

Centering Students when Evaluating Impacts of a Departmental Grade Alignment Policy

Research Team from the Psychology Department, University of British Columbia, Vancouver Canada

Dr. Catherine D. Rawn, Professor of Teaching Contact: cdrawn[at]psych.ubc.ca	Manya Bansal, BA Student (Psychology Major)
India Pereira, BA Student (Psychology Major)	Jeanie Woo, BA'25 Alumni (Cognitive Systems)
Aster Huang, BA'25 Alumni (Honours Psychology)	

This research represents a two-year student-faculty collaboration, in which students co-designed the research and led qualitative analyses of their peers' responses. An online poster was the most accessible medium for everyone to be involved in its presentation. Both the topic and process are aimed at shifting departmental culture toward more collaboration with students on policies that impact them.

Academic policy can impact instructors and students' experiences of the teaching and learning environment; this research seeks to foreground student perspectives in a policy evaluation. The context of this research is a large psychology department that has a longstanding policy delineating class averages and distributions, intended to reduce inequities across sections. Previous research revealed ways instructors and students experience this policy's impacts on teaching and learning (Rawn, Dammert, & Woo, 2026/in press), which led to a collaborative student-instructor departmental Working Group which proposed a modest policy revision. Heeding growing calls for student-faculty partnerships (see Ashton-Hay, 2025), the current mixed methods study was co-developed with undergraduate students (all co-authors on this poster) to explore potential psychological impacts of this revision, and to gather feedback from a broad sample of students.

Undergraduate students taking psychology courses that offered partial credit for research participation were eligible to participate in this online research. Across two studies, total of 1234 current undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions (i.e., to read the old policy, to read one of two versions of the revised policy, or no policy control), followed by four validated surveys measuring psychological variables of interest to the research team. Data were analyzed using MANOVAs with planned Helmert Contrasts. Contrary to hypotheses, the old versus new policy conditions showed no differences on any dependent measure. Overall, the clearest result showed that reading the grade alignment policy (either version) led to lower academic self-efficacy (Cohen's $d=0.21$) and higher amotivation (Cohen's $d=0.18$) for psychology courses compared to the control condition. Thus, mere exposure to such policy may be hindering students' belief in their abilities and interest. See Rawn, Woo, Bansal, Periera, and Huang (2026) for more details.

After the experimental portion, 1023 students (83% of participants) offered at least one open-ended comment on the revised policy's wording, advantages, disadvantages, and/or "anything else." Student researchers led the qualitative analysis of these responses, drawing on Braun & Clarke (2024) Reflexive Thematic Analysis techniques. Comments from the first 235 students were used to develop a codebook, and were refined into themes with procedural guidance from the faculty researcher. Student

researchers identified illustrative quotes and drafted theme write-ups, which were labelled: alternatives and suggestions, **purpose of grades, competition, encouragement and motivation, fairness, implementation, and future impact**. Alternatives and suggestions created a list usable for the department (e.g., simplify policy language), leaving six core themes. The remaining 788 students' comments were coded using the pre-existing codebook; themes were lightly revised, but no new themes were needed to encompass the larger dataset (see Bansal et al., 2026). Selected illustrative quotes from the six substantive themes are featured in the accompanying poster. Full written themes are in development. Together, these themes showcase complexity and ambivalence in student reactions to a departmental grade alignment policy.

Taken together, the quantitative (hypothesis-driven) and qualitative (data-driven) results connect only somewhat. The policy's impact on sense of competition with peers was featured in qualitative data but failed to emerge quantitatively. Impact on motivation (inclusive of related concept self-efficacy) featured importantly in both qualitative and quantitative datasets. Fairness emerged with nuance in qualitative results, but was unable to be measured quantitatively, suggesting an area ripe for future research. Overall, this research offers insights into how a departmental grading policy is experienced by students, while exemplifying how to centre student voice in policy development.

References and Resources

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