual, I have constantly told myself that if I don't have good grades and a high GPA, nobody will see me as valuable and accept me into any position or opportunity I am applying for. I have also struggled with grade comparison throughout my life, as I have always had a desire to be the "best of the best," and when my grades don't reflect that, I feel inferior to everyone else."

Focus on Grades – gender and major

- 85% of females agreed or somewhat agreed that they were too focused on their grades versus 54% of males.
- 81% of STEM majors and 57% of social sciences majors agreed that they were too focused on grades.

Motivation to Learn - gender

- 50% of males agreed/somewhat agreed that without grades, they wouldn't be motivated to learn, versus 26% of females.

Student Results and Conclusions, cont.

Cheating

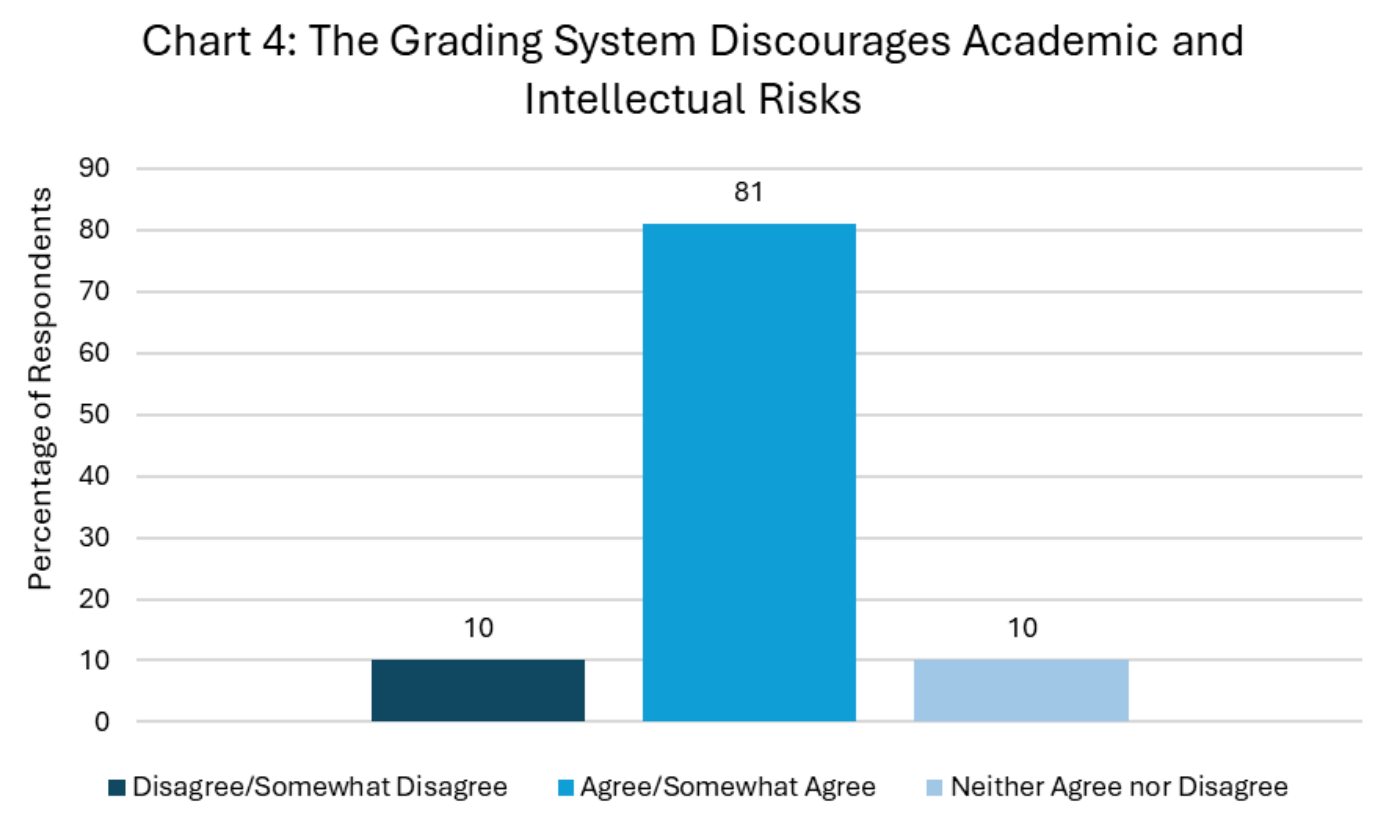
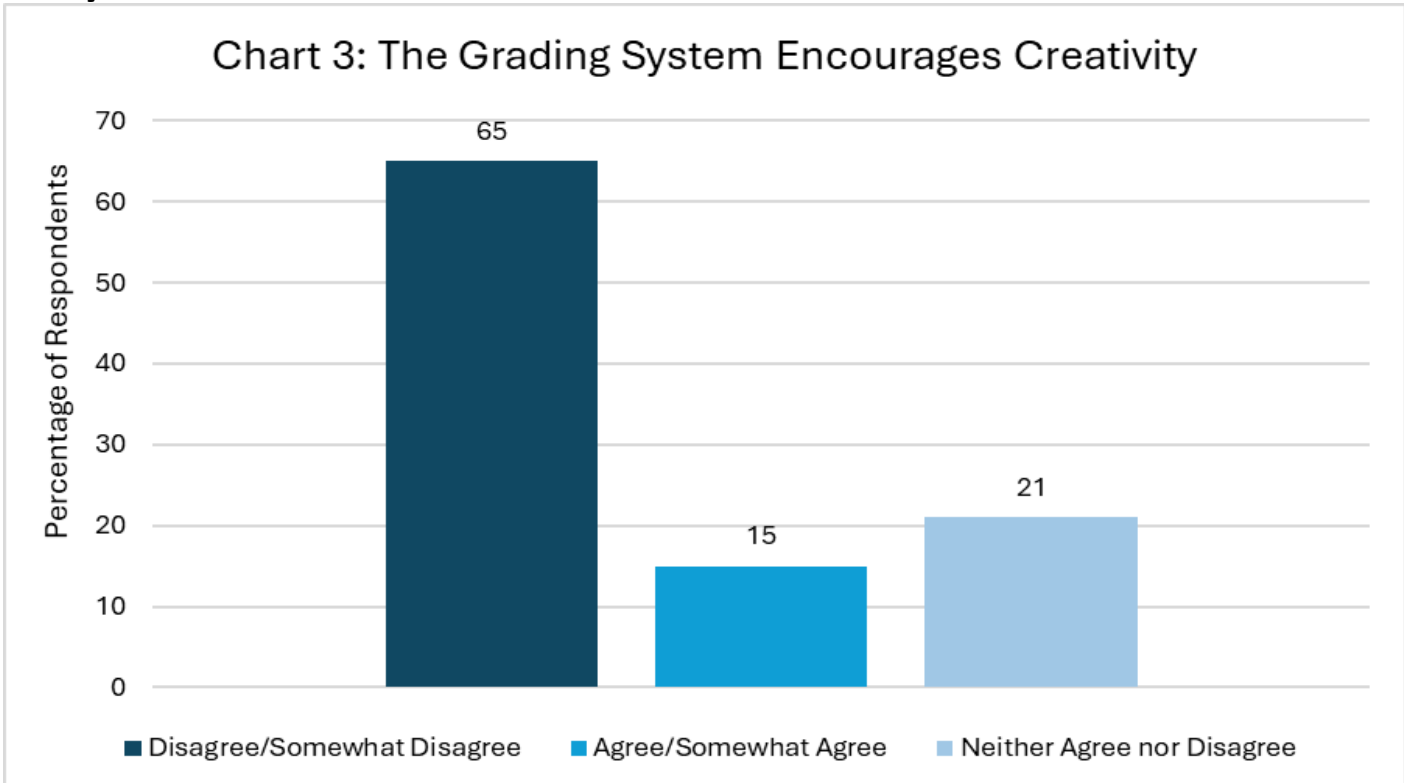
- 83% of respondents agreed that the grading system as it now exists encourages people to cheat.
- "Grades measure your knowledge of the topic being taught, how well you learn in the environment that you are being taught in, and how well you can cheat your way through learning the topic. I am not saying that you need to cheat to get a good grade, but grades can be a measurement of how much you cheat just as much as it can be a measurement of what you know. "
- "[The overall purpose of the grading system as it now exists is] to discern who is trying and who is not. Unfortunately cheating is everywhere and very much blurs the lines between these two groups."
- "i think people are more likely to cheat bc there are bigger things in the world than school, especially if you're not passionate about learning."

Relation of Grades to Learning Process

Retention

- 19% of respondents agreed that in college, higher grades have correlated with longer retention of the skills taught in the course.

Creativity and Risk



Student Implications

- Students report that grades have had substantial negative impacts on their mental health. In addition, students do not feel that their grades are an accurate representation of the things they think grades should represent. Furthermore, students feel that they are too focused on grades, which can lead to cheating in order to avoid earning what they consider “low” grades.
- Students offered a variety of changes they would make to the grading system to make it fairer, including having more opportunities to make/correct mistakes, more professor student-collaboration, increased flexibility in what it is considered an “acceptable” grade, and increased consideration for how the mental health of students is impacting their academic performance.
- We would like to further investigate the effects of the grading system on different majors. We started to see some interesting differences between STEM and other majors in regard to varying topics, such as mental health and the impact of rubrics, but the respondent rate in certain areas (humanities, communications, business) was not large enough to provide many statistically significant results.

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