

**The Grade is the Message: An Analysis of the Grading Structure's Effects on Student  
Grade/Learning Orientations**

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I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study was undertaken to study the medium of the grade in education contexts under the assumptions made within the field of media ecology. The goal of this study was to build on previous research that has identified that learning-oriented students are better set up for success in the classroom than grade-oriented students. With this in mind, this study aims to identify, from the student perspective, what different aspects of the grading system communicate to students that they should value in the classroom, especially in regard to grade-oriented or learning-oriented mindsets. After conducting interviews with current students from a variety of institutions and fields of study, the researcher has determined a list of 15 aspects of the grading system that students expressed influence their learning or grade orientation in one manner or another: application of knowledge assessments, busywork, career/interest relevance, class discussions, feedback, late policies, participation points, pass/fail systems, point-farming enablers, project decomposition, relationship with professor/classmates, retakes/redoes, rubrics, societal labels, and tests/quizzes. According to the constructs of media ecology, each of these aspects of how students are graded inherently and invisibly influences the ways that students perceive and engage with the classroom context. Further study is needed to identify how new grading systems can be developed that focus primarily on the grading aspects that promote learning-oriented environments to see if, in practice, they do indeed produce more learning-oriented students than our current grading systems.

*Keywords/topics:* media ecology, medium, media, grades, grading system, grade orientation, learning orientation, learning, education, communication

**Table of Contents**

Chapter 1: Introduction .....	8
Background of the Study .....	8
Research Questions .....	16
Professional Significance .....	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	19
What's in a Grade? .....	19
A Brief Overview .....	19
The Purpose of Grades .....	20
Components of Grading .....	21
Issues with Current Grading Practices .....	23
Current Discussions on Possible Solutions to these Issues .....	27
Philosophy of Education .....	32
Athenians vs. Visigoths .....	32
Learning and Grade Orientations .....	33
Media Ecology .....	41
A Brief History .....	41
What is Media Ecology? .....	43
What is a Medium? .....	44
How to Study a Medium? .....	44

Chapter Summary.....	48
Chapter 3: Methodology .....	50
Introduction .....	50
Nature of the Study .....	51
Philosophical Assumptions.....	51
Research Design .....	52
Selection of Participants.....	53
Data Collection and Procedure.....	54
Data Analysis .....	57
Anticipated Ethical Issues .....	58
Chapter Summary.....	59
Chapter 4: Results.....	61
Participant Demographics .....	61
Interview Question #1:.....	62
Interview Question #2:.....	65
Interview Question #3:.....	67
Interview Question #4:.....	71
Interview Question #5:.....	75
Interview Question #6:.....	79
Interview Question #7:.....	83

Interview Question #8: .....	86
Interview Question #9: .....	90
Interview Question #10: .....	93
Interview Question #11: .....	97
Interview Question #12: .....	100
Chapter Summary.....	104
Chapter 5: Conclusions .....	105
Answering the Research Questions.....	105
Application of Knowledge Assessments .....	109
Busywork.....	110
Career/Interest Relevance.....	110
Class Discussions .....	111
Feedback .....	111
Late Policies .....	113
Participations Points .....	114
Pass/Fail Systems .....	115
Point-Farming Enablers.....	116
Project Decomposition .....	117
Relationship with Professor/Classmates.....	118
Retakes & Redoes.....	119

Rubrics..... 120

Societal Labels..... 121

Tests/Quizzes..... 122

Limitations ..... 124

Suggestions for Future Research..... 125

References..... 127

Appendix A: Consent Form ..... 133

Appendix B: Interview Questions..... 136

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The following study examines the current generation of students, Generation Z, and what the grading systems used in schools communicates to them that they should value in the classroom setting. As a medium of communication, the grade is inherently imbued with a set of biases that invisibly influence how a student views and engages with the world around them. This means that every decision that a professor or teacher makes about how and what they grade their students on communicates something to the student about what they should place importance on and value. Some students end up valuing the grade over learning, and some students end up valuing the learning over a grade. For this reason, this study researches how the the grading decisions that a professor makes influences a student's values in the classroom setting. A secondary aspect of this study questions why we make the grading decisions that we currently do and provides perspective on what practices, according to the student perspective, could be better utilized to best promote a learning-oriented environment.

### **Background of the Study**

We create a constant pressure to perform, where every mistake or incomplete answer on homework lowers a student's grade. Whether students don't have enough time to do the homework, don't understand it, forgot about it, or didn't want to do it, it's no surprise that many students copy their peers' homework. (Feldman, 2020, para. 17)

There is a clear divide between students' motivation to master the material of a class and their motivation to obtain "a good grade." Oftentimes, it seems that they may be motivated to earn the desired grade even at the detriment of learning the course content. This poses a major problem for students and their future employers. Those very same classes are supposed to be preparing students to step into the workforce. If students are not learning the content, then they



are not prepared to do so. This is reflected in the fact that, according to a survey by Gallup, only 11% of business leaders in America would strongly agree that higher institutions are graduating students with skills that their business needs (Gallup, 2014). On the reverse, 17% strongly disagree with that sentiment. Let that sink in. More business leaders strongly disagree that American higher education is preparing students with the skills needed for their businesses, even though higher education is the standard path that everyone is required to take in order to get most jobs.

Business leaders are not the only ones who are feeling this way, however. The students themselves also think that this is the case. According to an article by the Harvard Business Review, 19% of recent graduates surveyed said that they did not think that college had prepared them for their first job (Hansen, 2021). Worse than that, 53% of those surveyed felt so unprepared that they did not even apply for a job in the field which they had studied. This is astonishing because students are paying a lot of money to obtain these degrees. The average student loan debt alone is \$37,358 (Welding, 2022). This is a substantial amount of debt to be in for a degree that one does not feel adequately prepared them for the workforce. Because of this, many students only view a degree as a means to an end. It is no longer viewed as the actual learning process but as a gatekeeping step that is necessary so that they can get any job and finally begin the real learning. As Kevin put it in Pope's (2001) book *Doing School*, "People don't go to school to learn. They go to get good grades which brings them to college, which brings them the highest paying job, which brings them happiness, so they think. But basically, grades is where it's at" (p. 4).

So, if students are no longer prepared to step into the workplace, why is it that there has been a significant increase in average grades over the past several decades? From 1960 to the

year 2000, the average grade point average for public and private schools increased from 2.4 to 3.1 (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2010). This has led many researchers to start looking into the topic of grade inflation. It is a topic that holds the attention of nearly anyone who is analyzing and assessing education. A study done in 2020 found, at that point in time, 340,000 academic articles and books mentioned the term *grade inflation*, with 40,000 of those articles having been written in the four years preceding the study (Tyner & Gershenson, 2020). The researchers, Tyner and Gershenson (2020), also identified that when an individual uses the term grade inflation, they usually mean one of three things: static grade inflation, dynamic grade inflation, or differential grade inflation. They went through great pains to describe each of these different types of grade inflation in detail, as well as the different issues that come with each, and implore researchers to clarify to which type they are referring. Because of this, a brief description and an identification of the types of grade inflation most relevant to the topics of this proposed research will be identified.

The first type of grade inflation is *static*. Static grade inflation is defined as grades that, “overstate student achievement at a fixed point in time” (Tyner & Gershenson, 2020, para. 8). The problem that can exist here is a disconnect between a grade received and the level of content understanding and mastery. This is the kind of grade inflation that is being proposed by the fact that students are receiving As but are not prepared to step into the workplace. At that one moment in time, their grade overstates their ability.

*Dynamic grade inflation*, on the other hand, is concerned with how the “relationship between grades & achievement changes over time” (Tyner & Gershenson, 2020, para. 8). Essentially, if average work used to be considered a “C,” but is now considered to be an “A,” then dynamic grade inflation has occurred. The problem here is with the consistency of what a

grade label means throughout history. One can label a level of understanding and mastery whatever he may wish, but if the label is constantly changing over time, then it becomes increasingly difficult to interpret. This is further complicated by the fact that the grading system in the United States has a cap, so as grades are inflated, all categorizations of content mastery are crunched closer together up toward the top. This concerns modern researchers because that would mean that not only are evaluators not able to easily distinguish between average and exemplary students, but perhaps even the students themselves are not correctly interpreting whether their grade level means average or exemplary.

Lastly, is *differential grade inflation*. This term is concerned with situations where the “relationship between grades & achievements varies by school/student type” (Tyner & Gershenson, 2020, para. 8). The issue that this causes also comes down to the ability to interpret what a grade means. If one school considers a certain level of content mastery to be an “A,” while another school considers that same level of content mastery to be a “C,” then colleges and professionals that are trying to use grades to make decisions will be unable to know what level of content mastery they should expect from a student with any grade. At that point, grades largely become meaningless because they would embody the oxymoron of an unstandardized standard.

Despite the fact that the study of all types of grade inflation is so widespread among education scholars, there is one major problem that has seemed to go overlooked. Solving grade inflation—whether static, dynamic, or differential—will not solve the fact that our students are not being prepared to step into the workforce. It will only increase our ability to *evaluate* their competency to do so. That does not mean that there is no place for the study of grade inflation and that it cannot be tangentially related to the topics proposed by this study. The focus on grade inflation itself, however, distracts from the main issue, which is students’ motivation for content

learning. Grades can be a motivation factor, however, so part of this discussion seeks to find out how effective they are at doing so. However, this study also seeks to find what other manners exist through which student motivation for content learning may be increased independently from their motivation for a grade. To do so, we first look at the history of classroom structure and grading.

Despite the fact that the modern grading system has been so deeply ingrained into our minds, schools and grading were not always done in this manner. In fact, the grading system that we currently know did not see its earliest roots until 1785 when Yale's then president, Ezra Stiles, divided the senior class up into categories of Optimi, Second Optimi, Inferiores, and Periores after an examination (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). Even with that, it was not until 1817 that Yale seemed to begin using a 4-point scale which is likely the origin of our current 4.0 grading scale (Durm, 1993). In addition, it was that same year that William and Mary College began dividing its students up into four categories, "No. 1. ... The first in their respective class; No. 2. Orderly, correct, and attentive; No. 3. They have made very little improvement; No. 4. They have learnt little or nothing" (p. 2). It was not until 1883 that there is a record of someone receiving a 'B' at Harvard, and then in 1884, Mount Holyoke is noted as grading with a scale including As, Bs, Cs, Ds, and Es (Schinske & Tanner, 2014). Still, changes kept being made to how schools graded, and this manner of letter-based grading did not become commonplace until at least the 1940s.

In their earliest form, these grades were primarily pedagogical, designed to help students learn and grow, and motivate them to continue onward to achieve more. They were utilized internally as "communication among teachers and families attached to a given school" (Schneider & Hutt, 2013, para. 7) and were usually hidden from the students themselves so as to

prevent distracting competition. Since then, however, there has been a shift, and the purpose of grades is now primarily for external communication and system-building. Their primary purpose is no longer to aid in student development but to categorize competency and communicate this to others.

An astute reader may have noticed, however, that all of the grading styles recounted so far have only been methods developed within the past 200-300 years. Education existed long before that, so how were students previously evaluated and motivated to learn? Hartmann (2000) recounts that, originally, students and teachers had an ongoing relationship. They consistently interacted with one another, and this allowed the teacher to have a clear idea of what their students' levels of mastery were. This student/teacher relationship continued until—and *only* until—the teacher decided that the student thoroughly understood the material and was no longer in need of their services. The only other option was for the teacher to give up on the student and declare them entirely unteachable. This, however, was generally seen as a failing of the teacher, so it was not a common occurrence. Evaluative measures were less necessary, then, because there was a stronger assurance that content was thoroughly understood and mastered. When distinctions still needed to be made, the prestige and authority of whom you had studied under would serve to speak to the extent of your mastery of a topic. This system is much more akin to apprenticeships than our current form of education and was phased out largely so that educational institutions could account for larger amounts of students.

That original method of student learning and evaluation seems to have done a much better job of motivating students to learn content than our current system does. This is because the appraisal of one's mastery of the content—getting the final approval from one's teacher that one has learned enough to go out and begin guiding himself—was the very same thing as one's

motivation to understand the content completely and thoroughly. In order to win the teacher's approval and receive the verification that one was ready to step out into the appropriate workforce alone, an individual *had* to exhibit content mastery, or else it would reflect poorly on their teacher. In addition, this had a perpetuating nature. Once the student was able to go out on their own, he was likely still motivated to continue growing and learning so as to continue to honor his teacher and win their approval.

Within our current system, however, there is a disconnect between the motivation to learn and understand the content thoroughly and the motivation to get a good grade. Durm (1993) points out that when a student asks, "Is that information going to be on the test?" (p. 1), they are recognizing that content mastery is not necessary for the grade. It all becomes a game of how one can play the system in order to achieve the grade that one desires. This is partially because "a good grade" is linked to so many rewards: getting into a better school, getting a better scholarship, and getting a better job. But it is also because youth are forced into these channels of education whether they interest them or not, especially at the high school level. Blum (2016) points out that "As a result, we find cheating, alienation, resistance, corner-cutting, fixation on credentials" (p. 3). When it comes to the perpetuation of motivation, this method of schooling hits another wall. If a student's goal is just to reach a superior position relative to his classmates or the grading scale, then once he reaches that superior position, he is able to relax his efforts (Mann, 1846, as cited in Schneider & Hutt, 2013).

In addition to all of this, teachers often further validate the idea that the grade is more important than content mastery by how they respond when students miss the mark. Think of how many teachers approach the topic of retakes:

Many teachers reason that they are building moral fiber and preparing students for the working world by denying them the opportunity to redo assignments and assessments—or if they do allow retakes, by giving only partial credit for redone assessments even when students have demonstrated full mastery of the content. (Wormeli, 2011, p. 1)

Whether intentional or not, this kind of approach toward classroom dynamics solidifies the fact in a student's mind that a grade and content mastery are two different—and somewhat unrelated—things. A similar thing occurs when a student receives a late deduction, or even a zero, for submitting the same quality of work past a deadline. This is not to say that there is not a place in the classroom for these kinds of practices or even that some of these things are not necessary. Instead, it seeks to show how deeply ingrained the disconnect between grades and content learning is in the modern classroom.

In one last example, consider how mistakes—which are often considered the pathway to learning—will permanently and negatively affect a student's standing in a class. Imagine that there are two students, John and Bill. On the first of two tests, John does not understand a single thing and scores a zero. Bill, on the other hand, has a mediocre grasp of the content in the class and scores a 75%. The second test builds on the content of the first test, so, spurred on by the realization that he had no idea what he was doing on the first test, John puts his nose to the grindstone and studies until he thoroughly masters all of the concepts necessary and then some. Bill was satisfied with his grade, so he does not do any more studying. Once the time for the second test arrives, John gets a 100% and Bill gets another 75%. The tests were weighted equally, so John fails the class with a 50%, and Bill passes with a C, even though John is now a master on the subject and Bill only knows enough to get by. Because John made a mistake on the first test, albeit many of them, his grade was permanently and negatively affected so it was not

apparent that he far outpaced Bill in understanding course content by the end of the class. This communicates to students that grade is more important than content mastery.

In the current education system, students are often given a cultural label (the grade) that defines them and affects their view of themselves and their competency in the field in question. Because of this, and the many tangible and intangible rewards linked to getting the best grade possible, many emotional factors can come into play. This is one of the reasons that 75% of K-12 students say that they are “often or always feeling stressed” by schoolwork (Bouchrika, 2022, para. 7). All of this has led many researchers to the conclusion that the current grading system does indeed have tangible—and seemingly negative—effects on students, and the way that they engage with the classroom experience, specifically in the realm of grade and learning orientations (Eisen et al., 1986; Pollio & Beck, 2000). Despite these concerning statements, however, no research seems to have been done on what specific aspects of the grading system contribute to each of these orientations.

### **Research Questions**

It is on these grounds that, in accordance with theoretical frameworks set in motion by the field of media ecology, this study proposes to analyze the current grading practices used in America as a medium of communication. As a medium, the grading system is inherently imbued with certain biases that invisibly influence how a student views and engages with the world around them. Despite all of the shortcomings present with the current grading systems used, however, it would take a considerable amount of effort to overhaul everything entirely and craft a new system. In addition, we are not facing a problem with students’ capability to learn, but as Blum (2016) puts it, “Students learn plenty. They just don’t learn the stuff presented by teachers in classrooms” (p. 3). With that in mind, this study seeks to work within the confines of the



current system and still find ways to place learning back into the classroom. As such, it is the purpose of this study to break down the grading system and determine which aspects communicate what values to students. This will allow adjustments to be made to current grading practices that can optimize a learning orientation in students. Considering everything discussed up until this point, this study proposes to address the following questions:

RQ1: What is the present state of students' grade versus learning orientations in America?

RQ2: From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?

Due to the qualitative nature of the field of media ecology, this study was conducted qualitatively and in accordance with phenomenological ideologies. This was accomplished via interviews with current college students in order to obtain rich data which was analyzed to determine answers to the research questions. Current college students were used as the participants because they are most likely to have experienced the widest variety of grading tactics and strategies from teachers. In addition, since they are still students, these thoughts and experiences will be fresh in their minds.

### **Professional Significance**

The results of this study may help educators to further understand students' motivation in the modern classroom. In addition, it may help alleviate the significant stress factors that students currently feel in the classroom. By identifying what factors lead a student to prioritize a grade over learning, educators will be better prepared to plan course content and curriculum in a manner that fosters minimum stress-inducing circumstances and maximum learning and enjoyment for the student. Given enough time, this research could also solve the problem of the

student and business professional perspective that graduating students are not prepared with the skills necessary to step into the workplace.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The current study is hinged heavily upon the understanding of the grading system as it currently exists in America. For that reason, before proceeding with this proposal, it is important to provide an overview of the purpose of grades, how they are utilized in the classroom, and what scholars have to say on the topic, including the system's current shortcomings. While a vast amount of knowledge exists on the subject of grading as well as student grade and learning orientations, there is a much smaller pool of knowledge that attempts to bridge the two and truly understand how they affect one another. This literature, therefore, provides an overview of the grading system in America, analyze different philosophies of education as they relate to grade and learning orientations, and suggest media ecology and the study of the grade as a medium as the bridge between the two.

### **What's in a Grade?**

#### ***A Brief Overview***

The current grading system in America is largely divided into three categories: percentage grades, letter grades, and GPA. Percentage grades are meant to indicate an exact percentage of knowledge that an individual has on a particular topic (Cross & Frary, 1999). Letter grades evolved from a long history of grading practices that first originated with Ezra Stiles' assignment of the categories *Optimi*, *Second Optimi*, *Inferiores*, and *Periores* to his students after examination (Schneider and Hutt, 2013). These categories were supposed to sort students into categories ranging from the best to the worst. Letter grades do the same thing and are now often linked directly to a percentage grade. Lastly, is GPA. GPA stands for Grade Point Average and is a measurement that is supposed to indicate, in one number, the sum of all of a student's academic achievements (Solomon & Piggott, 2021). Because GPAs represent the

whole of a student's academic career, they are often taken into consideration when assessing things like job applications, scholarships, and even acceptance into college (Goldman & Widawski, 1976).

### *The Purpose of Grades*

The purpose of a grade is something that also needs to be established. Many people assume that there is one widely accepted view on the purpose of grades, but upon delving further into this topic, there is more than meets the eye. Many scholars agree that the current primary purpose of grades is to exist as a tool used to communicate student achievement, both internally and externally (Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2005; Schneider & Hutt, 2013). That is, the grade should function as an accurate reflection of a student's mastery of concepts. This should be accomplished in a standardized manner so that anyone from anywhere could look at a grade and know how that particular student's demonstration of content mastery compares with another's. This is the only purpose that grades in academic subjects should have, according to measurement specialists (Cross & Frary, 1999; McMillan, 2005).

Despite that being the current opinion of specialists, this was not necessarily the original purpose of the grade. Schneider & Hutt (2013) point out that grades were not originally for external communication but for pedagogical purposes. That is, they were only used internally to communicate how a student was doing in comparison with their peers. The grade was not an absolute reflection of an individual's total knowledge of a topic. This competitive and purely ranking-based form of grading still permeates society, whether we realize it or not. Some scholars even suggest that the percentage-based grading system, in actuality, is little more than another form of assigning student rank (Cross & Frary, 1999).

Teachers also seem to have their own perspectives on the purposes of grading. Brookhart (1999) found that “Different teachers perceive the meaning and purpose of grades differently” (p. 289). Although most teachers view academic achievement as the most important grading factor, motivation is also another important purpose of grades for many teachers (Kunnath, 2017). It is noted that teachers “largely believed grades to be an important form of extrinsic motivation needed for students to complete assignments” (p. 82). Even some scholars acknowledge the motivational aspect that grades play. Brookhart (1999) asserts that “Present recommendations for grading do not take into account the teacher’s need to manage classrooms and motivate students” (p. 299). The underlying assumption of this statement is that there is a connection between grades and student motivation, leading the reader to assume that motivation, as well as classroom management, are in some manner a purpose of grades.

### *Components of Grading*

As noted above, measurement specialists generally agree that grades should only reflect student achievement (Cross & Frary, 1999; McMillan, 2005). This is not what a grade usually ends up being comprised of, however, as teachers generally hold values and beliefs about grades that are different from measurement specialists (Cross & Frary, 1999). Instead of just grading on student achievement, most teachers grade on a variety of factors including, but not limited to, ability, growth, effort, conduct, attitude, participation, and other non-achievement-related factors (Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan 2005).

McMillan (2005) takes these various components that teachers consider while grading and further categorizes them into four broader categories. The first of these categories is, understandably, academic achievement. The second category, McMillan (2005) refers to as “academic enablers” (p. 28). This category comprises factors such as effort, ability,

improvement, and participation. Essentially, anything that can assist in aiding academic achievement, but is not an academic achievement in and of itself, is considered an academic enabler. The third category that McMillan (2005) identified is the use of external benchmarks—such as comparisons with other students and the grade distribution practices of other teachers—and extra credit for non-academic performance in borderline cases. Although separate in function, these two components of grading are grouped into the same category because of their ties to things external to a student’s academic achievement and behavior. Teachers were found to be much less likely to use grading practices from this category. Finally, the last category identified that teachers may include as a grading component is their approach to homework. Some teachers attach grades to homework and therefore assign zeros to students who fail to complete the assignments. On the other hand, some teachers do not attach grades to homework at all.

From all of the components of grading listed thus far, it seems that—contrary to the opinion of measurement specialists—nearly all teachers think that, and consequently use, measurements of the effort and ability academic enablers in their grading practices (Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan 2005). It has been speculated that this discrepancy between “best practices” and actual practice is due to the fact that researchers have not demonstrated the legitimate value and use of solely achievement-based grading in real classroom settings, especially when considering things like student motivation and classroom management (Brookhart, 1999; Cross & Frary, 1999; Troug & Friedman, 1996). It is also noted that teachers often utilize effort and ability grades for “the benefit of the student and the psychic comfort of the teacher” (Airasian, 1996, as cited in Brookhart, 1999, p. 55). Brookhart (1999), however, asserts that while these kinds of practices may indeed bring psychic comfort to the teacher, they

do not always benefit the student. Therefore, grading on the basis of effort and ability should only be done in borderline scenarios. This will ensure that grades are primarily reflective of content mastery.

There are a couple of commonly accepted grading practices that most teachers do not even realize are based on effort rather than achievement, however. These are things like late deductions, attendance policies, and tardiness deductions. Most schools already have these worked into their syllabi and will enforce them through negative reinforcement—usually the deduction of points (Sulik & Keys, 2013). None of these things are indicators of content mastery, even if they may provide an environment that best promotes academic achievement. For this reason, it is deemed unfair to punish a student’s grade for such things, and therefore should not—or, at least, minimally—be practiced (Close, 2009). For similar reasons, McMillan (2005) asserts that if teachers are going to include a grade for components that fall into the academic enabler category, they should group them all into one “academic enabler” grade. This will help ensure that too many evaluations of things other than academic achievement do not slip through the cracks and start having a larger effect on students' grades.

### *Issues with Current Grading Practices*

**Disagreements on Purpose.** Within the current grading structure that we have set up, there are many issues prevalent. The first issue, which has already been discussed in this review of literature but is worth noting again, is that there is a distinct divide between measurement specialists’ suggestions and the actual grading practices of teachers (Brookhart, 1999; Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan 2005). Brookhart (1999) does note, however, that the existence of such a great divide—as well as teachers’ generally negative attitude toward grading—suggests that “the theoretical framework for grading and other classroom assessment

should be bigger than the interpretability of achievement constructs” (p. 291). In summary, there is a distinct disagreement and lack of clarity on the actual purpose of grades, which leads to a variety of grading practices and interpretations.

**Inability to Accurately Assess.** The next issue present is that the primary purpose of grades, the accurate measurement of academic achievement, is not being met. According to McMillan (2005), “they are highly individualized and may be quite different from one teacher to another. This suggests that the meaning of grades conveyed to students and parents differs from one teacher to another; composite grades include many idiosyncratically weighted elements” (p. 30). In short, grades are an inaccurate and imprecise tool for representing the total knowledge that a student has on a topic. Take percentage grades, for example. These are supposed to represent the exact percentage of knowledge or content mastery that a student has on a topic. Despite this fact, Cross and Frary (1999) determined that percentage grades are usually arbitrary. This was a statement that was endorsed by 63% of teachers surveyed since “90% correct on an easy test may represent performance comparable to 80% on a more difficult test of the same topic” (p. 66). Teachers even confirmed that they can make grades come out as they wish by varying the difficulty of questions asked. For this reason, instead of functioning as an absolute indicator of the percentage of knowledge that a student has on a topic, percentage grades wind up being just another form of ranking the students in one classroom against each other (Frary et al., 1993).

The issue of grades not being a true representation of absolute content mastery, but solely functioning as a localized ranking system, extends to GPAs as well. Multiple studies have found that GPAs can vary greatly from major to major, independent of student ability and achievement (Goldman et al., 1974; Goldman & Widawski, 1976). This is problematic because a GPA is



primarily viewed as an absolute representation of a student's academic prowess, regardless of the field. For this reason, GPAs are used as a determining factor in a wide variety of decision-making practices related to, but not limited to, acceptance into college and graduate schools, the awarding of scholarships, and the offering of jobs (Close, 2009; Goldman & Widawski, 1976; Solomon & Piggott, 2021). GPAs are not an absolute indicator of academic prowess, however, and instead appear to function as a localized ranking system within a field. This means that fields that attract the "best qualified" students (that is, the students that score the highest in standardized testing) also end up having "the most stringent grading standards" (Goldman & Widawski, 1976, p. 389). In turn, highly qualified students end up being punished with lower GPAs since they are only being ranked against the other highly qualified students in their field. This can then also restrict their access to scholarships and jobs, despite their higher academic prowess. This problem is furthered when one realizes that students are not just required to take classes only within their field of study. They can also take classes in other fields of study that, perhaps, have easier or less stringent grading standards. Goldman and Widawski (1976) point out that "These differences suggest that grades per se are not a clear-cut index of academic prowess. Instead, the meaning of a student's grades depends heavily upon the selection of classes in different fields" (p. 389). A similar view was also espoused by Johnson (2011) while studying Duke University. He stated, "For Duke Students, the grading policies used by their instructors were nearly as important in determining their GPA and class rank as was their academic performance" (p. 195).

**Teacher's Conflicting Roles.** The fact that grades are so heavily tied to a student's outcomes and rewards despite their incredibly arbitrary nature at present creates a difficult situation for graders. Teachers function as both *judge* and *advocate* for students (Brookhart,

1999; Kunnath, 2017). The role of *judge* requires that teachers give hard and rigorous assessments, based only on academic achievement, in order to be able to accurately determine how much content mastery is achieved by a student. The role of *advocate*, however, wants success for the student and recognizes the arbitrary nature of grades once expanded beyond the context of one classroom due to differential grade inflation, and desires to give students the highest possible grade in order to set them up for success in life (Schneider & Hutt, 2013). It is this second role that leads to the fairly common practice of teachers adjusting grades upwards for lower-performing or lower-ability students that have still demonstrated effort in the classroom (Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan, 2005). This compulsory method of including effort into the grade is not distributed evenly and fairly, however. McMillan (2005) notes that “low-ability students who tried hard would be given a passing grade even if the numerical grade indicated failure; however, working below ability level did not affect the numerical grade” (p. 21).

**Permanent Negative Effects.** The last issue with grading practices to be discussed in this review of literature is the fact that mistakes are permanently and negatively reflected in a student’s grade, which is not reflective of how learning and content mastery occur in real life. As it stands, when a student receives a bad grade, there is nothing that they can do to change it. The best thing that one can do is get a better grade next time in hopes of pulling up their average (Brookhart, 1999). Some teachers argue that this practice teaches students about responsibility and what “the real world” is like. However, Wormeli (2011) points out that this is not the case. All sorts of professionals—lawyers, pilots, surgeons, etc.—practice what they need to do thousands of times so that they are properly prepared. Never are mistakes that were made in the practice process held against them as long as they achieved full mastery by the end of the

process. This is because mistakes are the pathway to learning. The current grading system does not treat mistakes as such, however, and permanently holds them over a student's head.

### *Current Discussions on Possible Solutions to these Issues*

Several possible solutions have been proposed to fix some of these issues, but they have all been very isolated in their implementations or not thoroughly researched and investigated. This is evidenced by the fact that very little has changed in the way we grade over the last century. The suggestions and attempts to be addressed here are the following: separating grades for achievement and effort, harder tests, allowing retakes and redoes, and Bucknell University's GPA Median.

**Separation of Grades.** The first suggestion found to address some of these problems is to experiment with separating grades for achievement and effort (Brookhart, 1999; Cross & Frary, 1999). If—according to measurement specialists—grades should only be reflecting students' academic achievement so that we are able to accurately understand their level of content master, but teachers feel that grades on effort are needed in order to help with things like classroom management, then it is reasonable to assume that it could be good to keep both grades but separate them out into distinct categories. This would then allow for academic achievement grades to be reported without the influence of outside factors, while still grading and giving credit to students for their effort. It is interesting that this has not become the standard considering that McMillan (2005) even found that “a very high percentage of teachers agreed that effort and conduct should be reported separately from achievement” (p. 22).

This has the potential to be greatly beneficial to businesses looking to hire recent college graduates as well. The further categorization of the grade gives them more information on the kind of worker that they would be hiring. For example, in our current grading system, two

students with the exact same grade leaving college may have received those grades for very different reasons. One might have excelled at content mastery, but consistently did not show up to class and turned in assignments late, whereas the other might have learned the content at a decent level, but always came to class and always turned in assignments on time. With our current system, these two students would be indistinguishable. If their grades had been divided between achievement and effort, however, then the business would have the extra information necessary to be able to decide if they would rather have a worker who is very dependable, but might need a little extra training, or a worker who is highly qualified, but less likely to be responsible and more likely to miss deadlines.

Cross and Frary (1999) noted that there has been little research into the efficacy of this practice, however. There needs to be more research into whether, if framed this way, double-grading systems would actually be beneficial to the classroom. There are some concerns that it is possible that effort grades would not be looked upon as “real” grades since awards like scholarships are more likely to only be attached to the academic achievement grade (Brookhart, 1999). In addition, there is also concern that teachers may feel pressured into creating an artificial correlation between achievement and effort. Students or parents may be confused or frustrated by the fact that someone passed a class with the best achievement grade even if they received the worst effort grade possible. On the flip side, it is even more likely that a student or parent gets mad if someone *fails* a class because they received the worst achievement grade possible yet still got a perfect effort grade (Brookhart, 1999). The success or failure of this type of grading system could entirely hinge upon how it is framed or presented upon implementation, but further research is needed to prove this.

**Harder Testing.** The next suggestion found to improve the current grading system is simply to create harder evaluations. By strictly adhering to the idea that tests need to yield results from 60-100%, teachers are limiting the chance to see how far students' understanding truly goes (Frary et al., 1993). A test that was designed so that students' scores range from 35%-90%, for example, would do a much better job at determining just how much the top students know, and just how little the bottom students comprehend (Cross & Frary, 1999). The problem with implementing this currently, however, is that teachers are not operating in isolated contexts. If other classrooms are not operating under the same grading policies, then the students with the harder grading format will be punished by the fact that their grades are lower, therefore leading them to receive fewer scholarships, acceptance letters, and jobs, regardless of their true level of academic achievement.

The format of testing can also change the difficulty level of the test. Multiple choice tests can be easier to pass—or even easier to fail—depending on if the specific facts that appear are known by the student. They do not demonstrate full content mastery. Essay tests, on the other hand, create a better opportunity for students to demonstrate everything they know on a topic and can be harder for students because it forces them to know the content more in depth. Since students have to write all they know on the topics at hand, teachers are able to better gauge who knows the most and who knows the least. For this reason, most teachers agree that this form of testing is preferable to multiple-choice tests (Frary et al., 1993). Despite this fact, however, many still use multiple-choice as a primary form of testing.

**Retakes and Redoes.** Another solution that has been proposed to fix the current state of the grading system in America is to allow retakes and redoes so that students are no longer being permanently affected by past mistakes. It is astonishing this is as rare of a practice as it is. If a

grade is supposed to accurately report the current level of content mastery a student has on a topic, then why should the first—and *only* the first—attempt be what gets recorded as their percentage of understanding on a topic? In many cases, even if further attempts are allowed, previous attempts are not wiped clean and still bring a student's average down. Wormelli (2001) points out how absurd this practice is with a humorous anecdote about a runner. He urges the reader to imagine the absurd scenario of how surprised a runner would be if their current and fastest time were to be averaged with their previous slower times. Nobody cares about the previous and lesser physical achievements made by a runner as long as it has brought the athlete to their current and better state of being. Their previous times are not indicative of their current ability, but a roadmap showing how they got there. The same should be true for academics. Students should therefore be able to retake or redo assignments in order to demonstrate content mastery at a later point in time. Original lower scores should then be wiped from their grade so that the most recent—and most accurate—representation of their knowledge is the only thing to remain. As Feldman (2020) put it, “Retakes sit at the nexus of improving our calculations and reducing pressure on students to constantly be at their best” (para. 24).

**The GPA of Median Grades.** The last proposed solution to be discussed in this review of literature is Bucknell University's—and subsequently, the University of Queensland's—implementation of the GPAM, or GPA of median grades (Piggott, 2020; Solomon & Piggott, 2021). These universities found, in concordance with other researchers' previous studies (Goldman et al., 1974; Goldman & Widawski, 1976), that GPAs and grades were varying greatly from field to field, degree to degree, and class to class, regardless of a student's academic prowess. For this reason, after a student had attended the university for at least three semesters, their GPA would also be accompanied by a GPA of median grades, which showed what the

average GPA would be for a student who had taken all of the exact same classes that they had.

This produced some interesting results. Take a look at the following table:

**Table 1**

STUDENT	GPA AT GRADUATION	GPAM AT GRADUATION
STUDENT 1	2.93	2.91
STUDENT 2	3.37	2.98
STUDENT 3	3.56	3.83
STUDENT 4	3.60	3.02
STUDENT 5	3.74	3.74

*Note.* The image was created from data collected by Bucknell University's Office of Registrar.

From *Perspective | GPAs don't really show what students learned. Here's why*, by Tom Solomon and Adam Piggot, 2021. The Washington Post. Retrieved October 21, 2022, from

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2018/06/15/gpas-dont-really-show-what-students-learned-heres-why/>

Even though Student 3 has a better GPA than Student 2, we can see that Student 3 has performed worse than the average student who has taken all of the same classes that he has. Student 2 on the other hand, might have a lower GPA, but he has performed significantly better than the average student who took the same classes as him. This inclusion of the GPAM is used in academic advising with students at Bucknell University in order to help them understand how they are doing in classes compared with their peers and can also be used by students to help frame grades for employers' understanding when applying for jobs (Piggott, 2020). It does not appear on their

transcript, however, but students can request a letter from the school that attests to their GPAM. This is a practice that is still being assessed and monitored by Bucknell University.

## **Philosophy of Education**

### *Athenians vs. Visigoths*

In his graduation speech, Neil Postman (2008) presented two long-dead people groups that held opposing ideologies, the Athenians and the Visigoths. The Athenians are detailed to have achieved great accomplishments in learning, science, politics, language, and art, even being credited with having developed the first full alphabet. “They believed in reason. They believed in beauty” (p. 162). For an Athenian, to learn, to grow, and to better yourself and humanity was the highest goal.

The Visigoths, on the other hand, could not care less about learning. They were singularly motivated by domination and brutality. “There was nothing a Visigoth liked better than to burn a book, desecrate a building, or smash a work of art. From the Visigoths, we have no poetry, no theater, no logic, no science, no humane politics” (p. 162). Postman (2008) humorously notes that the only good thing that can be said of them is that they were “spectacularly good horseman” (p. 162), referencing some of their battle tactics.

Postman’s (2008) purpose in bringing up these two people groups is to show that even though Athenian and Visigoth societies have long since faded away, their ideologies have not. There are people alive today who are Athenians, if not in blood, in spirit. And there are people alive today who are Visigoths, if not in blood, in spirit. Postman (2008) puts forth that to be an Athenian “is to hold knowledge and especially the quest for knowledge in high esteem. To contemplate, to reason, to experiment, to question—these are, to an Athenian, the most exalted activities a person can perform” (pp. 162-163). In contrast, the Visigoth values none of these



things. The only thing that has value to someone with the outlook of a Visigoth is that which “can help you to earn money or to gain power over other people” (p. 163).

Postman (2008) ends his speech by imploring the audience to choose to be an Athenian, to choose to seek after knowledge and the improvement of society above all else. It is difficult because, by nature, we begin as Visigoths, motivated by selfish ambitions to conquer and be the very best. Despite this, however, we need to make the choice to be Athenians, especially in an academic environment. Education is meant to provide a “glimpse of the Athenian way” (p. 164), and we cannot let the mindset of the Visigoth take it over.

### *Learning and Grade Orientations*

**Education Orientations.** The mindsets of both the Athenians and the Visigoths are indeed pervasive in the modern-day classroom, especially in how grades are viewed. An Athenian-minded student values learning and bettering themselves above all else, regardless of the grade. A Visigoth-minded student, on the other hand, wants to conquer the grade and achieve it by any means necessary. Learning just happens to be a potential side-effect in the process for these students. Much like Neil Postman (2008) at the end of his graduation speech, it is the desire of most teachers that their students adopt the Athenian mindset. Unfortunately, modern education seems to house many Visigoths, as evidenced by Hobbs’ (1974) breakdown of the five student stereotypes: The Grubber, The Idealist, The Pragmatist, The Loser, and The Conscientious Objector. Only one of these student types could be considered to be an Athenian.

The first type of student, the Grubber, is described as having become so psychologically dependent upon the reward of good grades that he is willing to do whatever it takes to keep up that status. The Idealist, on the other hand, espouses that he is not emotionally dependent upon a grade, but the reality is that the moment his grade dips below an “acceptable” level, he will be

filled with extreme anxiety. The Pragmatist has a very level-headed view of grades. He is not emotionally dependent upon them but recognizes that they are a transactional necessity to achieve the career that he wants. On those grounds, he does whatever is necessary to get the grade that ushers him into his desired future. Hobbs' (1974) harshly named "Loser" is the student who has lost the grading game for so long that he no longer cares and has no motivation to try. Each of these first four student stereotypes is not in it for the learning. They want to conquer the grade, *need* the grade, or have been overpowered by the grade. For this, they are Visigoths. Grades are merely a medium for power that can get them what they desire, even if they have lost control of that power. Learning may or may not happen as they engage in these endeavors.

The Conscientious Objector, however, is the only student stereotype described by Hobbs (1974) that is not dependent upon the grade. They are "that small band of students who have won the professors' respect by conventional achievement yet have the intellectual and emotional resources to play at the grade game without becoming addicted" (p. 239). Since they are not emotionally or tangibly dependent upon the grading system, they are the only ones who can easily object to its failings, hence the label of Conscientious Objector. Their detachment from the grade also allows them to enjoy education for what it is—an opportunity to learn and better one's self. Because of this, they embody the modern Athenian.

Later scholars took Hobbs' (1974) idea of students' views toward grades and refined it into two orientations: learning orientation and grade orientation (Eison, 1981). Learning-oriented students embody the Athenian mindset of education, and grade-oriented students embody the Visigoth mindset of education. At times one will see these referred to by other terms as well, such as achievement orientation and performance orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988); however, they are functionally the same thing.

**LOGO & LOGO II.** On the basis of these two educational orientations, Eison (1981) developed the LOGO scale, which is a questionnaire created to discriminate between those who have a learning orientation (LO) and those who have a grade orientation (GO). One of the major faults with this scale, however, is the fact that it assumes that learning orientations and grade orientations are mutually exclusive. If a student has one, then LOGO says that they cannot have the other. This has since been found not to be the case, so Eisen, Polio, and Milton (1986) expanded the scale, creating LOGO II.

The LOGO II questionnaire is comprised of 32 questions designed to place the taker in one of four categories: High LO/Low GO, Low LO/High GO, High LO/High GO, or Low LO/Low GO. For convenience, these four orientation pairings are referred to as H-L, L-H, H-H, and L-L. H-L and L-H represent the originally proposed learning orientation and grade orientation, respectively, however, this new scale also acknowledges the existence of students who have both a high learning and grade orientation (H-H), as well as students who have a low learning and grade orientation (L-L).

**Orientation-Specific Characteristics.** Subsequent studies have found that students who share a particular education orientation also share a variety of other characteristics (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Eisen, 1981, 1982; Eisen et al., 1986; Pollio & Beck, 2000). In addition, despite LOGO II's updated and more accurate matrix of educational orientations, it was still found that H-L (the traditional learning orientation) and L-H (the traditional grade orientation) were the most recognizable and the most discriminable orientations, and previous assumptions about student characteristics linked to them held up (Eisen et al., 1986). Detailed below are the various characteristics that are associated with each of the orientation pairings.

*H-L (High Learning & Low Grade Orientation)*. Students with an H-L Orientation are considered to be the “ideal” kind of student. This is because they possess “a wide variety of positive educational attributes” (Pollio & Beck, 2000, p. 85). Eisen (1982) specifically found that they are “more trusting, imaginative, self-sufficient, and relaxed; had better study habits; experienced less debilitating anxiety; collaborated and participated more in classroom settings,” as well as rated their courses and professors more favorably (pp. 868, 870). Eisen, Milton, and Pollio (1986) later added that students with an H-L orientation had higher levels of self-motivation, a greater interest in new ideas and intellectual topics, and rated higher on the Intuition (N) dimension of the Myers-Briggs personality test than Sensing (N). This means that they care more about finding meaningful facts and patterns and engaging in abstract thinking than dealing with concrete absolutes of physical reality (“Sensing or Intuition,” n.d.), which is probably why Pollio and Beck (2000) found them to have “above average reasoning abilities” (p. 85). They also are less stressed when taking tests and have a very high sense of personal responsibility, otherwise known as a high internal locus of control (Eisen et al., 1986).

When faced with challenging situations or problems, students with a high learning orientation do not give up as easily as students with equivalent abilities and a high grade orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Instead, they possess an “unflagging optimism” (p. 258) and, when faced with their own failure, tend not to see it as a lack of their own ability. Instead, they view failure as a challenge to be mastered, a representation of ineffective current strategies, which pushes them forward to find solutions and reach their maximum capability. “In short, in the face of failure ... mastery-oriented children exhibited constructive self-instructions and self-monitoring, a positive prognosis, positive affect, and effective problem-solving strategies” (p.

258). They seem to be constantly asking themselves the question, “What is the best way to increase my ability or achieve mastery?” (p. 260).

Students are not the only ones that have specific educational orientations, however. Teachers, too, will fall into one of these categories. Pollio and Beck (2000) found that teachers with a high learning orientation tend to be more flexible than their grade-oriented counterparts, willing to adapt and change their teaching and grading practices. They also seemed to highly value cooperation, both amongst the students and between the students and themselves. Overall, this led to a higher valuation of class discussion for learning-oriented teachers.

***L-H (Low Learning & High Grade Orientation)***. Unlike students with an H-L orientation, students with an L-H orientation struggle significantly more with school. Instead of viewing it favorably, they tend to view it as “a crucible in which they must endure continual testing and evaluation” and consistently have “below average Scholastic Aptitude Test scores, and low grade point averages” (Pollio & Beck, 2000, p. 85). According to Eisen, Pollio, and Milton (1986), these kinds of students do have a strong desire to do the right thing, however, which leads to them acting in more conventional manners. This connects nicely with the fact that these students tend to have a “tough-minded and realistic ... approach to personal and social issues and to show the greatest respect for established ideas” (p. 64). For similar reasons, in contrast to H-L-oriented students, L-H-oriented students tended to score high on Sensing (S) and low on Intuition (N) on the Myers-Briggs personality test. Despite these attributes, however, students with an L-H orientation tend to have bad study habits, high test anxiety, and, along with L-L-oriented students, have the highest levels of tension and anxiety in general. They also have the lowest scores for internal locus of control, again tied with L-L-oriented students.

When grade-oriented students are faced with challenging situations or problems, they are much more likely to give up than their fellow learning-oriented students that have equivalent abilities and are presented with the same challenges. (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). This is because their grade orientation reflects their concern about assessing their own abilities. They are constantly asking themselves, “Is my ability adequate or inadequate?” (p. 260). Thus, when a challenge arises, and they are incapable of immediately finding a solution, a grade-oriented student is much more likely to view this as a failing of their own ability. This then gives them the answer to their core question, and the answer is that they are inadequate. Such a mindset can be debilitating and ushers the grade-oriented student into a helpless mindset, causing them to shut down and give up before they would have been able to overcome the challenge at hand. “In short, in the face of failure, helpless children exhibited negative self-cognitions, negative affect, and impaired performance” (p. 258). This is further complicated when one realizes that as a result of forcing concrete thinkers into the abstract ways of our schooling system, we get “cheating, alienation, resistance, corner-cutting, [and] fixation on credentials” (Blum, 2016, p. 3), which all further the grade-oriented mindset.

When it comes to teachers and professors with high grade orientations, these educators unsurprisingly have a very strong belief in a grade’s ability to predict the future success of a student (Pollio & Beck, 2000). They also tend to be “very concerned about grade inflation, teach to the ‘best and brightest,’ and value grades as incentives” (p. 85). They also tend to be less focused on class discussions and student cooperation than their learning-oriented counterparts.

***L-L (Low Learning & Low Grade Orientation)***. This orientation pairing is the hardest one to identify (Eisen et al., 1986). This is possibly because it composes a student with the unlikely combination of not caring about learning as well as not caring about grades. At face

value, it seems most reminiscent of Hobbs' (1974) student stereotype of the Loser—a student who has lost at the grading game for so long that they have ceased to care. He speculated that these types of students do not stay in school long before dropping out, which might be why the L-L-oriented student can be so hard to identify.

Out of all the orientation pairings, these kinds of students tend to score the lowest in Extraversion (E) on the Myers-Briggs personality test (Eisen et al., 2000). They also are tied with L-H-oriented students for the lowest levels of internal locus of control and the highest levels of tension and anxiety. Despite those high levels, however, students with this particular education orientation usually have average study habits and only have average levels of test anxiety.

***H-H (High Learning & High Grade Orientation)***. This orientation pairing was originally hypothesized to represent preprofessional students who have high-learning orientations and—much like Hobbs' (1974) Pragmatist—also have a high valuation of grades due to the recognition of their necessity for success in the student's desired field (Eisen et al., 1986). After their research was concluded, however, this was found not to be the case.

Instead, this type of student was found to be similar to the L-H orientation in the fact that they have a very tough-minded, realistic, and concrete view of the world. This actually led to this group having the *lowest* capacity to engage in abstract thinking. When it comes to the Myers-Briggs test, however, H-H-oriented students were found to have the highest scores in Extraversion (E) out of any other orientation pairing and were also found to have a very relaxed disposition. For some reason, however, this relaxed disposition did not extend to testing because this group had the highest levels of test anxiety. Eisen, Pollio, and Milton (1986) summed it up well when they said:

The picture that emerges from this set of data is that of an extraverted yet relaxed person who takes a realistic and tough-minded view of the world while still placing great importance on fate. This person also has a tendency to be quite tense when taking tests.

(p. 65)

**Implications.** According to Pollio and Beck (2000), a professor's attitude toward grades and learning has the ability to change students' educational orientation. With this in mind, the best and the brightest students—the ones who are the most likely to truly learn and the least likely to experience any negative effects from the academic environment—and the classrooms that are most likely to set them up for success are those with a high learning and a low grade orientation (H-L). It seems that everyone is aware of this to some degree as well. Professors generally espouse that their ideal student is learning- rather than grade-oriented, and “Students clearly and emphatically regard the ideal professor as more learning-oriented and less grade-oriented than the typical professor” (p. 10).

However, despite the fact that both educators and students recognize that a learning-oriented environment is preferable, there seems to be a disconnect happening somewhere along the way. Students *want* to be learning-oriented but feel that their professors are forcing them to focus on grades. On the reverse, professors *want* students who care primarily about learning but seem to think that all students care about is the grade. Pollio and Beck (2000) note:

Basically, the present situation seems to be that both students and professors want the same changes— stronger emphasis on learning, weaker emphasis on grades—and both seem to hold the other responsible for the present, less than ideal, situation—weak emphasis on learning and strong emphasis on grades. (p. 98)



If both parties are feeling forced into a grade orientation when they would prefer a learning-oriented one, there must be something else at play that is affecting the values of both professors and students. Pollio and Beck (2000) suggest that in such a situation, it is reasonable to conclude that it may be the actual grading system itself that is causing these grade-oriented behaviors. A similar thought process is also espoused in the research of Eisen, Pollio, and Milton (1986), for they warned:

Although faculty members may be tempted to blame students for being “so grade oriented” or “not learning oriented enough” they should remember that they, themselves, often employ educational procedures serving to make such an orientation reasonable for the student even if not for the faculty member.” (p. 66)

Although many seem to suggest that the grading system is inherently affecting the values that both professors and students hold, there appears to be minimal research into exactly how this is happening and what aspects of the current system promote a grade orientation or learning orientation. If this is discovered, then perhaps those parts of the system could be altered to promote learning orientations instead.

## **Media Ecology**

### ***A Brief History***

These conclusions that the grading system could be influencing the mindsets of students and professors are what led this study to research further into Media Ecology. The discipline was introduced by—and is largely credited to—Neil Postman, although he never claimed to have been the one to have created the field (Strate, 2017). In fact, much of this field of study, including Postman’s work, stems from Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Message*. In this paper, McLuhan makes the assertion, just as the paper’s title suggests, that the medium is the

message (McLuhan, 2015). What he means by this is that, often, the medium in which a message is delivered has more influence than the message itself. Many critics have attacked this sentiment because, of course, the medium is not the actual message, but Lance Strate (2017) notes that to make this critique is to miss the point entirely. It is a pun of sorts, because if the medium is the message, then this new message needs a medium, and now that medium is the new message, and so on and so forth. This is why McLuhan makes the assertion that the content of a medium is always another medium (McLuhan, 2015). The point is not to get the reader to truly believe that the medium is the communicator's final intended message, but that the medium is *a* message—and a highly influential one at that. This suggests that we should be studying what messages are being communicated by the mediums that we use.

Neil Postman (2007) furthered this idea and simplified it in a way that made it more palatable, understandable, and practical. He proposed a change to McLuhan's languaging, instead asserting that the medium is the metaphor. He wrote:

They [media] are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like. (p. 10)

Because of this new framing of McLuhan's ideas, it became apparent that this was not just a theory, but a whole new field of study. Every medium that exists is an opportunity to study the effects that it has on us and the ways that it changes our behavior. Since every medium is different and will likely have different effects, new theories need to be developed for each

medium. The term that Postman gave to this field of study was Media Ecology, and thus a new discipline was born.

### *What is Media Ecology?*

The ideas discussed thus far provide a good framework for understanding what media ecology is, but they do not describe it in its entirety. At its most basic, the definition of media ecology is “the study of media as environments” (Postman, 1970, p. 161). Strate (2017) points out that this is a very vague definition, but it is purposefully so. To give it more definition and clarity would turn it into an oversimplification that ignores other important factors and implications of the field. The truth is that media ecology is complex. If media are environments, and environments have effects on how we think or act, then there is much to be studied about how those media are influencing our behavior.

The two key terms necessary for understanding media ecology, then, are *media* and *environments*. These come right from the name of the field itself because ecology is nothing more than the study of environments. The interesting thing about these two terms is that—if the constructs of the theories that compose the backbone of this field are true—they are the exact same thing. A medium is an environment, and, as Strate (2017) wisely points out, an environment is also a medium. The central concept of this field is then summarized by the statement, “in every tool [medium or environment] we create, an idea is embedded that goes beyond the function of the thing itself” (Postman, 2007, p. 14). The goal of media ecology is to identify those invisible influences so that we are not blindly imprisoned by the media that we create.

### ***What is a Medium?***

In order to fully understand media ecology, it is then very important to understand what a medium actually is. There happens to be a fairly big difference between what society commonly refers to as “media” and what media actually are. To bring clarity to why this is the case, Strate (2017) organizes a history of the term “media” to show it arrived at the place it currently is in society. In short, due to the sequential development of technology over time, society now commonly truncates the term “mass media communications” to just “media.” This means that when the average person hears that word, they only think of things such as the television, the radio, the newspaper, social media, etc. In reality, “media” is just the plural of “medium,” which is nothing more than a channel through which something can be conveyed. It does not need to be just a material or a mechanism but can also “represent practices and process” (p. 94). Strate (2017) is very particular about this point and makes sure that people know that media are not just what people traditionally think of. Nearly anything—and potentially everything—is a medium of sorts. He even goes on to explain in significant detail seven different types of mediums that exist to further this point: substance or sensation, words, form, human bodies, relationship, technology and technique, and environment and process. This is important to note because much of modern scholarship in the realm of media ecology still seems skewed toward a study of media that is restricted to the societal definition rather than looking at it on the broader definition that is presented here.

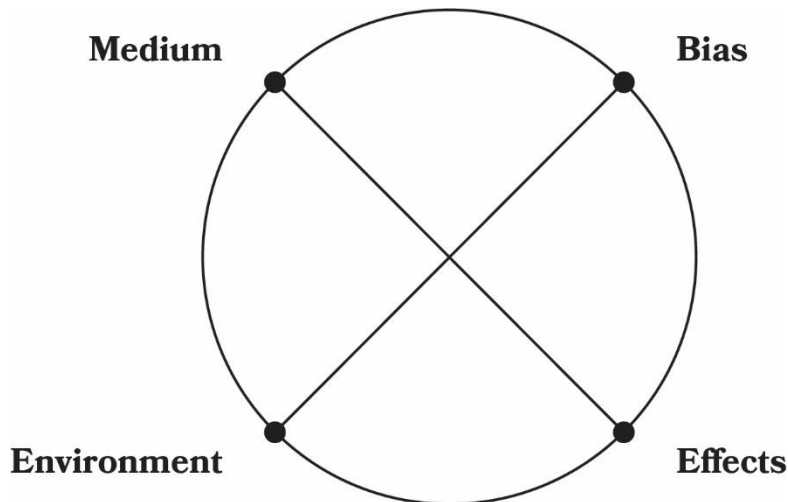
### ***How to Study a Medium?***

Once a specific medium has been identified, it then needs to be studied so that we can be aware of what kind of values and views the medium may be invisibly imposing upon us. As McLuhan said, “Subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact has made them [media]

prisons without walls for their human users” (p. 34). Since these prisons do not actually have walls, we need nothing more than to become aware of the fact that they have been keeping us in one spot in order to be able to break free and once again be in control of them rather than vice versa.

It is helpful, however, to have a framework with which to study something so that one is not blindly feeling around and making assumptions. That is exactly what Lance Strate (2017) supplies at the end of his book *Media Ecology* with his pathways for media ecology scholarship:

**Figure 1**



*Note.* The image was recreated by Grant Rye from the image present on p. 212 of Lance Strate’s book. From *Media Ecology: An approach to understanding the human condition*, by Lance Strate 2017. Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.

Strate (2017) identifies four main areas into which a media ecologist can launch a study: medium, bias, effects, and environment. These four areas are interconnected and are constantly affecting each other. Therefore, a media ecologist should begin his studies by choosing one of these areas and asking questions about how it affects the next area, and so on and so forth. Strate (2017) points out that the most obvious way to do this would be by working around the outer

edge of the circle. For example, if a media ecologist began with the medium, and was working clockwise around the circle, then they could ask the following questions:

What are the characteristics of the specific medium or media? What biases are associated with those characteristics? What are the effects resulting from those biases? How is the environment shaped or altered by those effects? What medium or media comprise or arise within the new or altered environment? (p. 213)

This is just one pathway that a scholar could choose. One could go clockwise or counterclockwise, and, as evidenced by the interconnected nature of Figure 1, one does not just have to work around the outside circle but can follow the intersections between as well. In order to aid in answering these questions, however, it would be helpful to provide a little extra context on two of these categories in particular: the bias and effects of media.

**Bias.** The idea of bias here is that any medium is going to inherently restrict or promote the accessibility of a variety of factors. For example, printed text restricts the viewer's senses to only that of the visual. At the same time, however, it promotes the weight and value of the words themselves. It is biased toward pure language. Television, on the other hand, restricts fewer of the senses, allowing both the visual and the auditory senses through. Unlike printed text, however, it puts greater emphasis on its visuals rather than the words that are coming through as well. This is the very basis of Postman's (2007) book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, as he notes that as our society has shifted from the Typographic to the Televisual Age, the bias of our media has shifted to the visual as well. He suggests that this is having a tangible effect on many things, like politics, causing people to primarily form their opinions based on the visual nature of a person rather than the words and arguments they use.

These biases that media hold can show up in a plethora of manners, however. Christine Nystrom (as cited in Lum, 2000) details seven different kinds of biases that exist based on the seven different forms that media can take: intellectual and emotional biases, temporal, spatial, and emotional biases, political biases, social biases, metaphysical biases, content biases, and epistemological biases. A media ecologist should always look to see which of these biases are affecting the media that they are studying because one, or more, *will* be at play.

**Effects.** There are many different effects of media as well, but once again there is a helpful framework to guide a media ecologist's investigation and study of such effects. That framework is Marshall and Eric McLuhan's (1988) Four Laws of Media. These four laws are based on four concepts—enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal—and are framed as four questions to be asked of the medium at hand:

1. What does the medium enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate?
2. What is pushed aside or obsolesced by the new medium?
3. What recurrence or retrieval of earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form?
4. What is the reversal potential of the new form?

The first two questions tend to be fairly easy to interpret and understand. The question of enhancement just seeks to find out what things are naturally more likely to be promoted or given extra attention because of the medium being used. The question of obsolescence addresses the opposite. It considers what things are done away with or restricted and handicapped because of the current medium. These first two questions are heavily related to bias but seek out the effects that come into play because of those biases.

The third and fourth questions tend to be a little bit more difficult to understand for people. The question of retrieval is referencing anything from the past that may have been cut off or restricted due to a previous medium. If the new medium opens up the door for that thing to become relevant and to flourish again, then it is said to have been *retrieved* by it. For example, mobile phones have caused a retrieval of tribal culture. Tribal culture is something that is not often found in its traditional form in the modern world, but with mobile phones and social media, there is a new connecting point that has allowed the formation of new tribes, albeit digital ones.

The question of reversal is centered around the idea that when a medium is pushed to its limits, it will often end up *reversing* and showcasing patterns reminiscent of the original state of being. An example of this can be easily shown with the car. Various forms of moving from one location to another can take quite a bit of time to accomplish, so the car was invented in order to speed up travel. Now that cars are an available medium of transportation, however, further locations are reachable, so distances increase and the same amount of time—if not more, now—is spent traveling.

### **Chapter Summary**

There are many failings with the current grading system being used in America. Its purpose is unclear (Brookhart, 1999; Cross & Frary, 1999; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan 2005). It is failing to accomplish its primary goal of accurately assessing academic achievement (Cross & Frary, 1999; Goldman et al., 1974; Goldman & Widawski, 1976; McMillan, 2005), it is forcing teachers into conflicting roles that make their job as educators more difficult (Brookhart, 1999; Kunnath, 2017), and it is working contrary to the learning process by enacting permanent negative effects on students for their mistake (McMillan, 2005; Wormeli, 2011).



In addition to this, students and professors alike feel that they are being pressured by the other into a grade-oriented environment (Pollio & Beck, 2000). This is concerning because both would rather operate in a learning-oriented classroom setting since it has been shown to produce characteristics in students and professors that foster more favorable, pleasant, and effective educational environments (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Eison, 1982; Eisen et al., 1986; Pollio & Beck, 2000). Since both parties are feeling forced into a grade orientation when they would prefer a learning-oriented one, there must be something else at play that is affecting the values of both professors and students. That something is the grading and evaluation system that is being used, therefore, this medium of communicating student academic achievement needs to be assessed and potentially restructured if the classroom is to be able to promote a learning-oriented environment (Pollio & Beck, 2000).

Media ecology is the study of media as environments (Postman, 1970) and seeks to find the invisible ways that those media are influencing how we view and interact with the world (Strate, 2017). Observing all of the research present in this review of literature, the grading system surely meets the qualifications of a medium. It is the environment of evaluation in the classroom and the tool that we have created to measure and communicate a student's level of academic achievement. As such, it can no longer just be blindly assumed that the grade will do as we want it to without having any effects on us. Therefore, the goal of this study is to identify the ideas embedded in the grading system that go beyond the function of the grade itself, especially as it relates to a student's learning/grade orientation.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

#### Introduction

The problems studied in this research are the deficiencies of the grading system in America and the difference that exists between student motivation for a grade and student motivation for learning. The gap between these two problems is bridged with the theoretical framework of media ecology. The field of media ecology establishes that “in every tool [medium or environment] we create, an idea is embedded that goes beyond the function of the thing itself” (Postman, 2007, p. 14). Thus, there is an idea embedded in the communication medium of the grade that invisibly influences, guides, and affects how a student views and interacts with his or her classroom experience. It even has the potential to sway a student’s orientation for a grade versus their orientation for learning.

Many studies have previously been done on the purpose of grades and their inability to accurately assess academic achievement (Brookhart, 1999; Cross & Frary, 1999; Goldman et al., 1974; Goldman & Widawski, 1976; Kunnath, 2017; McMillan 2005), as well as on the effect that a student’s orientation toward grades and learning has on their classroom experience (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Eisen, 1981, 1982; Eisen et al., 1986; Pollio & Beck, 2000). It is generally accepted that students with a high learning orientation are better set up for success in the world of academia than those who have high grade orientations. Despite this fact, it seems that students and instructors alike feel forced into a grade-oriented mindset (Pollio & Beck, 2000). Some researchers have also made the observation that the grading system and evaluation techniques used by instructors could possibly be the culprit behind this phenomenon (Eisen et al., 1986; Pollio & Beck, 2000). Aside from casual comments that this may be the case, however, it does not appear that any studies have been done to analyze the grading practices used in America in order to find out what specific factors contribute to a grade-oriented mindset and what factors

contribute to a learning-oriented mindset. Considering it would be difficult to accomplish a full overhaul of how grading is done in America, it is important to determine what factors or characteristics of current grading practices contribute to each of these things so that we can properly emphasize the factors that contribute to a learning orientation and deemphasize the factors that contribute to a grade orientation.

For these reasons, this study sought to confirm what kind of gap currently exists between students' grades versus learning orientations in the classroom and discover how the grading system in America contributes to this. This was analyzed under the theoretical perspective of the field of media ecology, examining the grade as a medium. For that reason, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1: What is the present state of students' grade versus learning orientations in America?

RQ2: From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?

## **Nature of the Study**

### ***Philosophical Assumptions***

The following study is considered under the philosophical assumptions of the constructivist worldview. This worldview generally espouses that meaning is constructed by individuals as they interact with each other and the world around them (Creswell, 2014; Crotty, 1998). Studies that are conducted with this underlying worldview tend to be qualitative in nature because "The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied" as the researcher seeks to "make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (Creswell, 2014, p. 8). This worldview goes hand in hand with the

theoretical perspective of media ecology used in this research, as both put an emphasis on the importance of understanding people's environment in order to derive meaning in any given situation. As such, the constructivist worldview influenced the research design chosen for this study.

### ***Research Design***

Following the nature of research conducted under the constructivist worldview, this study engages in a qualitative method of discovery as it is “an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). The problem, in this case, is how the grading system in America is affecting students' grade and learning orientations. In addition, qualitative research was chosen because it concerns itself with the study of “the context or setting of participants” (p. 18). Since media ecology—which is the study of media as environments—is used as the theoretical framework for this study, the context and setting of participants are of the utmost importance to the research being proposed.

There are many different strategies of inquiry that can be used within the qualitative research design. This research employs the phenomenological strategy of inquiry. This method of research culminates in “the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (p. 14) and is typically conducted through interviews. The phenomenon studied in this research is the grading system and its effects on students' grade and learning orientations. Furthering the relevance of phenomenological research for this study, the grading system in America is something that we take for granted and do not often consider when it comes to how we construct meaning in the world around us. This coincides with the fact that

phenomenology “examines taken-for-granted human situations as they are experienced in everyday life but which go typically unquestioned” (Finlay, 2013, para. 1).

For this reason, the current study adheres to the practices of phenomenological research and collects its data through interviews. These interviews allowed the participants to pontificate on their personal experience with grades so that meaning could be constructed about how grading systems that they have experienced have affected their views on, and orientations in, the classroom experience. This directly relates to all three of the research questions.

### **Selection of Participants**

The focus of this study is on students’ perspectives of grading systems. For this reason, to be eligible to participate in this study, the participant had to be a current student. Even more specifically, the researcher for this study decided to restrict this parameter to only include college students. This is to ensure that participants have encountered the highest number of grading styles and practices possible. This gave the participants more experiences to pull from and grapple with as they began to determine which practices benefited their education experience the most and which practices hindered their experience the most.

In order to mitigate bias in the selection of participants, the researcher created social media posts and a flyer that detailed the parameters of the study and invited students to participate if they would like to contribute to the topic of study. The social media posts were posted on the researcher’s personal social media accounts and were further spread through snowball sampling, which is a method that asks participants to share the social media posts/flyers with other potential candidates for the study. The flyers were posted on the campus of Liberty University. Liberty University was chosen as the place to put up the flyers because of the researcher’s contacts within the university that allowed the possibility for the announcement to

reach a wide variety of departments and disciplines. This combination of efforts was chosen to ensure that students from a variety of disciplines and universities were given the opportunity to contribute to this study.

Prior to participating in the study, potential participants were sent a consent form that was created according to the standards provided by the International Review Board (IRB). This consent form is included in Appendix A of the study. The consent form is to ensure that participation in this study was voluntary, that the participants knew exactly what they were getting into by joining this study, and that were aware that at any point they could choose to quit participating in this study. Potential participants were not allowed to participate in this study if they did not fill out the consent form.

### **Data Collection and Procedure**

Each of the interested participants was sent a preliminary questionnaire that confirmed that they met the qualifications for participating in this study, namely that they are current college students and are older than 18 years of age. Once this questionnaire had been completed, a one-on-one interview, lasting up to an hour, was conducted with each of the participants. They were given the opportunity to select the location of the interview so that it could be conducted uninterrupted and in confidentiality. Consent to record and transcribe the interview for research and coding purposes was acquired from the interviewee before the interview began. In addition, consent to contact the interviewee with clarifying follow-up questions after the interview was acquired at that time. Recordings and transcriptions are stored on a password-protected computer in a safe location in order to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee. In addition, a number has been assigned to each of the interviewees, which is used in place of their real names in the results section of this study in order to protect the privacy and identity of the interviewee.

The interviews were conducted by the researcher and consisted of the same 12 questions for each of the interviewees. These questions were constructed according to ideologies consistent with phenomenological research as they were intended to delve into the personal experiences of each of the participants as they relate to the phenomenon of the American grading system and its effects on students' learning and grade orientations. Before being presented to the participants in the interview, the questions were submitted for review by the IRB, an organization dedicated to ensuring the rights and ethical treatment of human subjects of research. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewee was given a list of all 12 questions to be asked in order to help guide the conversation and keep the interview on track. In addition, a few ice-breaker questions were asked in order to establish a conversation pattern before the interview began. The 12 questions asked in the interviews are as follows:

1. Based on personal experience, what are your thoughts on the grading systems used in classes you have taken? (This question relates to RQ1)
2. Idealistically, when taking a class, which is more important to you, achieving the desired grade or learning the course content? Why? (This question relates to RQ1 and RQ2)
3. Realistically, when taking a class, do you find that you are more often working to achieve the desired grade or to learn the course content? Why do you think that is? (This question relates to RQ1 and RQ2)
4. Have you ever had a class where you were very engaged with learning the course content and minimally focused on your grade? If so, why do you think that you felt that way toward the class? How were you graded/what were you graded on in that class? (This question relates to RQ2)

5. Have you ever had a class where you were very focused on your grade and minimally engaged with learning the course content? If so, why do you think that you felt that way toward the class? How were you graded/what were you graded on in that class? (This question relates to RQ2)
6. What form of assessment (i.e., test, quiz, project, paper, homework, etc.) do you think best motivates a student to learn course content? How have you personally experienced this? (This question relates to RQ2)
7. What form of assessment (i.e., test, quiz, project, paper, homework, etc.) do you think least motivates a student to learn course content? How have you personally experienced this? (This question relates to RQ2)
8. Take a moment to list out everything that you can think of that might affect a student's final grade. What does each of these things communicate to you about what you should value in a class? (This question relates to RQ2)
9. Take a moment to think about how late work is handled in the classes you have taken. What does this communicate to you about what you should value in a class? (This question relates to RQ2)
10. Take a moment to think about how the classes you have taken approach retake or redo policies on tests, homework, and projects. What does this communicate to you about what you should value in a class? (This question relates to RQ2)
11. How would you say that the grading system in America affects a student's motivation to achieve the desired grade versus their motivation to learn the course content? (This question relates to RQ1 and RQ2)



12. If you could change anything about the grading system in order to make class and learning less stressful and more enjoyable, what changes would you make? (This question relates to RQ2)

### **Data Analysis**

Once each interview had been completed, the researcher created a transcription of the interview to be reviewed for the purposes of data analysis. Qualitative interviews provide a vast array of stories, experiences, answers, and terminologies. Because of this, they can seem overwhelming to analyze in a productive manner that will synthesize cohesive results. In order to do so, a correct framework for analysis needs to be utilized so that the researcher is able to make sense of, understand, and interpret the different themes appearing throughout the interviews. The framework for analysis used in this study is the six-step process for analyzing qualitative interviews presented by Creswell (2014, pp. 197-201). Each of the six steps will be listed below and, as needed, followed by a short description of what that step entails:

1. Organize and prepare the data for analysis.
  - a. This includes the process of transcribing interviews and collecting any other relevant data, like field notes, collected in the interviewing process.
2. Read or look at all the data.
  - a. This is to familiarize oneself with the overarching concepts and themes present in the participants' answers before the real analysis begins.
3. Start coding all of the data.
  - a. Emergent themes will be given a *code* and added to a codebook. Anywhere that theme appears in the interviews—regardless of if the exact same terminology was used—will be noted as a new instance of that code.

4. Use the coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis.
5. Advance how the description and themes will be represented in the qualitative narrative.
  - a. “The most popular approach is to use a narrative passage to convey the findings of the analysis” (p. 200).
6. Make an interpretation in qualitative research of the findings or results.
  - a. One of the best ways to do this is to ask the question, “What were the lessons learned?” (p. 200).

In order to ensure the validity of the data present in this study, the researcher employed Creswell’s (2014, pp. 201-203) eight validity strategies in research to the best of his ability: triangulation of data sources, use of member checking, use of rich and thick descriptions, clarification of the researcher’s personal biases, presentation of negative or discrepant information, spending prolonged time in the field, the use of peer debriefing, and the use of an external auditor. In order to ensure the reliability of the data present in this study, the researcher documented all of his processes so that anyone reading his research can investigate and corroborate his results. In addition, the researcher reviewed the interview transcripts to check for errors and used clearly defined codes when analyzing themes to ensure that the definition of a code did not drift throughout the course of this study.

### **Anticipated Ethical Issues**

Participants were not exposed to any risks greater than one might encounter in their daily life. The chosen topics for the interview questions do not appear to cover any sensitive issues that could trigger strong emotions due to past trauma that a participant may have experienced, however, if something were to come up, the researcher would have reported the newfound

ethical issues of his research to the IRB and made any updates necessary to his research per their procedures. In addition, the privacy and confidentiality of the participants was guarded throughout the process. In order to protect the participants' identities, they were each assigned a number that is used in place of their names when referenced in this study.

Some of the questions in the interview are regarding previous grading experiences that a student has encountered, both good and bad, so any names or identifying factors of teachers (like the subject taught) have also been redacted and replaced with an alias. This ensures that neither the student nor the teacher can be identified and receive any emotional, social, educational, or career backlash from comments that may have been made. Physical transcripts have been stored under lock and key, and digital transcripts are stored on a password-protected computer in order to ensure their safety.

### **Chapter Summary**

Currently, a gap in research on the grading system exists when it comes to what the current grading systems communicate to students about what should be valued in the classroom setting. Researchers have commented on the fact that the grading system seems to have an effect on students' grade and learning orientations (Eisen et al., 1986; Pollio & Beck, 2000), but no research seems to have been done on what specific aspects of the grading system contribute to each of these orientations. Research has shown that students with high grade orientations typically perform much better in class and enjoy the classroom experience much more than those who primarily have a high grade orientation (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Eisen, 1981, 1982; Eisen et al., 1986; Pollio & Beck, 2000). Because of this, if it can be determined what factors of the grading system contribute to each of these orientations, then the grading system could be adapted

to better promote a learning orientation in students. This could greatly improve students' classroom and learning experiences.

For this reason, the purpose of this study is to verify the current state of American students' learning/grade orientation and find out, from the student perspective, what the grading system in America communicates that a student should value. In addition, it seeks to determine, from the student perspective, what practices best promote a learning orientation in the classroom. This research is conducted under the theoretical framework of media ecology with the assumption that the grade is a medium and, therefore, inherently and invisibly influences, guides, and affects how a student perceives, and therefore interacts with, the classroom experience. This research is qualitative in design and, in accordance with phenomenological research, conducted through the usage of interviews so that the participants can engage in the meaning-making process by providing accounts of their own personal experiences.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this study is phenomenological in nature and seeks to explore the experiences of students in regard to how they have been graded and assessed. This will give insight into how they view the classroom and learning experience, especially as it relates to grade and/or learning orientations. Chapter 2 of this study details the review of literature that pertains to these topics, and Chapter 3 gives an overview of the methodology undertaken to further explore students' experiences. The following chapter details information about each of the participants in this study, along with a summary of their answers to the interview questions posed.

### **Participant Demographics**

All participants in this study were required to be current students, whether in undergraduate or graduate school. This allows them to have the broadest exposure to multiple different types of grading systems as possible, therefore bringing more experience to the table, while simultaneously ensuring that their exposure to various grading systems is accurate to processes currently being used. A call for participants was posted on the researcher's social media, and participants were chosen on a first-come, first-served basis.

11 of the participants were in graduate school, and four of the participants were in undergraduate. Of the graduate students, one was in law school, and one was in medical school. In terms of universities currently being attended by participants, five different schools were represented; however, each of the participants answered the interview questions in terms of previous schools that they had attended as well. Subjects currently being studied by participants include aviation, interpersonal communication, strategic communication, business, information technology, counseling, medicine, graphic design, engineering, vocal performance, and law.

Each of the participants has been given an alias that they will henceforth be referred to throughout the rest of this study in order to protect the confidentiality of their information.

**Interview Question #1:** Based on personal experience, what are your thoughts on the grading systems used in classes you have taken?

This interview question relates to RQ1 (What is the present state of students' grade versus learning orientations in America?). Overall, since this study is phenomenological in nature, this question serves to provide a general check on what the current experience is with grades for students. It also provides insight into the different perspectives that students have on grading systems, and helps to highlight the major issues present in the system, as the vague nature of the question prompts students to only discuss the things that weigh the most heavily on their minds in regards to the grading systems used in America.

Two major themes arose in how students answered this question. In general, students either did not have an issue with the current grading systems used, or they seemed to primarily view the grading systems in a negative light. Answers were heavily weighted toward the negative with 10 of the participants obviously having a negative overall view of grading systems, and two participants expressing some similar negative thoughts about grading systems as other participants even if they seemed to at times have a neutral view towards them.

Only three of the 15 participants stated in some kind of way that they were fine with how grading systems are currently handled. Of those three, Rose was the only one that had nothing negative to say at all about the grading system, yet the best that even she could say was that they "work well for what they've had to adapt to." Nickee only stated that she has never had a problem with grading systems but attributes this to the fact that she has always gotten good grades, and Jessica said that she is mostly fine with how she is graded in classes and went on to

talk about some positively challenging experiences she has had in the ways that she has been graded.

The main experience that is interesting to note here is that Jessica identified that a common flaw present in many classes is that as the end of a class gets closer, the point values associated with assignments can de-incentivize students to complete their assignments and therefore learn the course content. If a student realizes that they can still get an A—or even just a passing grade—without completing the remaining assignments in a course, then they will just not do them since they already have the desired grade. If professors try to alleviate this issue by making the assignments at the end of a course worth a disproportionately large number of points, then this adds a significant amount of stress on students to perform perfectly at a specific point in time, no matter how well they have done for the rest of the semester. Jessica experienced—and greatly appreciated—a course where the final project was the same size and worth a similar amount of points as others she had to complete throughout the semester, but there was a caveat that students could not pass the class unless this project was completed—even if they already had an A in the class. Jessica expressed that she enjoyed this because it pushed her to focus on learning course content while simultaneously not causing her to stress an inordinate amount about her grade.

For students who expressed a negative view of grading systems, three primary themes appeared: grading systems used actively de-motivate students to learn course content or push them to focus on a grade instead, grading systems used are largely inaccurate or misrepresentative, and grading systems used increase stress and are bad for students' mental health. Surprisingly, all three of these negative themes were also present in the answers of those who stated that they largely did not have a problem with the grading system. Of these themes,

the most common one was that grading systems that the students have experienced have actively de-motivated them to learn course content or instead pushed them to be working for a grade. 11 of the participants brought this up somewhere in their answers, including both Nickee and Jessica. Jessica stated that, because of how a certain teacher had graded her, she lost complete respect for the teacher, did not want to interact with her, and “completely stopped worrying about the class.” Bailey observed that some grading systems have “so many places where you can get graded down that you are all bound up and can’t actually think freely.” Similarly, both Annaliese and Joseph noted that the way most things are graded gamifies points in a manner that shifts the entire focus onto how one can gain or avoid losing points. When grading systems do this, the actual course content or education is often completely overlooked.

The second most common negative theme that emerged amongst students’ answers is the fact that grades are often inaccurate or misrepresentative. Chauncey, straight out of the gate, said “Inconsistent is what it is,” when asked this interview question. In a similar manner, Brayden immediately said that he thinks that grades are often misrepresentative due to there often being a misleading assignment-to-point ratio. He detailed how he has taken courses that associate a small number of points with large and work-intensive assignments, which leaves him feeling unrewarded for his effort and leads to him often wanting to skip over valuable material, especially if there are other assignments in a class that offer a larger number of points for less work and effort. Other participants, like Dexter, Jessica, and Nickee, expressed that they have experienced classes where they felt like they understood the content well, but did not end up achieving a grade that reflected this. Landon offered some insight into why this sometimes seems to be the case in classes. Some classes are so large that a professor cannot actually adequately



evaluate student work, and sometimes more subjective assignments can be given different grades just based on who is grading it or the mood that they are in.

The last negative theme that arose during this interview question was that current grading systems used increase stress and are bad for students' mental health. Dexter specifically stated that the traditional letter grade system has been very harmful to his mental health as he is not a good test-taker. Because of this, he has been marked as a C or D student in classes where he felt like he understood the content but was not given methods to express that understanding that worked for him. Landon and Dmitri also noted that the grading systems can be nerve-wracking and stressful. Bailey noted that she has experienced classes with competitive grading systems that made it very unclear what content was actually supposed to be learned, and grades were assigned entirely based on how students did in comparison with each other. She stated that this led to a "breakdown of ... a healthy learning environment."

One participant, Dmitri, has had experience with a different type of competitive grading system. He noted that he is currently in a pass/fail grading system while in medical school and that this is his favorite grading system he has ever been in. He is still assigned a percentage grade for work and tests completed in the class, but there are no letter grades associated with that percentage. Instead, a student knows how they are doing in the class based on how they did compared to other students. He says that there is still stress involved with this grading system, but he enjoys it more because it frees him up to focus more on learning the course content because, at the end of the day, all that matters is that he passes.

**Interview Question #2:** Idealistically, when taking a class, which is more important to you, achieving the desired grade or learning the course content? Why?

This interview question relates to RQ1 (What is the present state of students' grade versus learning orientations in America?) and RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Overall, students' answers to this question were very uniform and fell under the same theme, with only one major outlier.

The primary theme that every participant's answer aligned with (aside from Bradford) was that the whole point of education is to learn, so, idealistically, they would rather be focused on learning the course content rather than the grade that they receive in the class. Beyond this, many of the participants expressed legitimate excitement about the prospect of getting to learn new things in a class (although, spoiling some of the next question, most of those answers were followed by disappointment because they felt like they were not getting to focus on learning once they were actually in the class). Bailey said, "I would love to have school be all about just learning and becoming a better individual." Nikki, Jerry, and Landon all expressed that they are individuals who are just generally curious, love to learn, and will likely be learning whether or not they are in the classroom. Chauncey also discussed how, idealistically, it is really important for him to understand the course content, even if he does not do well on assignments or tests the first time. He wants the chance to be able to go back and learn why his answers were incorrect and not just be given a grade that tells him what his level of proficiency is on a topic.

Four of the participants—although they expressed that learning is their idealistic goal of education—had more things at play in their answers than just that. Brayden initially said that he is idealistically focused on grades because those are what get you jobs, but he later backtracked and said that, idealistically, the focus should be on learning the course content, but that is not what normally happens. Both Dmitri and Stanley expressed that in a previous level of education

(undergraduate for Dmitri and high school for Stanley) their idealistic focus was on the grade because that was what would get them to the next level of education that they needed, but now that they have made it to higher levels of education, they would like it to be focused on learning. Similarly, Harper stated, “Idealistically, [the goal is] to learn the material. But also, that’s kind of when I’m interested in the subject ... for more gen ed, sometimes that shifts more toward the grade.”

The only participant to never state that his ideal was to be focused on learning the course content was Bradford. Bradford expressed that his ideal is to be focused on the grade in the classes that he is taking. Similar to what has been discussed about some of the other participants, Bradford stated that this was his ideal because the grade is what gets you the job. He said that he knows that, personally, he will always pick up whatever he needs to learning-wise, and in the “real world” he will always have access to tools and resources to teach him what he needs to in the moment. Because of this, the grade is what will do the most for him, so it is the thing that is ideally the most important.

**Interview Question #3:** Realistically, when taking a class, do you find that you are more often working to achieve the desired grade or to learn the course content? Why do you think that is?

This interview question relates to RQ1 (What is the present state of students’ grade versus learning orientations in America?) and RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Once again, students’ answers to this question were very uniform, with only a few outliers, although each student had a plethora of unique examples to back up their statements. Each of these different examples provided a new perspective that allowed deeper understanding of the topic at hand.

The theme that arose in all of the students' answers—except for Rose and Landon—was that even though idealistically they want to be focused on learning course content in their classes, realistically, they are always focused on the grade. They were all very quick to state this. For example, when asked this question, Jerry immediately responded with, “Most definitely a grade.” Jessica stated that,

Every time I'm working on something for a class, I'm not really working at it from the perspective of, like, “Oh, I'm trying to learn and engage in this.” I'm working on it because I have to do it for a grade ... if it's something that, like, I have to meet rubric requirements and, like, do a set of rules ... I'm really just focused on hitting all of those points.

This kind of grade-oriented response broke down into two different major themes. The first theme is something that will be referred to as the “game of grades.” 12 of the participants gave answers that solidly fell into this theme, and those responses were largely composed of explanations for why students felt that they tended to be grade-oriented, even though idealistically, they want to be learning-oriented in their classes. Brayden covered the topic the most thoroughly when he said the following:

I kind of feel like it [the way things are graded] doesn't allow students to pursue their passions because ... you're playing the economy of points. You just want to get the most points that you can. You don't really care if you're learning anything, unfortunately... You don't pass the course because you learn something. You pass the course because you got enough points. And that's something that I think a lot of students realize, and, like, a lot of students—including myself—kind of get to the point where we are like, “Why?

Why am I like— what’s the point of like— why am I here?” ... I’m just playing the game of points just to be able to pass the class and get a degree.

Bailey also noted that the way that most classes are structured makes it possible for her to get the grades that she wants without really having to learn the course material, which is why she usually works toward the desired grade. She did note, however, that some—but not all—of her classes in her master’s program have been structured in a way where there is no workaround. In those courses, to complete the class assignments is to learn the material. Normally, she said, you are able to determine what kind of class it will be in the first week. Annaliese points out that most students end up playing the game of grades rather than focusing on learning course content because of how much outside pressure and emphasis is placed on that grade. She stated, “that score is almost related to success rather than actually digesting and understanding the material ... So it almost becomes an efficiency thing rather than an actual, like, ‘is this good content that I am putting out into the world?’” Harper brought this idea up as well, expressing that the grade is the already established standard of success, and she concluded by saying, “I’ve been in such a grading system for so long of being— evaluating myself though grades, that sometimes it feels like that the goal is to get the grade rather than to learn.” Jerry expressed that he was often disappointed by the fact that he would be really interested in a topic in his classes and would want to spend more time diving into it and learning about it, but felt pressured by deadlines and the way things were assessed to just get it done quickly so that he can get a better grade.

The second theme that became present in the grade-oriented responses is related to the game of grades and could almost be considered a sub-category of those responses as well. That theme is the idea that the level of interest a student personally has in a class will change whether they are more grade-oriented or learning-oriented in it. This interest can come from personality

or from connections to future career interests. Bradford expressed that if a class is not interesting, does not cover what he thought it would be covering, or feels like it is useless, then he is only concerned about the grade, and his level of focus on learning drops. Landon directly stated, “If it’s a class that I just have to take to get through a degree program, then I think anybody taking any class that they don’t want to take... they just care about the grade.” Dmitri also noted that in undergraduate school he only focused on the grade because of the fact that most of his classes did not obviously apply to what he wanted to do with his life, so his goal was just to “get the grade and get out of here.”

One participant, Dmitri, stated that he is mainly grade-oriented, but still had a lot of good things to say about how his medical school classes were making him more learning-oriented. He attributes this to the fact that, in medical school, there are no letter grades assigned. It is a pass/fail system where anything over 70% is a passing grade. In addition, the content is directly applicable to what he wants to do with his life. Since he wants to know the content and does not have to worry about what his grade is beyond getting above 70%, he is more motivated to learn. Dmitri compared this to the class in undergraduate school from which he said he remembers the most. In this class, the professor was very passionate about the content, which made him passionate about the content. The professor was also an easy grader as long as you were willing to put in the effort. Dmitri said that, in undergraduate school, that was the class he wanted to learn the most in.

Only two participants had answers that stated that they are currently not grade-oriented but are instead learning-oriented. Of those two, Landon was the only one to state that, realistically, he is learning-oriented just because he has always been a learning-oriented person, so that overflows into how he approaches his classes. As previously stated, Landon noted that the

only classes in which he focuses on the grade over learning are ones where he feels that he does not actually need to know the content of the class and is only in the class because it is required for his degree. Rose also expressed that she previously would have identified as a grade-oriented individual, but now that she is in her MFA she is more learning-oriented. Rose worked for several years in her field of study between undergraduate and graduate school. She expressed that this experience showed her that jobs in the real world focus on things entirely different than what most rubrics in school seem to make out as important. Because of this, now that she is in graduate school, she is not worried about the grade that she receives, but just that she is producing quality content.

**Interview Question #4:** Have you ever had a class where you were very engaged with learning the course content and minimally focused on your grade? If so, why do you think that you felt that way toward the class? How were you graded/what were you graded on in that class?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Participants discussed a wide variety of answers to this topic, but there were still several major themes that presented themselves across many of the participants' answers.

The first theme that arose was centered around projects, presentations, experiences, or "hands-on" assignments rather than tests and quizzes. 10 of the 15 participants specifically brought up that the classes where they felt the most engaged with learning the course content and the least concerned about their grades were ones that had assessments and assignments geared more towards these things. Some of the students thought this was the case because those types of assessments allowed them the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them in a way that tests and quizzes do not allow. Chauncey discussed this when he talked about one of his counseling

classes where the grades primarily came from assignments where the students had to be the ones to teach concepts to the rest of the class. He said that it was “just a big learning experience for all of us.” He noted that many of the students did not know what they were doing at first, but that was okay because the awkward practice that they got with each other was more important. They were allowed to make mistakes and learn from them without worrying if it would affect their grade. It was more about the interactive class engagement. Joseph noted a very similar thing in the counseling class that he had taken as well.

Brayden discussed a similar thing about the IT labs that he had to complete in one of the classes that he took. The labs were graded in a pass-or-fail manner. If you completed the code correctly, you got a 100% on the assignment. If not, you got the opportunity to try again until you got the code right. Brayden said that this incentivized risk-taking, essentially allowing him to try, fail, and learn from his mistakes without worrying about it affecting his grade. In fact, even though the majority of the points in the class were associated with these labs, Brayden noted that it felt like there were no points to worry about at all with these assignments. He did say that there were a couple of quizzes in that class as well, but he was not a fan of them since the kind of content they tested over he would not realistically remember a couple of months later. The things that he learned how to do in the labs, however, he noted that he uses at his work all of the time.

Dexter noted a very similar experience to this with a coding class of his own.

Several other participants also made statements that very clearly showed how helpful experience/project-based assignments have been to their learning. Nickee stated, “it was really, like, the doing part that helped me learn this stuff.” Stanley responded, “So I think having really hands-on classes in my undergraduate school really helped me learn in an environment where the grade wasn’t the forefront of my desire.”



Interestingly enough, two students, Dexter and Annaliese, also talked about an experiential form of learning/evaluating students that had been paired with normal rote memorization. In Dexter's example, he began talking about how beneficial it had been that his astronomy teacher tested if he knew the different star systems by scheduling a one-on-one with him and having him verbally talk him through the different star systems. It was not until Dexter was part way through describing this experience that he realized that he was technically being tested over the exact same content that a traditional test would cover, but the one-on-one conversational format had given him a more approachable environment to express this knowledge. Similarly, Annaliese described how, as an aviation major, in some of her flight classes, she had to learn large amounts of content through rote memorization, but these large amounts of content were tested by her ability to apply that information and correctly fly the plane and do all of the correct procedures. In addition, instead of getting a traditional grade, Annaliese was assessed on an RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) Scale from 1-5. A 1 means you still need teaching, a 2 means you made major errors, a 3 means you made minor errors, a 4 is standard, and a 5 is above standard.

The second theme that arose in the participants' answers was that they were more likely to be focused on learning the course content in a class if they already felt secure in the fact that they would get the grade that they wanted in the class. 10 of the participants brought this up at some point. Sometimes this was because the class was legitimately easy. Most of the time, however, the students were secure in their grades because the assignments had some sort of pass/fail nature to them. This was present in the labs that Brayden and Dexter talked about, as well as the teaching activities that Chauncey and Joseph discussed were present in their counseling classes. Joseph specifically discussed how, since the topic at hand was a little

subjective in nature, the professor would give you a 100% on those kinds of assignments as long as you were putting in the effort and most of what you were doing was good content. She would also give feedback along the way. Nickee noted a similar thing when she spoke about how her art classes were always graded on self-improvement, and as long as you were showcasing creativity by pushing yourself personally as a designer and were meeting the few necessary assignment stipulations, then you would get a good grade. Harper noticed this in her art classes as well. She had a professor that told them up front, “I am not here to wreck your GPA, so you do not have to worry about your grade.” Harper noted that this took all of the pressure off, and she was freed up to only worry about learning. When graded, she only received a few points off, but then received a lot of feedback for how she could improve for next time. The focus was more on the feedback than the grade. In general, five students brought up the fact that feedback or one-on-one evaluations with their professors.

Only Landon expressed that extremely difficult classes were what would make him maximize focusing on learning and minimize focusing on a grade. He stated that if he were ever in a class where he had no hope of getting a good grade, then the only possible benefit he could get out of the class would be if he learned as much as he could. Because of this, in those situations, he would heavily focus on learning and forget about worrying about the grade since he did not think he could achieve the grade anyways.

Several students also expressed that assignments that have a chain of small projects that build off one another were helpful. For example, Harper noted that having those smaller projects that connect to a large project helps break down and make the large project less difficult.

Brayden also noted that when his coding labs built off of one another, it motivated him to keep

up with all of the labs because he would always need the previous knowledge in order to feel adequately prepared for the next one.

Another theme that arose in the participants' answers, even though it is not directly related to grading, was that having a good relationship with their professor was important to them caring about learning more than the grade in a class. Rose stated, "I felt like the relationship I had with the teacher drove a lot of what made me want to succeed." Dmitri said a similar thing, expressing that it was the fact that his professor put less emphasis on grades and more on the fact that he cared about the course material and the success of each of the students. Bailey also stated, "I'm very relationally driven. So if the professor is someone that I like and want to do well in that class, then that drives me to learn the content generally more." Overall, five participants expressed something similar to this.

Two students—Bailey and Bradford—said that they have never had a class where they truly focused on learning more than the grade.

**Interview Question #5:** Have you ever had a class where you were very focused on your grade and minimally engaged with learning the course content? If so, why do you think that you felt that way toward the class? How were you graded/what were you graded on in that class?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Participants' answers to this question brought up a wide variety of things. Most of the answers highlighted the fact that *how* something was graded would affect if they were more focused on the grade rather than learning. Contrary to the last question, which focused on projects and experience-based learning, for this question, some participants brought up quiz/test-based assessments, although it was not as prevalent as project/experience-based was

in the last interview question. Four participants discussed how test/quiz-based testing caused them to be focused on the grade instead of learning because they just had to memorize and regurgitate the information for those assessments, and then usually did not remember any of the content by the following week.

The first two major themes that appeared across students' answers were that they are more likely to be focused on the grade when they receive no feedback or when every part of the grade is very heavily linked to the rubric. These two themes are grouped together here because they usually showed up with one another. 11 of the participants brought up at least one of these categories. Harper discussed how she was in a photography class which is a topic that she really enjoyed. The professor, however, graded them solely based on whether they hit structural aspects of the rubric. For example, did you submit 25 photos? Yes? Then you get a 100%. Harper noted that this was unhelpful because she received no actual feedback and never knew how she could improve, so she was more focused on the grade than learning. Brayden expressed a similar thing. He had a class where he received no feedback and always got really good grades. Because of this, he stopped trying because he knew that he would get a good grade anyways. Stanley also expressed a similar thing but from a little bit of an opposite situation. Stanley had a class where the professor kept giving him bad grades with no feedback, so eventually, he gave up on trying because why should he try if he is going to get the same bad grade either way? Bailey also had an experience where she never received feedback on assignments and did not receive any of her grades until the end of the semester. In this situation, however, she felt that the professor's grades were really arbitrary and not based on a rubric at all.

Dmitri, Dexter, Joseph, Brayden, Nickee, and Annaliese all brought up how in the classes that they were in where they were extremely focused on the grade, the professor would dock

points for every little thing that was not perfect, exactly as it was supposed to be, even if it was unrelated to learning the content. They expressed things like, if you did not write your name correctly, you would lose points; if you did not do the correct formatting, you would lose points; and if you did not remember a phrase exactly, word-for-word, you would lose points, etc. Essentially, the grading was not holistic, and felt disconnected from the actual understanding of the content. Nickee said, “when it comes to classes where I was focusing more on the grades, it’s like, did you meet all of the expectations for the projects? Like one, two, three, very, very specific? ... If not, you get points off.” She summed up this idea by stating that it is the difference between completeness and correctness. Things that lean heavily into rubric standards focus on completeness, sometimes at the expense of technically being correct. Annaliese noted that when classes are set up like this, you are working to achieve an arbitrary standard of a professor rather than learn. Brayden summarized this by saying, “So points just kind of ruin that where we can’t really learn what the objective of the course is because we’re too focused on what gets me those points.” Once again, students are playing the game of grades rather than trying to learn.

That brings up another theme that appeared in many of the participants’ answers. 11 of the participants also noted that they were only focused on the grade in classes where they were either not interested in the topic, did not see career relevance in the class, or could not see any real purpose for why they were doing the assignments they were doing. Jerry summarized this best when he said, “If I am in a class, and I’m, like, “Why am I doing this?” ... I’m just going to be, like, I’m getting the grade, and I’m getting out of here.” Jessica stated a similar thing for a class she was in where all of the presentations they had to do were from content straight out of the textbook that they were supposed to read anyway for other homework. It was also content

that she said she did not see any value in having to know because it was so easily accessible. At any point in time she could look up and have that information.

In a similar vein, seven participants gave answers that stated they were more grade-oriented in classes where they did not feel like they actually had to learn the content in order to achieve the desired grade. Classes like this included assignments like discussion boards, open book tests, projects where you could easily copy and paste what you needed, and tests that required large amounts of memorization that were separated from application. Dexter and Bradford both also brought up experiences where they did not understand the content in a class, and the professor basically gave them the answers to put down so they could get the grade they wanted, even though they had no idea what they were doing or why the things the professor was telling them to do was the correct answer. Dexter noted that he believed his teacher was doing this because the school wanted to reach a certain academic standard so that they could advertise more about how good of a school they were.

Brayden brought up a few interesting additional points as well. He noted that he became more grade-oriented when given really hard and big assignments that were not broken down into smaller steps. He said that this adds a lot of stress because you basically only have one shot at getting it right, and if you do not, you lose a ton of points in the class. He also noted that he becomes more grade-oriented in classes where each assignment has a very small point value. He brought this up for two reasons. First, he noted that this often causes an imbalance in point distribution for assignments, meaning he starts to play the game of grades and tries to figure out which assignments will get him the most points. Second, he noted that this leads to him skipping some assignments and not doing them at the end of the semester because he can still keep the grade he wants without completing them. He said that this bothers him, however, because every

assignment is supposed to be tied to a course learning outcome, so it does not make sense to him why you could skip over some of those assignments—and potentially certain course learning outcomes—and still pass the class.

One participant, Jerry, noted that he became grade-oriented in a very difficult class that he was in where they were allowed as many attempts as they wanted for the labs. Since he felt that he did not understand the content at all, he would basically submit the same assignment over and over, making little tweaks to it each time, hoping that it would get him more points, even though he had no idea what was going on.

**Interview Question #6:** What form of assessment (i.e., test, quiz, project, paper, homework, etc.) do you think best motivates a student to learn course content? How have you personally experienced this?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Of all of the interview questions up until this point, this question had the most uniformity in the way that students answered. Every student except for Bailey stated in some manner that it was experiential, hands-on, types of assessments, like projects, papers, or presentations, that led to them learning content better and more thoroughly. Even though Bailey was the only one to *only* bring up and talk about tests for this question, however, she described a specific type of test that is more experiential in nature. Bailey discussed how there are ways to make tests in a manner that force students to actually learn content for tests, although that does not normally happen. She gave an example of a form of test that did this well. In one certain class, she had to memorize a large number of different theories. The test over this content then made her summarize each of the theories in her own words, rather than pick out specific facts

about each one. In a sense, the test was several mini papers which made it more experiential and less rote memorization.

As previously mentioned, however, the overarching theme for students' answers to this question was that presentations, projects, papers, and any other sort of experiential, hands-on method form of learning is the best form of assessment. Brayden noted that assignments like his coding labs were the most beneficial to him. He described these types of projects as ones that make the student "do some critical thinking, but [are] not challenging to the point where you feel like you are a fish out of water." Most of the participants referenced themselves as "hands-on" learners, and Stanley said that he is this way because it gives him the opportunity to try and fail. When he does fail, his professors then provide feedback on how to succeed next time, and that is how he learns best. Nickee brought up the fact that she finds that projects and papers are more effective because there are fewer time constraints than with tests, and you are interacting with the content over and over again, which cements it into your memory better. In addition, both she and Annaliese noted that projects and papers give the student an opportunity to discover newfound interests that they might not have previously known about. This happens because they have a chance to tailor the project to something interesting and personally applicable to them. Dexter also spoke about how projects broke out of the "one-size-fits-all" mentality and gave him the opportunity to creatively find a way to show his knowledge of content that he felt he was unable to demonstrate through traditional tests. Chauncey recounted a specific experience where he had to write a paper about how to make an evidence-based treatment plan for social anxiety. He concluded by saying that "it really made me understand more about the topic versus if I had just had to take a test on it." Even students like Bradford, who stated that he hated projects, and



Joseph, who said that he found presentations anxiety-inducing, both noted that they still learn the most from these types of assignments.

Nickee also had a very unique example of an experiential form of assessment and engagement that she found incredibly beneficial to her education and mindset toward learning. This method of learning is called the Harkness. Prior to attending college, Nickee had gone to a school that split the elementary, middle, and high school into three separate forms of learning. Elementary was the grammar school that focused on teaching students the terms, information, and basic knowledge of Latin that is needed to thoroughly understand dialogic encounters. The middle school focused on dialectics. At this point, students were encouraged to start seeking out information and learning for themselves. Instead of just being given information by the teachers, students now had to research and come to conclusions on their own. The high school then focused on rhetoric. This taught students how to adequately argue and defend their ideas, interacting with others in a manner that brings about new insight and conclusions. At this point, students then got to put these skills to the test in what was referred to as a Harkness. Students were given a topic that the teacher wanted them to learn about, and then had to research it and come to class prepared to engage in a round table discussion where they had to present and defend their ideas with their fellow classmates. Nickee recounted that this method worked so well at getting her to be excited about learning that she and her friends would often find themselves accidentally starting their own Harkness with each other outside of class. Nickee said that teachers tracked how many times people contributed to the conversation and who spoke to whom in order to determine grades for these kinds of assessments.

Three of the participants, Annaliese, Stanley, and Joseph, all stated that being made to teach content to other students is one of the things that makes them learn the most. Stanley and

Joseph added the caveat that you have to know that the professor and other students can and will ask you questions about your presentation; this way, you are further motivated to thoroughly teach yourself the content. This is interesting to note because Stanley had previously, in the interview, discussed a class with a similar set-up, but this was the class where he had been the least motivated to learn course content and was solely focused on the grade. When asked about this, he clarified that the first class he had discussed did not put an emphasis on engagement with the presentation, whereas the second one did. In both classes, he was not interested in the content, but knowing that his knowledge was going to be tested by his professor and peers through class discussion made him motivated to learn the content in the second class. He concluded, “I think that the engagement, at the end of the day, is what made the difference.”

It is also interesting to note that although this question only asked for students’ opinions on the best forms of assessment, seven of the participants still specifically brought up that it is definitely not tests or quizzes. Most of their answers were centered around the fact that tests and quizzes are based on memorization and that most of the content memorized will be quickly forgotten after the fact. Chauncy stated this viewpoint very well when he said, “with tests and quizzes, it’s just regurgitating, like, different things that you’ve had to memorize. It’s not practically applicable unless you are studying for a license exam or something.”

One participant, Landon, brought up an insightful point on this question. He noted that different types of topics need different types of assessments. Some things require rote memorization, and some things require application of knowledge. His undergraduate classes were in sports management, and he spoke about how this topic was one that did not require any rote memorization, so the most beneficial assessments were project or application-of-knowledge based. Now he is in medical school. Some of his classes still require the application-of-

knowledge assessments, but some also include the need for a lot of rote memorization now. For those classes, he said the best form of assessment is when he has one big test at the end of the semester from which all of his points come. This motivated him to learn all of the content thoroughly throughout the rest of the year. He said that these tests were broken up into three parts: multiple choice, short answer, and essay questions. These three sections are important because it allows him to be tested on the rote memorization aspects that are needed while also giving him an opportunity to apply that knowledge. He also noted that if you have all three of those sections, hopefully, one of them will actually get the content to stick for you.

Other things that are interesting to note are that two students, Brayden and Jessica, both brought up that the best projects are ones that include smaller sections that build up to a larger end result. They both noted that this takes pressure off of the final project because having the smaller sections gives them the chance to try, fail, and receive correction before their actual final submission. Rose specifically noted something that seems contrary to this, however, because she said that if a project is broken down into too many little steps, and essentially micro-managed, she loses motivation for the final result. It is also interesting that two different students, Jessica and Dmitri, noted that they would be more motivated for tests if they were held verbally, one-on-one, with the professor. Dexter also expressed this in a previous interview question.

**Interview Question #7:** What form of assessment (i.e., test, quiz, project, paper, homework, etc.) do you think least motivates a student to learn course content? How have you personally experienced this?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). The participants' responses to this question, much like the last one, were

incredibly uniform. Every single one of the participants stated at some point during this question that tests and quizzes were the form of assessment that least motivates a student to learn course content.

Stanley specifically stated, “I am a firm believer and a strong advocate that tests and quizzes are not a strong way for students to learn ... I think tests and quizzes are one of the biggest false ways for people to prove that they know a subject.” This was a sentiment that was shared by multiple other participants. Nearly all of them brought up in some way that it can be very easy to get things right on a test and then not internalize, understand how to apply, or remember any of the concepts long term. Harper summarized everyone’s thoughts well when she stated, “you memorize it, but then you forget it once its no longer relevant than truly, like, learning and internalizing concepts.” Three participants in particular, Joseph, Rose, and Dmitri, called out open-book tests as an especially bad form of testing because they do not incentivize any kind of learning or problem-solving. Dmitri said on this topic, “Whenever I’ve had, like, an open book test or something along those lines, like, I just— I celebrate because I’m like, ‘Oh, so you don’t have to learn it!’ ...but also, like, I’m not learning anything.”

Another theme that popped up for why the participants thought that quizzes and tests were the least motivating form of assessment was that they are stressful. Stanley brought up that tests are a “stress inhibitor” for him as opposed to other forms of assessment. Jessica brought up that tests make her feel stressed, panicked, and nervous, making it more difficult for her to know what the right answers should be. She also wanted it noted that she said, “I hate pop quizzes. Say something about this. Yes, I hate them.” Nickee as well brought up that even though she is a person who loves learning and loves getting as much information as possible, tests are daunting to her. This is because she could have just spent weeks learning about and discussing a topic, but

when the test rolled around, she felt pressured to know every last possible little detail of everything that was covered. If she does not, then she might choose to randomly ask about the one detail she did not know, and then her grade will suffer immensely just because of the bad luck. This is the same kind of pressure that Dexter noted has led him to cheat on tests in the past. He noted that it is “anything at all costs to get the grade,” even if that cost is learning.

There were a few other interesting things brought up about why tests and quizzes are the least motivating for students as well. Jerry brought up that quizzes can be worth so few points that you do not even worry about studying for them. Brayden brought up the fact that the content he has been tested over on quizzes and tests does not seem like they have any relevance to his future career. He specifically noted that he is currently working in IT while also taking IT classes online, and he has never had to recall information that he was tested on in any of his classes. He said that the type of information he was tested over is stuff that no one in the industry memorizes, and it is all stuff that people just look up whenever they need it. The content of stuff covered in his labs and projects, however, he said that he daily has to do things that he learned to do in those.

There were two other forms of assessment that were brought up as well for this question. The first was labeled homework/busywork. Landon classified this kind of work as anything that he could just turn off his brain while doing. Bailey mainly classified this as class readings that were either never clearly linked to the content covered in the classroom or were just exactly what you were being taught in the lectures anyway. This made that kind of homework busywork in her mind. She noted that homework readings would be more beneficial if you knew that you were going to have actual discussions in the classroom that proved you had read the content. The second additional type of assessment that was discussed in answers to this interview question

was discussion boards. Bradford made it very clear in his interview that the discussion board is the most useless, time-wasting assignment that has ever existed, and he did so in some very expressive language to help get his point across. Specifically, he stated that sometimes he has to consciously make a choice between doing his discussion board and getting in a car wreck and going into a coma so that he does not have to complete it, amongst other colorfully dark analogies for how bad discussion boards are.

Two participants, Nickee and Bradford, did note that quizzes could potentially be useful if utilized correctly. Since they have lower points and are low-stress, if they are implemented frequently, then they could potentially help students retain certain memorization content. Both of these participants stated this in a way, however, that made it seem like this is a possibility that they could see for quizzes but have never personally experienced. Bailey also noted that tests could be useful for helping students retain content if they are built in a way that makes students have to do good analysis and comprehensively understand things.

**Interview Question #8:** Take a moment to list out everything that you can think of that might affect a student's final grade. What does each of these things communicate to you about what you should value in a class?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). It was the interview question that was the most confusing to participants and therefore elicited a wide variety of answers, some of which did not directly relate to the intended topic of this question. It is still important to go through the participants responses, however, because it shows what kind of thing comes to a student's mind first when thinking of what will affect their grade in a class.

The first thing to note is that most of the students began by expressing that understanding of the course material and their grades on tests, quizzes, projects, and papers would affect their final grade in a class. This kind of answer was to be expected, so participants were asked to think even deeper. The next most common theme that arose was that attendance and class participation would affect a student's final grade in a class, however, there were two primary different takes on what kind of values this communicates. Nine of the participants expressed that classes that emphasize attendance and participation in the classroom want students to value learning and the idea that they will not properly comprehend the course content unless they are present and engaging with the material. Dexter said, "I think class participation in the learning is, like, a great value ... because then I'm, like, actively listening, actively involved, and learning things from my peers and teacher." Dmitri specifically noted that when a course assigns a lot of points to participation, they are communicating that you, as a student, should value learning that material and being present. Stanley had a little bit of a contrary view, however. He still noted that class participation is extremely beneficial to communicating to a student that they should value course materials, but when point values start getting assigned to that attendance and class participation, all the course really values is getting warm bodies in a room. Stanley said that people who are actually interested in participating and learning would be there no matter what it takes, regardless of whether there are points attached to it. By assigning points to attendance and participation, the course is not secure in its own ability to need students to be present in order to learn, so it has to mandate a way to get warm bodies in the room (who likely will not be interacting with course concepts, at least in a beneficial manner, anyways). Bradford also expressed that professors who are extremely strict with attendance policies communicate that they have no care for the student and any realistic life circumstances that might come in the way of them and the class.

This segues in one of the next major themes that appeared amongst student responses: that a student's interest level in a course and their relationship with their professor and fellow classmates can affect their grade. These two ideas are paired together because the six participants that mentioned these things almost always mentioned them in tandem with one another.

Annaliese brought up how the classes where she felt that she had a good relationship with her professor and her fellow classmates were always the ones that she enjoyed the most. It was in those classes that she also felt as if she was able to retain the most information. On the flip side, Joseph noted that in classes where there was little interaction with the professor and other students, the content was not as easily retained. The professor made the class boring, so there was less interest in the content, which made it harder to engage with learning the material. Jerry discussed this idea as well. He said that if he does not have a good relationship with the professor and other students in his class, then he will not feel engaged enough to learn the course content.

A third major theme that appeared in the participants' answers was that a professor's approach to rubrics could affect a student's final grade. Some students discussed how there are professors who do not grade based on a rubric, and instead grade based on personal biases that they have. Landon and Jerry noted that these could be personal biases based on what the professor thinks about you as a student, whereas Nickee and Joseph noted that they could be biases based on what content the professor thinks is correct in subjective situations. In the first situation, the student has no strong connection between the work they are doing and the grade that they are receiving. In the second situation, the student is disincentivized to dig into learning course content, and instead is encouraged to just mimic and reflect whatever opinion the professor believes. In either case, this communicates that the student should value doing whatever it takes to please the professor rather than delving into learning the content for



themselves. Brayden specifically stated that it communicates that the student should conform rather than think against the grain, as this is what their grade depends upon.

On the other extreme, some students noted that there are professors who get really strict and nitpicky, adhering blindly to an extremely detailed rubric and list of expectations. In these situations, learning and comprehension get lost under a long list of checkboxes that need to get ticked off in order to achieve the grade. Stanley brought up how, in classes like this, students are disincentivized from taking risks and trying new things, as doing anything more than exactly what the rubric tells them to do could risk them the loss of points. Bailey said, “I think what a lot of these things communicate to me as a student is that, um, often structure and following procedure is valued more—or at least as much as—um, organic learning.” She went on to note, however, that some sort of structure is needed. Finding that sweet spot in the middle zone is what makes the most effective grading. Jerry expressed this sentiment as well when he recounted how both “super arbitrary” grading systems as well as “hyper rubric-based” ones each cause their own issues, so he prefers one in the middle that still has some sort of structure to it. Rose also noted in her interview that, since she has already experienced the “real-world” work environment, she would rather walk away from a class understanding the concepts and how to create work that has that “wow-factor” rather than know all of the key terms and meet all of the “nitpicky” rules.

Aside from these major themes, there were a few small themes that arose in student's answers as well. Brayden, Chauncey, and Dmitri all discussed how the point distribution of assignments could affect a student's final grade. They noted that when an assignment takes a lot of time and effort to complete but is worth a very low number of points, it communicates that the content learned from that assignment is invaluable and skippable. Dmitri also noted that classes with lots of big tests value the ability to compartmentalize and memorize large amounts of

information, whereas tests with lots of papers value the ability to apply knowledge. Bradford noted that quizzes could communicate a value for the slow accumulation and repetition of knowledge if they are implemented consistently throughout the semester and eventually lead to a cumulative test. In a similar manner, Annaliese discussed how classes with lots of small projects that build onto each other communicate a value for deep learning and understanding and that making mistakes is okay, whereas classes that only have a huge project worth a large number of points communicate that a student should value for the grade and doing everything right the first time. When it comes to homework, Bradford stated that classes that if there is no obvious discernable purpose for it, then it communicates that the professor is on a power trip, whereas Dmitri said that if the homework directly relates to the course content, then it communicates that the professor values the application of knowledge.

**Interview Question #9:** Take a moment to think about how late work is handled in the classes you have taken. What does this communicate to you about what you should value in a class?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Overall, participants' answers to this question were extremely uniform, with only a few outlier comments. In general, there were four different approaches to how late work has been handled in classes. The first method was to accept all late work at any point, the second method was to accept late work, but with a tiered method of introducing late penalties over time, the third method was to not allow any late work at all, and the final method could be implemented with any of the prior three, but was for professors to accept late submissions at no penalty if the student had a reasonable excuse. Students' explanations for what these different methods communicated that they should value in a class setting were very similar.

Participants generally seemed to agree that classes that have no deadlines or allow late assignments to be submitted at any point with no penalty do not incentivize students to learn. Nickee noted that without any deadlines at all, “students just won’t do the work.” Harper recounted that she had been in a class before that utilized “recommended deadlines,” and she theorized that this had been implanted with the intent that it would communicate a value for learning course content over a grade, but in reality, she found that it caused her to value legitimate deadlines more because she got behind on all of the assignments that she was not interested in doing. Bailey also brought up that if there were no late deductions because the professor just was not upholding the standard that they had set for the class, it caused her to lose respect for the professor and the class, making her not want to put in as much effort. Similarly, Brayden noted that if late policies were implemented inconsistently, it just taught him to value playing the game of grades as he got really good at guessing which assignments would most likely not end up getting late deductions taken off. Chauncey was the only one to note a contrary opinion. He said that, in graduate school, he has never had any late points taken off, even though the policy says that points should have been. This communicated to him that his professors understood the fact that college students have a lot of different things going on all at once, so all that matters is that the work gets done and gets done well. Chauncey was not against late deductions, however. He just thought that they should not be too strict.

Participants also generally agreed on what tiered late deductions over time communicated that a student should value in their classes. Harper stated it well when she said, “sometimes being done is better than being perfect.” She also was sure to note, however, that this is not always the case. Students like Rose, Annaliese, Joseph, Dmitri, Nickee, and Landon all expressed that late policies communicate that a student should value being punctual and accountable since that is

what is expected of employees in the workforce. On the other side, Nickee also discussed that being able to turn something in even if it is past the due date communicates to a student that, on occasion, taking the time to learn the content is more important than getting something in on time. Specifically, she said that a student should never be overly penalized for submitting something late if it's going to ultimately be a better end result because they had those extra 24 or 48 hours. Landon notes that having a tiered method of late deductions that increase over time is a happy medium as it introduces a little bit of leniency that avoids disincentivizing students to learn once something is past due since they can still receive points. Dexter made it a point to state that he believes that late work should never *not* be accepted, even if it gets a late deduction, because "if a student gives it their full attention and gives it their full effort ... it's more valuable than having it be turned in on time."

Nearly all of the students seemed to agree that, when a professor or class assigns a zero for anything past the due date, this does not communicate that they should value learning first and foremost. Harper noted that classes like this always pushed her to work harder, but made her value the grade much more than she did the learning. Bradford stated that classes with this kind of policy communicated to him that "the professor views your life as having to be centered around the class at all given points in time. No matter what's happening ... it implies that your grade is all that matters." He also noted that classes like this incentivize him to turn in work that has really poor quality just so that it is in on time. Stanley responded that systems like this communicate that "there is no point in learning past this point" about deadlines. Dexter said that professors who treat assignments this way create an environment that is "very harmful to students" and promotes "a lot of pressure and stress."

Nine of the participants talked about extensions. They all agreed that when a student has some sort of reasonable excuse for why something was handed in late, a professor should offer grace and leniency. Harper stated that when professors offered this kind of grace to her, she always knew that they really valued that she learned the content. Jerry, Stanley, Landon, and Jessica all in some way mentioned how it is communicated to them that a professor cares about them as an individual and values that they learn the course content when they are willing to periodically offer extensions for various life situations. Jessica even recounted how a professor once reached out to her near the end of the semester to let her know that she was missing two assignments and that he would still grade them if she turned them in. Since he showed so much care for her in this situation and valued her learning the content so highly, this caused her to want to care about the assignments, learn their content, and get them turned in. Rose also noted that policies like this could help relieve stress from the classroom environment for students. In addition, she discussed how different types of assignments could affect whether or not an extension makes sense. Specifically, she noted that assignments that require a little more creative exploration could be more lenient with extensions.

**Interview Question #10:** Take a moment to think about how the classes you have taken approach retake or redo policies on tests, homework, and projects. What does this communicate to you about what you should value in a class?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Participants indicated that there are three primary different methods that a class may utilize when approaching retake or redo policies. The first method is to not accept any retakes or redoes, the second method is to allow retakes or redoes, and the last method is to allow

retakes or redoes, but with some sort of deduction. On the whole, participants indicated that they have never or seldom taken classes that allowed retakes or redoes. If the participant had ever experienced a retake or redo in a class, it was much more likely to be a one-off situation that occurred rather than an actual policy that was consistently implemented across different assignments or classes.

For classes that implemented a strict “no retakes or redoes” policy, every participant, except for Chauncey and Dmitri, gave very similar answers for what this communicates to a student. Harper stated that this communicates that work “needs to be perfect the first time” and that it promotes “just moving on and accepting the grade that you got” rather than actual learning. Bradford, Rose, and Joseph all put a similar emphasis on the fact that this kind of policy communicates a stressful and immediate need for perfection. Bradford specifically stated, “I feel like if I were to blanket everything that I have said so far, there is, like, a push for, like, you to need to be perfect.” He then went on to describe how this does not accurately reflect the real world, as in the real world, you have a certain amount of leniency to make mistakes and learn from those mistakes. Rose noted that this push for perfection in one shot could “be intimidating” and leads to students not completing work at all out of fear of failure.

Jessica, Brayden, and Stanley all responded that this kind of policy communicates that professors do not fully understand the lives of their students. Jessica noted how sometimes you get a bad grade on a test, not because you are a bad student and do not know the content, but because you were prepared for the wrong format of test. Brayden said that it “doesn’t account for the fact that life happens,” and Stanley specifically stated, “What it communicates to me is that sometimes the professors don’t always understand the life of a student.”

Landon stressed that strict “no retake or redo” policies do not value learning, but instead communicate that once information is out of sight, it is out of mind now as well. He also indicated that these policies do not value the fact that different students learn different topics at different paces. Nickee also noted that when a student does not do something correctly, a strict “no retake or redo” policy punishes them by not allowing them a chance to do whatever the thing was correctly. She concluded by stating, “if the penalty is not actually having to do it correctly, then you’re not learning anything new.”

Annaliese and Rose both expressed that, in addition to the things mentioned above, these kinds of strict policies can also communicate a value for deadlines and promptness. Chauncey and Dmitri agreed with this viewpoint but did not express any of the other previously stated views about retake and redo policies. Dmitri also added that these kinds of strict policies communicate that a student that the course highly values the content so the student should as well.

Once again, aside from Chauncey and Dmitri, all of the participants gave similar answers to what had been communicated to them when a class or professor allowed them to retake or redo an assignment. One of the first themes that surfaced in almost all of the participant’s responses was that it communicates that mistakes are valuable to the learning process. Dexter specifically stated, “I’m all for retakes. I think they are some of the most helpful things you can have in your education ... I think the best way to learn is from your mistakes.” He expressed that he learned quicker in this fashion, and it was more valuable for him in the long run than just knowing the percentage of how well he did on an assignment. Several other students also indicated that they retain the content much better when they are allowed to retake and redo assignments. Nickee noted that this is partially because it exposes you to the content more, and

Harper stated that these kinds of policies allowed her to improve her work so much more than she would have been able to otherwise. Stanley responded that courses like these “are the ones that really resonate with me in the learning experience.”

Because of all these things working together, students agreed that courses with these policies communicate a value for learning over the grade, but also alleviate stress because it still allows the student to keep their grade up. Bailey stated that these kinds of professors value “actual learning, as opposed to just valuing structure and adherence to rules.” Similarly, Bradford boldly and immediately claimed, “Any class that allows this [retakes or redoes], the professor is trying to make sure you know the content. Classes that don’t really allow this... the professors are just the worst. Like they just don’t care.” Annaliese has had a similar experience. She has studied aviation and noted that tests in that program were very practical. Students had to demonstrate their knowledge one-on-one with a professor and would be rated as “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory” for each thing that they were supposed to know or be able to do. If they received an “unsatisfactory” then students were given another opportunity to demonstrate that knowledge at a later point in time. They did not have to repeat any of the portions that they had already received a “satisfactory” on. If they failed twice, it was then that they would be taken before a review board to discuss why it was that they were struggling, and a plan would be made to help them move forward. Annaliese expressed that these policies push students to strive for continual growth rather than aiming for perfection.

Jessica noted that one time she had a teacher in high school notice that she was struggling with the concepts in the middle of a chemistry test. He came up in the middle of the test and told her that she did not need to complete the test right then but could retake the test after the



weekend if she wanted. Jessica stated that, because of this experience, she knew the material so much better than she would have.

Five participants brought up that sometimes deductions are involved with retake or redo policies, usually an averaging of the two different scores. Four of these five—Bradford, Landon, Stanley, and Nickee—all noted that they think this is perfectly fine, as it communicates that students should value their first attempt while still allowing them to improve their grade as well. Brayden had a different experience, however, as he had a class where he could only get a quarter of the point values missed back. He said about this, “So you end up doing this massive amount of, like, work for no point reward.” Braydon then concluded that he could not see the point in redoing assignments under that kind of policy.

At one point, Jerry sidetracked and discussed how it bothers him that our education makes students spend so much time learning things that they are not interested in or feel are not relevant to them. He stated that he wished that the education system would allow students to spend more time in the classes that they really cared about. This would then, in turn, allow them to spend more time on assignments that they felt were really relevant to their learning.

**Interview Question #11:** How would you say that the grading system in America affects a student’s motivation to achieve the desired grade versus their motivation to learn the course content?

This interview question relates to RQ1 (What is the present state of students’ grade versus learning orientations in America?) and RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Every participant agreed that the way grades are approached in America heavily leads to a grade-oriented mindset. Dexter noted that, for him, in our current system,

learning is “a byproduct of just trying to do anything I can to get the grade,” when it should be that reverse.

Several themes emerged when it came to why this kind of mindset is so prevalent. The most prevalent of these themes was that, as a society, we put an emphasis on the grade over everything else. The grade is the standard of success and the only measure by which students are evaluated. Eight participants discussed this, stating that the GPA is what gets you into college and is what gets you the job. Stanley brought up that the GPA becomes your label, and students with higher grades are viewed as superior to people with lower grades. Chauncey even noted that he thought his parents did not care if he was learning anything as long as he got into college. Jerry, while mimicking the voice of a caveman, said that we as a society have gotten stuck in the mentality of “Number high equal learning a lot.” Essentially, he said that since we have used this as our standard of success for so long, we assume it is the only way to do things.

Another theme that arose among participants’ answers is that students’ heavy grade orientation comes from the intersection of society’s push for grades as the measure of success and the fact that grades are incredibly inaccurate and misrepresentative, making them easily manipulated. Brayden notes that this whole system is like investing. You put in time and effort to get points. Since current assessment practices do not always require students to learn course content in order to receive the desired grade, students take the path of least resistance, skipping over learning in the process. He says, “it incentivizes playing a game instead of actually learning.” Bailey also noted that our system has “gamified the learning process instead of learning for practical use” and Nickee similarly discussed how the grade can be a great motivator, but it does not necessarily reflect whether a student has learned any of the content. Joseph, too, brought up how you can play the game of points and just stop learning and

completing assignments once you know you have reached the threshold of points needed to get the grade that you want.

It is because of reasons like this that Annaliese brought up that it is getting too easy for people to get an A. She said that this has caused a dilution of our education system, so now a bachelor's degree is not enough. People need a master's degree or even a PhD to differentiate themselves. The goal is no longer learning. Education is just being completed because it has to get done. Landon also expressed this sentiment when he stated:

I think GPAs and grades tend to show that somebody was willing to put in some amount of work. Whether or not they actually learn the content, I have no idea ... It shows that a bunch of people are willing to run in the rat race for as long as they need to to get to wherever they want to go.

Another theme that arose among participants' answers was that society has a grade-oriented mindset since we have such a heavy emphasis on tests and quizzes over projects. Stanley noted that traditional tests and quizzes are geared to have students just regurgitate knowledge and never grow past that, which caps learning. Similarly, Bailey spoke about how tests and quizzes can assess abstract knowledge but are very bad at testing practical knowledge. Jessica and Chauncy both noted as well that teachers put a heavy emphasis on tests, sometimes just handing out information for students to memorize and regurgitate so that they can get the grade, even if they do not know why they are memorizing those things and will soon forget them.

Rose also had an interesting insight of her own. She recounted a class where she and her science teacher did not get along at all. By the end of the semester, her teacher failed her out of the course. What is interesting, however, is that the state that Rose lived in at the time had SOL,

or “Standard of Learning,” tests to evaluate whether students were learning the concepts that they were supposed to. Rose got a perfect score on the science SOL, because she completely understood the concepts. This experience led Rose to the following speculation about how specific classroom contexts might contribute to why we are more grade-oriented:

So maybe it is tied to whether or not, like, I feel like the teacher is creating an environment where I feel like it is safe but also motivating [to learn]. I don't know. This is causing me to be a little introspective.

**Interview Question #12:** If you could change anything about the grading system in order to make class and learning less stressful and more enjoyable, what changes would you make?

This interview question relates to RQ2 (From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?). Participants came up with a wide variety of ideas for this question. Some got very philosophical, like Jerry, who simply said that he would push our system to ask “Why?” more. Why do we grade the way that we do? Is it truly because it is the best? or is it just because that is what we have always done, so we blindly keep doing it, assuming that it is the best system out there? Stanley seemed to be already asking some of those questions, as he noted that he thinks our system needs a complete overhaul. He stated that the way we test and evaluate students comes from a time period when America was training children to work in factories, so there was a heavy emphasis on memorization, correct process, and order of operations. That is not the kind of work we are being trained to do anymore, so he expressed that we need a shift in mindset for how we view education.

Other participants gave more concrete answers, and several themes appeared in the ideas that they proposed. One of the most prevalent themes that appeared was students expressing the

sentiment that they would enjoy learning more if education was switched to something more similar to a pass/fail system. Six students—Dexter, Dmitri, Joseph, Rose, Brayden, and Landon—expressed this belief, even though several of them also stated that they were not sure exactly how this could be implemented, and it may not work for every type of class out there. Brayden specifically expressed how he wished points could somehow just go away because they incentivize him to just play the game of grades instead of actually focusing on learning course content. He said that this could be difficult to do, however, since we have been in a system for so long that only focuses on points for assessment. Dmitri noted that he is currently in a pass/fail system for medical school, and it has freed him up to just enjoy learning the content now that he does not have to worry about a GPA. He still receives grades on tests and homework, but there is no letter grade assigned to those percentages. Instead, the percentage just indicates whether you pass the class or not. Rose expressed how a pass/fail system does not simply have to be a single assessment at the end of a course where it is decided if you pass or fail. Instead, it could resemble something more like trade schools where there is a chain of milestones. She concluded by saying that it could be a system “that is maybe more based on, like, ‘Okay, you’re passing this. You can do this. Go on to the next level and learn,’ instead of grades.” In a similar vein of thought, Joseph indicated that a pass/fail system could include weekly or bi-weekly check-ups with the professor in order to receive feedback on how you are doing in the course.

The other most prevalent theme in participants’ answers was that they would change the system to include more experienced-based, practical forms of assessment, like projects and papers, rather than tests. Six students specifically answered with this kind of ideology as well—Annaliese, Jessica, Joseph, Bailey, Chauncey, and Rose. Chauncey indicated that, in general, these kinds of assessments make the class more “fun and engaging.” Other students—like

Bailey, Rose, and Annaliese—answered in a way that primarily focused on how projects give more of an opportunity to practically prepare students for the actual things that they will be doing once they step into their careers. Tests do not appear to be as competent at accomplishing this, so students are hungry for more chances to try out doing the things that they will actually be doing post-education.

In a similar vein of thought, four students—Annaliese, Nickee, Jessica, and Chauncey—all indicated that they would change the education system to include more class discussions that prompted students to engage in critical thinking. Nickee took the opportunity to bring up Harknesses again, stating that they were extremely beneficial to her, teaching her how to be curious, learn, and think for herself, so she wishes more of education was like this. Interestingly, while Chauncey was speculating how he would like to include more class discussions and engagement in the classroom, he reasoned out a process that was essential to the idea of a Harkness that Nickee had described.

Four students—Stanley, Rose, Bradford, and Landon—also brought up the fact that they would change the education system to include a more personal and individualized journey for students. Stanley speculated that it would be good to implement placement tests, because right now, school too often assumes that everyone is at the exact same level and grades them accordingly. If students were to be placed in an environment that reflected their competence on a subject, however, they would be able to be graded in a manner that reflects the kind of assessment and motivation that they need to reach that next level of skill and ability. Bradford also discussed the idea that forcing all students to do the exact same assignments can be counterproductive, because sometimes a student truly is struggling with and does not understand a concept. If a student does not understand the concepts behind a certain project, then forcing

them to do that project anyways will not help them better understand the topic at hand. It might be necessary for the professor to prepare some sort of individualized journey for that student first so that they can reach the point of understanding and learning. Rose noted that it could be beneficial for schools to help students develop a goal for what their intended career is, and then gear their projects toward things that would help prepare them for that specific profession.

Landon brought up a personal example of how an individualized journey benefitted him in his education. He recounted how, when he was younger, he had been homeschooled. He said that his parents never made him waste his time on anything that he considered busy work. If he thought that he knew a topic sufficiently, then they would allow him to skip all of the homework and assignments for that section and go straight to the assessment. If he was able to prove to them that he did indeed know the topic sufficiently, then he could move on to studying other topics. Landon expressed that he appreciated this because it allowed him to develop a love for learning, since he could focus primarily on the things that he either was interested in or truly was struggling with. This aligns with a complaint that Annaliese brought up in her own answer when she pondered on why students have to spend so much time taking classes that have no relevance to what they want to know and do with their lives.

Other minor themes appeared in students' answers as well. Three students discussed how they would appreciate it if they could get more feedback and one-on-one time with their professors. Harper specifically stated that she would like, "more, like, coaching and feedback, because it's like, if you get a grade but you don't know why you got the grade, you don't really know how to improve or grow in future ones." For similar reasons, three students also brought up how they think it is really important for students to be allowed retakes or redoes in their classes. Lastly, Rose gave some final thoughts on what the merging of feedback and points has

done to how students view the classroom environment. She said, “I think if you start attaching grades to feedback or criticism, it adds maybe an extra element of fear or intimidation, and they’ll start chasing just the grade as opposed to the quality of work.”

### **Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this study is qualitative and phenomenological in nature and seeks to explore the experiences of students in regard to how they have been graded and assessed. This will give insight into how they view learning experiences in the classroom, especially as it relates to grade and/or learning orientations. This chapter details the demographics of the 15 students who agreed to participate in this study and provides a detailed breakdown and comparison of their answers to the 12 different questions asked in their interviews. Specific notes are made on themes that emerged across multiple participants’ interviews, as well as on unique grading systems experienced by the students. The following chapter will discuss the conclusions of this study in relation to the research questions that have been posed, as well as review this study’s limitations and suggest what future research on this topic could look like.



## Chapter 5: Conclusions

The purpose of this study is qualitative and phenomenological in nature and seeks to explore the experiences of students in regard to how they have been graded and assessed. This will give insight into how they view learning experiences in the classroom, especially as it relates to their grade and/or learning orientations. A review of literature has been conducted on the current constructs and failings of our grading system, how various grade and/or learning orientations can affect students in the classroom, and the field of media ecology so that the idea of a grade as a medium can be applied to the classroom context to see what kind of effects it is invisibly asserting onto our students. Interviews were then conducted with current students to identify what their views and values are in the classroom, and what different aspects of the grading system contributed to this. This chapter considers the results of those interviews in light of previous research that was detailed in the literature review.

### Answering the Research Questions

Considering everything that has been discussed in this paper up until this point, the research has made the following conclusions in regard to the research questions posed at the beginning of this study.

**RQ1:** What is the present state of students' grade versus learning orientations in America?

In their research, Pollio and Beck (2000) concluded that, although both professors and students seem to espouse that they would prefer to be in learning-oriented environments rather than grade-oriented ones, on the whole, students currently tend to be grade-oriented. The findings of this study concur with this statement. Of the 15 participants interviewed, 14 of them stated that, idealistically, their classroom preference is to be learning-oriented. Bradford was the only one to state that his ideal was to be grade-oriented. Despite this fact, only two of the

participants—Rose and Landon—self-identified as being learning-oriented. Even amongst those two, the only reason that Rose identified as being learning-oriented was that she had gone and worked in her field of study for a few years between undergraduate and graduate school. Those few years spent getting real-world experience caused her to have a shift in mindset about how relevant grades are, as she realized how disconnected rubrics are from what is actually expected of people in the workforce. By the time she returned to school to pursue an MFA, she had determined that all that was relevant was that she was able to turn out quality work that resonated with what she desired to produce.

In addition to this, when participants were asked how the grading systems in America contribute to a grade or learning orientation, every single one of the participants said that they heavily influence students to be more grade-oriented. This was the only interview question that participants unanimously agreed upon, aside from the fact that all participants also brought up quizzes and/or tests at some point in time when asked what form of assessment least motivates a student to learn. This is highly problematic when taken in tandem with research on students' learning/grade orientation matrices. Only students who were identified as *H-L* (High Learning-Oriented and Low Grade-Oriented) were associated with all of the positive characteristics that people tend to want to be associated with a student (Eisen et al., 1986). These students are more highly motivated, view problems as engaging challenges to overcome, perform better in classes, and tend to experience less stress and more enjoyment in their classes. The second that a high grade orientation was introduced into the mix, these qualities were diminished, even if the student was already high in learning orientation as well and had been identified as *H-H*. This means that, because our system is skewed toward pushing students into a grade-oriented mindset, it does not matter if the student has already developed a high learning-oriented mindset in

tandem with this. The fact that the system is leading students down a track of grade orientation as well is going to introduce negative class engagement qualities into the student that we generally do not want to be associated with them. The only way that a student can truly achieve an *H-L* on the learning/grade orientation matrix at the moment is if they are able to go against the grain and actively fight against the influences of our current grading system. These students resemble what Hobbs (1974) labeled “The Conscientious Objector.” He said that they are “that small band of students who have won the professors’ respect by conventional achievement yet have the intellectual and emotional resources to play at the grade game without becoming addicted” (p. 239).

**RQ2:** From the student perspective, what do different aspects of the grading system in America communicate that a student should value in the classroom setting?

This research question is pertinent because of the field of media ecology, as discussed in the literature review. The grade—and all of the systems surrounding it—qualify as a medium according to media ecology, as a medium is nothing more than a channel through which something can be conveyed and can go so far as to “represent practices and processes” (Strate, 2017, p. 94). This is important to note because, as Postman (2007) noted:

They [media] are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like. (p. 10)

One must conclude, therefore, that the grading practices, and all systems surrounding it, that are used in a given classroom will, “by unobtrusive but powerful implication,” influence and alter

the way a student views and therefore interacts with the learning environment. The grade even has the power to alter a student's grade and/or learning orientation.

The grading system as a whole, however, is made up of a plethora of tiny components and characteristics that each individually contributes to influencing a student's values in the classroom. With this in mind, it is important to identify what each of these characteristics is and determine whether they are communicating that students should value a learning-oriented environment or a grade-oriented one. From there, it will be easier to assess how professors should alter the grading system as a whole in order to have the medium of the grade's invisible communications to the students promote a learning-oriented environment, rather than the grade-oriented one that it is currently communicating.

Pulling from the data and information gained in the participant interviews, the researcher of this study was able to synthesize a list of 15 components of the grading system that were heavily discussed and identified by the students themselves in order to individually assess the grade/learning orientations of each one. Lance Strate's (2017) model for how to study a medium in media ecology, as well as Marshall McLuhan's (1988) Four Laws of Media were kept in mind while determining this list of components. Strate's (2017) model identifies that there is an interconnected nature between medium, biases, effects, and environments, as each one can flow into and/or be influenced by each of the others, and McLuhan's (1988) Four Laws of Media pose the following questions:

1. What does the medium enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate?
2. What is pushed aside or obsolesced by the new medium?
3. What recurrence or retrieval of earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form?

#### 4. What is the reversal potential of the new form?

These concepts influence and greatly broaden the idea of what it means to be a “component” or “characteristic” of the grading system. This can include everything from methods of communicating a grade to a student to what students are even being graded on. For some things on the following list, it is not immediately obvious how they are a component of the grading system as they are a seemingly unrelated environmental factor or effect. The truth of the matter, however, is that the factors listed below can all have an influence on and/or be influenced by decisions made in how we grade. The following list of components has been organized in alphabetical order and will each be followed by a brief assessment of how they influence student's grade/learning orientations.

#### *Application of Knowledge Assessments*

Application of knowledge assessments are composed of any sort of assignment that is experiential in nature and requires a student to be able to demonstrate the practical application of knowledge on a specific subject as opposed to rote memorization. These kinds of assessments most commonly are discussed in the forms of projects and papers, but can manifest in other forms as well, like labs and presentations. Participants largely agreed that these sorts of assessments promoted a learning orientation, as 10 out of 15 of the participants brought up these sorts of assessments when asked to recall a class where they felt that they were primarily focused on learning and minimally focused on a grade, and 14 out of 15 of the participants stated one of these types of assessments as the form of assessment that best motivates students to learn course content. Students like Nickee attributed this to the fact that these kinds of projects cause you to have to interact with course content over and over again, which cements it in your memory

better, and students like Brayden mentioned how these kinds of assessments have proven to have the most career relevance.

### ***Busywork***

Throughout the course of the interviews, busywork tended to be labeled as “homework.” This was identified as anything that did not have a clear purpose for why it was being completed or, as Landon put it, anything that you can turn your brain off while completing. Bailey also noted that class readings often end up as busywork because of the fact that professors often do not integrate it into class discussion and engagement, but instead just lecture over the exact same content, making completion of the reading seem largely purposeless. Assignments and assessments like these are heavily linked with a grade-oriented mindset, as students expressed that they were only completing them in order to get the grade.

### ***Career/Interest Relevance***

This is the first component of grading on the list for which it is not immediately obvious how it is a component of the grading system. The reason, however, is fairly easy to see once it has been pointed out. What students are being graded on greatly influences how they view the grading system and education as a whole. As it stands, several students, like Annaliese and Jerry, expressed complaints and confusion about why students are made to spend so much time completing classes and assignments that have nothing to do with anything that interests them or their careers. Harper also mentioned how, even though she wants to be learning-oriented most of the time, when taking classes she has little interest in, like general education classes, she prefers to be grade-oriented because she is just there for the grade in those. A very common answer for the interview question about classes where students were most focused on the grade and the least focused on learning was that they were just not interested in the subject. As one may have

noticed now, forcing students to complete lots of assignments or classes that they have no interest in leads to a grade-oriented mindset.

Students also noted, however, that classes that had career relevance or were on a topic that they were interested in tended to make them more learning-oriented. Landon also noted how when he was homeschooled, he was given the opportunity to complete courses and coursework at his own speed, which allowed him the possibility to test out of classes that he was less interested in. This gave him more time to be able to spend on classes that he enjoyed or was legitimately struggling with, and he attributes a lot of his learning-oriented mindset to this education experience growing up. It is important to note that Landon was also one of the two students interviewed who self-identified as realistically learning-oriented over grade-oriented in practice.

### ***Class Discussions***

Many students brought up and discussed how group-oriented classes that had a heavy amount of class discussion worked into the structure of the course facilitated more of a learning-oriented environment. In most implementations that students brought up, the class discussions that benefitted learning the most seemed to resemble the Harkness that Nickee brought up in her interview. This is a class discussion that is led by the students where students are expected to teach, engage, and debate with one another until they come to their own conclusions on the topic at hand.

### ***Feedback***

Feedback on assignments and tests is another topic that came up multiple times throughout the course of the interviews. In general, it seemed that students wanted more feedback, and it was much more likely to contribute to a learning-oriented environment. Harper

stated that she would like “more, like, coaching and feedback, because it’s like, if you get a grade but you don’t know why you got the grade, you don’t really know how to improve or grow in future ones.” This seemed to be especially true when feedback was offered in environments not related to a grade or was paired with minimal point deductions. It appears that feedback, when in conjuncture with lenient grading, communicates that a student should value that mistakes are a part of the learning process and do not define the end result of what you are able to accomplish in a subject.

Minimal or no feedback seemed to always have the opposite effect, however, whether it is paired with no point deductions or with lots of point deductions. Brayden recounted how he had a professor that stopped leaving feedback on his assignments even though he was still giving him good grades on them. Brayden eventually assumed that the professor was not truly looking over those assignments, and so he stopped putting in as much effort because why should he put in effort on an assignment that he can get the exact same grade on with minimal effort? On the other hand, Stanley talked about how he had a professor who kept giving him horrible grades with no feedback. Eventually, he too gave up trying in that class since no matter how much effort he put in, he always ended up with a bad grade since he did not know what the professor was actually looking for. Because of things like this, it can be seen that minimal or no feedback leads to grade-oriented mindsets and values in students.

In a fascinating addition, this whole topic brought up an interesting flaw in the grading system that the researcher of this study had not previously thought of or encountered in his research. Previous studies have mentioned the fact that teachers are put in an interesting predicament as they must function as both *advocate* and *judge* (Brookhart, 1999; Kunnath, 2017), but stop there when the idea can be taken much further. Current grading systems have



merged feedback and appraisal into one thing, which has potentially been detrimental to the learning process. Feedback is a part of the process of learning. It requires mistakes in order to make itself relevant, because the goal is that next time the same mistakes will not be made. Mistakes and feedback are both needed for improvement. Appraisal, on the other hand, is an assessment of one's competencies and abilities on a certain topic. As it stands, we are appraising students on their entire competency in a subject in a manner that will permanently stick with them at the exact same time that we are offering them feedback because there is an expectation that they will have made mistakes. We have made the appraisal the feedback and, in doing so, have bumped up the timeline of when someone should be appraised far too much. It only makes sense to appraise someone *after* they have completed their learning. Anything before that should be feedback, yet the current grading system appraises at every step of the way. What this has communicated to the student is that mistakes are to be avoided at all costs, because, in the appraisal process, mistakes are failures to have learned a concept, whereas, in feedback, mistakes are merely the pathway to learning. This is part of the reason why we are seeing students like Bradford say things like, "I feel like if I were to blanket everything that I have said so far, there is, like, a push for, like, you to need to be perfect."

### ***Late Policies***

There are four primary different ways to how late policies can be approached according to this study's participants: there are no deadlines for anything, anything turned in after the due date is assigned a 0%, anything turned in after the due date is accepted, but with some sort of late deduction, and professors can offer extensions for extenuating circumstances. Students' general consensus indicated that the first of these methods attempts to promote a learning-oriented environment, but instead communicates to the students that they can value other things more

than the class, which leads to the student getting behind and having to rush their work, which, in the end, actually contributes to a grade-oriented mindset. Assigning a 0% to anything turned in after the due date was heavily associated with a grade-oriented mindset, as it primarily communicated to students that “there is no point in learning past this point” as Stanley put it. This leads to a value of grades above all else for students, as well as communicating that the professor does not care about or understand the student.

Accepting late work, but with some sort of late deduction, communicated to students that they needed to value getting things in on time, but that learning the topic at hand was still valuable even if it did get turned in late. Dexter even suggested that late work should always be accepted, no matter how late it is, because “if a student gives it their full attention and gives it their full effort ... it’s more valuable than having it be turned in on time.” All of these sentiments are learning-oriented in nature.

Lastly, are extensions. When a professor is lenient about giving extensions for reasonable excuses, this communicates that the professor both cares for the student and that they actually learn the course content. This contributes to learning-oriented values in the classroom.

### ***Participations Points***

Participation points did not clearly communicate either a grade orientation over a learning orientation or vice versa. Some students, like Dexter and Dmitri, thought that this communicated that students should value the course content, being in class, and learning the course material, which would lead to a learning-oriented mindset. Other students, however, like Stanley thought that this communicated that the class time was not relevant enough on its own to make people need to attend, so it had to mandate attendance in order to get warm bodies in the room. He indicated that since people are only attending or participating for the points, however, he

indicated that those students are not actually engaging with the course but are just pretending to. This seems to be promoting a grade-oriented mindset. Because of the contradictory answers presented by students on this topic, it is inconclusive whether or not participation points tend to cause more grade orientations or more learning orientations.

### *Pass/Fail Systems*

Students indicated that various pass/fail systems for grading students de-emphasize a grade orientation and can, if implemented correctly, simultaneously communicate a value for learning orientations. The most common form of this pass/fail system that came up among participants is a method that breaks up a topic into various small stages that build upon one another. Each of these stages serves as a gateway, or checkpoint, that a student is not allowed to pass until they have demonstrated satisfactory knowledge and competence to their educator. If the student is not able to demonstrate satisfactory knowledge, then they must stay at that stage, learn more, and try again. Dexter, Dmitri, Brayden, and Annaliese all described classes with forms of assessments like this when answering the question of if they have ever taken a class where they were heavily focused on learning and minimally focused on the grade. Rose also speculated that a grading system “that is maybe more based on, like, ‘Okay, you’re passing this. You can do this. Go on to the next level and learn,’ instead of grades” would make learning less stressful and more enjoyable.

Checkpoints in a system like this can even utilize various testing procedures like a letter or percentage grade. The catch is that, at these checkpoints, the grade is only used for pedagogical or feedback purposes for why the student did or did not pass this milestone. The grade does not stick with the student in any way and is not used as an appraisal of their entire competency of the topic at hand. What would be used as an appraisal, in this situation, is what

gateway or milestone a student has been able to make it to. Think of it like a boy scout collecting merit badges. The boy scout who has collected the most merit badges has demonstrated that he has the most competency, at least in certain areas of learning, not because he has been appraised by means of a percentage, but because he has passed X number of competencies in a subject. In a manner of speaking, this is similar to how we appraise people later in life, as grades are usually only relevant to careers immediately post-education. After that, an individual's collections of jobs and experiences is what sets them apart from other applicants.

Unlike traditional percentage-based systems of grading, this communicates to students that they should value full understanding and mastery of a topic, because they are not allowed to move on to the next major project or assignment until they have demonstrated satisfactory comprehension of the previous one. In addition, it allows assessments given at a checkpoint to be harder and more difficult, which allows for a more accurate appraisal of a student's abilities (Cross & Frary, 1999) since that assessment is only being used for pedagogical purposes in that moment and will not be linked to a permanent appraisal of that student's total topic competency.

### ***Point-Farming Enablers***

Participants identified several aspects of the grading system that enable a "point-farming" mentality, otherwise referred to as the game of grades. As the name suggests, these point-farming enablers emphasize the points tied to an assignment over the content material itself. Since the points are what get the student a grade, and not necessarily the content understanding itself, students tend to stop putting in effort once they have been able to "farm" the necessary number of points for the grade that they want, which obviously leads to a grade-oriented mindset over a learning one. Point farming enablers are anything that invites students to play the game of grades, but the primary things discussed by students in this study were as follows: imbalanced

point-to-effort ratios, classes where all assignments do not need to be completed to pass, and strict “checklist” rubrics.

Imbalanced point-to-effort ratios on assignments, in tandem with a society that evaluates success on a standard of percentage grade, communicate that a student should value the ability to be able to determine which assignments are going to get them the highest number of points for the least amount of effort. Understandably, this promotes a grade-oriented mindset. Classes that are structured in a manner where a student can reach their desired grade, quit completing assignments, and pass a class before they have finished the entirety of the course communicates to the students that the grade is more important than learning all of the class's proposed learning outcomes. Jessica gave an example of a class she appreciated that had a paper as a final project in the course. The paper covered important course-related content but was not worth an insane number of points. To ensure that students did not skip over this desired learning outcome, however, there was a caveat that students could not pass the course if they did not complete the paper, no matter what grade they would have had otherwise. Jessica said that she appreciated this because it communicated to her the value of the content of the paper, but since the paper was not worth an extremely large number of points, she also was able to enjoy the subject matter more as she was not afraid that, if she made any mistakes, her grade would be ruined. Strict “checklist” rubrics also can be seen as a point-farming enabler, but that will not be discussed here as there is a grading component section just dedicated to how various rubrics affect students’ grade/learning orientations.

### ***Project Decomposition***

Decomposition, in a non-biological sense, is the process of breaking up a task into several smaller parts. Many participants indicated that classes that are formatted in a manner where there

is a large final project for the course that has been broken up into smaller projects that are completed throughout the course of the semester and build off of one another to become the final project promote a learning orientation rather than a grade-oriented one. This is because, as Annaliese indicated, when a large project stands on its own, there is a lot of pressure that you have to get it right the first time with no mistakes. This would reflect a grade-oriented mindset. When a large project is paired with a series of smaller projects, however, they build off of one another to combine into the final project by the end of a course, students are given more leeway to make mistakes. In essence, the students are allowed to redo the project without a large hit to their grade as they make mistakes, since a smaller number of points is attached to each of the smaller portions of the projects. As long as they implement the feedback given and have corrected those mistakes by the time they submit the final project as a whole, their grade will not be significantly impacted, as the final project holds the largest influence over their final grade. This communicates to students that it is okay to make mistakes as long as they value learning and grow from those mistakes.

### ***Relationship with Professor/Classmates***

A student's relationship with his or her professor and fellow classmates is another component of the grading system that is not immediately and obviously identifiable as a component. A student's relationship with their professor and peers can be influenced by a wide variety of factors, but participants' responses made it very clear that the way that a professor grades and the types of assessments that they assign can heavily influence this relationship factor. For example, participants indicated that professors who are lenient with granting extensions and allowing retakes or redoes communicate that they legitimately care for the student and are striving for their success. In addition, participants like Harper also indicated that

professors who make it very clear that they are not out to wreck the student's GPA communicate the same thing. On the opposite end of this, it was also noted that professors who do not care about tanking a student's GPA and are not lenient with extensions or retakes communicate that they do not care for or understand their students. In a similar vein of thought, students also indicated that professors who put a heavy emphasis on methods of evaluation that are based on classroom discussion and presentations facilitate an environment where students are able to build better relationships with their peers.

This is important to note because participants also indicated that they tend to be more interested in the content of classes where they feel like they have a good relationship with their professors and peers. Multiple participants, like Bailey, brought this topic up when identifying what kind of factors contributed to making classes where they were more focused on learning than the grade. What this means is that any method a professor can use including building better relationships with and among their students to show that they genuinely care for them and their grades will help promote learning-oriented environments.

### ***Retakes & Redoes***

13 of the 15 participants indicated that professors and classes that allow retakes or redoes communicate that they want to make sure that students learn the material no matter what. It also communicates that professors care about their students and understand that sometimes things come up and get in the way of classes, or that sometimes certain topics take some individuals a little longer to master than others.

On the reverse, 13 out of the 15 participants also indicated that classes that use strict "no retake or redo" policies communicate to students that learning is not as important as the ability to be perfect on the first try. It also communicates that mistakes should be avoided at all costs and

that the professor does not care about their students. This means that allowing retakes and redoes promotes a learning-oriented environment, whereas not allowing retakes and redoes promotes a grade-oriented one. This is consistent with the findings of Wormeli mentioned in the review of literature (2011).

This is problematic because nearly all of the participants indicated that they have never been in a class that has allowed them retakes or redoes. If they have, it was always a one-off situation rather than a legitimate policy that the class was implementing. Logically, it does not make sense why we do this as it communicates to students that if they did not do it correctly the first time, not only is there no reason to go back and try again, but they are not allowed to. Nickee summarized why this is an issue when she stated, “if the penalty is not actually having to do it correctly, then you’re not learning anything new.”

### ***Rubrics***

Students identified that there are three primary ways that professors can approach rubrics for grading. They can utilize strict “checklist” rubrics, arbitrary rubrics (or lack thereof), or rubrics that fit in a zone somewhere in the middle of the previous two. Strict “checklist” rubrics provide a very detailed list of items that must be completed in order to receive points. The items are often related to many things other than learning course concepts, like formatting. Bailey stated about this, “what a lot of these things communicate to me as a student is that, um, often structure and following procedure is valued more—or at least as much as—um, organic learning.” As previously alluded to, strict “checklist” rubrics incentivize point-farming mindsets in students because they are more worried about checking off every item on the to-do list than actually learning. Students indicated that this form of grading with rubrics incentivized them to be heavily grade-oriented and minimally learning-oriented.



Arbitrary rubrics, or the complete lack thereof, communicate a similar thing to students. When professors graded students in a manner that was not linked to a rubric, or ignored the rubric, students indicated that this caused them to give up on learning in the class. When this manner of grading was linked with a large point deduction, students eventually gave up because they had no clue what they needed to do to get the grade or felt like they were just teacher-pleasing instead of learning course content. On the other hand, when this manner of grading was paired with minimal point deductions, students gave up on learning in the class because they (often correctly) assumed that the professor was not actually reading their content and realized that they could achieve the same level of grades with much less effort. This means that both of these approaches to grading with rubrics incentivize students to be grade-oriented and disincentivize learning orientations.

Students like Jerry and Rose indicated that rubrics that exist somewhere in between “nitpicky” and “super arbitrary” are what lead to the most learning. Rubrics cannot be completely arbitrary, but they do need a level of personal expert assessment from the teacher. Rose identified this element as the “wow-factor” of the project. It is not always possible to put that in a rubric in a non-subjective-sounding manner, but the pursuit of that “wow-factor” is what motivates students to learn and not just point farm.

### ***Societal Labels***

The societal labels and pressures associated with the grading system are another component of the system, and how we grade that may not immediately and obviously be seen as such. If we follow the flow of the medium of the grade as Strate (2017) suggests, however, and also keep in mind the question in McLuhan’s (2007) first law of media, “What does the medium enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate?” one can see the following. The method of

grading that we have produced as a society—namely, one that appraises students through means of a percentage, letter grade, or GPA—has created a bias that intensifies societal labels based on those systems. A student is a success if, and only if, they have a high GPA or good percentage in a class. That sentence alone should be alarming because nowhere in it does it mention learning and comprehension. Yes, the GPA and grades are supposed to be an indicator of learning, but as has already been established, we are well aware that they do a very poor job at accomplishing this accurately. Despite this, however, as a society, we have placed a lot of stock in labeling our students with this kind of system. Now we cannot imagine how we could appraise students in any manner other than by those kinds of things, so we continue to promote and develop grading policies that play into these systems. It can reasonably be assumed that this is part of the reason why we see tests and quizzes as the primary form of assessment in most education.

This heavy emphasis by society, however, on the grade as the indicator of success has caused students to be more focused on the grade than learning itself. Harper even very directly stated, “I’ve been in such a grading system for so long of being— evaluating myself through grades, that sometimes it feels like that the goal is to get the grade rather than to learn.” If, as a society, we were to switch our primary forms of assessing and appraising students to something that was more learning rather than point-based, as suggested in the Pass/Fail section of this chapter, then it is possible that we would initiate the gamification of learning rather than the gamification of grades and subsequently see a shift in what society views as successful in a student.

### *Tests/Quizzes*

Students in this study unanimously agreed that traditional tests and quizzes are one of the forms of assessment that least motivate a student to learn. They indicated that this is because of

several different factors. First of all, students discussed how tests and quizzes tend to assess content that is not practically relevant to the topic being studied. Most students seemed to think that their topic of study operated more like a trade than traditional scholarship, making the practical application of knowledge more relevant than the ability to memorize and regurgitate information. Brayden even recounted how, while working in his field of study, he has never had to recall information that he had been tested on in his classes. He daily, however, uses the knowledge and processes learned through projects completed for his classes.

Another reason that students indicated is a reason for why tests do not motivate students to learn is the fact that it is really easy to not retain any of the information from a test. If the test requires the student to memorize large amounts of information, students find that they often do not ever have to use that information again after the test and would, therefore, quickly forget it. If tests were open-book, or even sometimes just a certain breed of multiple choice, then students did not feel like they actually had to learn any of the content for the test and could just skate by using “CTRL F” or just utilizing good guessing practices. Because of these reasons, students, like Landon and Brayden, found that tests and quizzes usually do not do more than assess a student’s capacity for short-term memorization. Because of this, students found that most tests and quizzes communicated to them that memorization is a more important skill than learning.

It should be noted, however, that tests and quizzes did not seem like they always have to heavily promote a grade-oriented mindset in students. First of all, if the topic at hand truly does require large amounts of memorization, then the test communicates that it truly is necessary for students to internalize that information. Students indicated that this would be even more effective if tests or quizzes were given consistently and built up a body of knowledge over a period of time in order to help cement the information in their minds. Some students also indicated that when

tests incorporate things like short answers and essay questions they can do a better job at forcing students to have to demonstrate full understanding and comprehension of a wider variety of topics. This promotes more of a learning-oriented mindset than traditional tests, but because of the fact that they still act as a permanent appraisal of students at a specific point in time, they still promote grade orientations as well. This communicates to students that mistakes should be avoided at all costs which can inhibit learning-oriented mindsets.

### **Limitations**

Keeping in line with the nature of phenomenological and qualitative research, this study focused on the personal, in depth experiences of its participants. What this means, however, is that researcher was limited in the number of participants that he was able to interview and examine. There were only 15 participants in the pool of students interviewed for this study. While this provided a wide variety of experiences for the researcher to examine and pull from, gathering larger amounts of data will ensure that results are reliable and consistent.

The researcher was also limited in his ability to gather participants from a wide variety of demographics. While five different schools currently being attended were represented in this study, each institution has its own quirks in how they go about grading and assessing their students, so it would be beneficial for a study to obtain data even more institutions to see what different kinds of grading systems are already out there, and how they are affecting their students. In a similar vein, the following areas of study were represented in this study: aviation, interpersonal communication, strategic communication, business, information technology, counseling, medicine, graphic design, engineering, vocal performance, and law. While this is a wide array of fields of studies, more exist that could be assessed. In addition, it was outside of the scope of this study to compare and contrast how these different grading systems affect

different areas of study in various manners. The results of this study are also limited by the researcher's ability to capture the voices and ideas expressed by the participants of this study.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The most important suggestion for future research that this study can give is to suggest that future researchers analyze the components of a grading system identified in the conclusions of this study and develop new forms of gradings systems that try to maximize learning-oriented components and minimize grade-oriented ones. These new forms of grading systems can then be tested to see if, in implementation, they actually hold up to producing learning-oriented mindsets in students.

The primary concepts from this study that should be explored when developing new grading systems is the idea of separating feedback from appraisal, as well as questioning how we could appraise students by means other than by primarily letter grades, percentages, and GPAs. For these reasons, the checkpoint pass/fail system discussed in the conclusions of this study should be explored further as, in theory, it seems to incorporate most of the learning-oriented grading components that students discussed. In addition, as the checkpoint pass/fail system would not need to rely on letter grades, percentages, or GPAs to appraise students and assign them value at a societal level, it could also be investigated whether the accumulation of competency checkpoints is an affective manner of gamifying learning rather than gamifying points. Overhauling an entire infrastructure, however, cannot be done overnight, so in the meantime researchers should investigate how the current systems being used can be altered and tweaked to put more emphasis on the learning-oriented grading components identified in this study rather than the grade-oriented ones.



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**Appendix A: Consent Form****Consent**

**Title of the Project:** The Grade is the Message: An Analysis of the Grading Structure's Effects on Student Grade/Learning Orientations

**Principal Investigator:** Grant Rye, Graduate Student, School of Strategic and Personal Communication, Liberty University

**Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, and a current undergraduate or graduate college student. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

**What is the study about and why is it being done?**

The purpose of the study is to better understand the grading system in America and determine what effects it has on students' classroom values and engagement.

**What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an in-person or virtual, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 45-60 minutes.
2. Review transcripts of the interview and certify that they are accurate. This should take no more than 45-60 minutes.

**How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a better understanding of how the grading system affects students' approaches to learning in the classroom.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researchers will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer or in a locked drawer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Audio recordings of interviews will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of his committee will have access to these recordings.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

#### **What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Grant Rye. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Marie Mallory, at [REDACTED].

#### **Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

#### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researchers will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Printed Subject Name

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Signature & Date

**Appendix B: Interview Questions**

1. Based on personal experience, what are your thoughts on the grading systems used in classes you have taken?
2. Idealistically, when taking a class, which is more important to you, achieving the desired grade or learning the course content? Why?
3. Realistically, when taking a class, do you find that you are more often working to achieve the desired grade or to learn the course content? Why do you think that is?
4. Have you ever had a class where you were very engaged with learning the course content and minimally focused on your grade? If so, why do you think that you felt that way toward the class? How were you graded/what were you graded on in that class?
5. Have you ever had a class where you were very focused on your grade and minimally engaged with learning the course content? If so, why do you think that you felt that way toward the class? How were you graded/what were you graded on in that class?
6. What form of assessment (i.e., test, quiz, project, paper, homework, etc.) do you think best motivates a student to learn course content? How have you personally experienced this?
7. What form of assessment (i.e., test, quiz, project, paper, homework, etc.) do you think least motivates a student to learn course content? How have you personally experienced this?
8. Take a moment to list out everything that you can think of that might affect a student's final grade. What does each of these things communicate to you about what you should value in a class?



9. Take a moment to think about how late work is handled in the classes you have taken.

What does this communicate to you about what you should value in a class?

10. Take a moment to think about how the classes you have taken approach retake or redo policies on tests, homework, and projects. What does this communicate to you about what you should value in a class?

11. How would you say that the grading system in America affects a student's motivation to achieve the desired grade versus their motivation to learn the course content?

12. If you could change anything about the grading system in order to make class and learning less stressful and more enjoyable, what changes would you make?