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University of Michigan Drops First-Semester Grades to 'Curb Mental Health Crisis'

A pilot program aims to ease pressure on freshmen and help them adjust to demands of college

By Douglas Belkin

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The University of Michigan is among the nation's largest and best-known public universities. EMILY ELCONIN/AP

Quick Summary

- The University of Michigan will drop letter grades for first-semester freshmen starting in fall 2027, showing "pass or no credit" instead.

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The University of Michigan will drop grades for first-semester freshmen next year in an effort to "curb the mental health crisis unfolding among college-aged individuals," according to the school.

Instead of a letter grade, first-semester transcripts will show “pass or no credit.” The program is designed to help students “acclimate to the demands of college and allow intrinsic motivations to guide personally meaningful academic journeys,” the school said.

The program, set to start in fall 2027, applies to students in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts, which enrolls about half of Michigan’s roughly 8,000 first-year students.

A Michigan spokesman declined to comment about how the university reached the decision to enact the pilot. Although grades won’t be recorded on student transcripts or affect grade-point averages, professors will still assign them internally to track eligibility for scholarships and academic awards.

Schools including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the California Institute of Technology have implemented similar “grade-covering” programs in past years.

The shift at Michigan, among the nation’s largest and best-known public universities, comes as schools wrestle with grade inflation and the need for remedial instruction for freshmen ill-prepared for college-level classes. University of California math and science professors have urged UC regents to reinstate entrance exams because so many freshmen were unprepared.



The University of Michigan campus in Ann Arbor, Mich. EMILY ELCONIN/BLOOMBERG NEWS

A recent University of California San Diego faculty report found that the percentage of students placed in classes to remediate elementary- and middle-school math before they could take precalculus increased to 8.5% in 2025 from 0.5% in 2020.

In May, Harvard University faculty voted to approve a 20% cap on the number of A's per undergraduate course in an effort to curb grade inflation. It won't apply to A-minuses, which committee members predicted would become the most awarded grade.

At the University of Michigan, a review by the news site MLive found that 74.1% of all undergraduate grades in 2022 were an A+, A or A-. A decade earlier, that percentage was 57.6%.

Kenneth Lowande, a former Michigan political science professor who left for Rice University, said he didn't think the new policy would make much of a difference because grade inflation had made grades largely irrelevant. Michigan no longer mandates the SAT or ACT for undergraduate admissions.

"Grades have lost their value as an indication of quality or excellence," Lowande said.

Michigan students lauded the new policy. Student body president Summit Louth said he had spoken to around 50 classmates and they were either happy or jealous the policy didn't exist when they were freshmen. Poor mental health is closely tied to academic stress and anxiety among students, Louth said.

Louth, 20 years old, said he earned all A's and one B in his first semester and doubted he would have worked as hard had the classes been pass/fail. But he thinks he would have learned more from his classes without the pressure of earning high marks.

Derek Peterson, a history professor and former chair of the faculty government, said he believes the move is generally beneficial because it will give students a chance to explore subjects more freely.

Students are under more stress today than their predecessors, he said, including the distraction of social media, bleaker job prospects and less secure economic conditions.

“The idea that our kids are somehow more coddled is simply not true,” Peterson said. “If we can find ways to open up space for students to experiment while also protecting their future employability, which means protecting the GPAs, I think it is a good idea.”

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Douglas Belkin covers higher education and national news out of the Chicago bureau.



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