

Should Schools Change How They Grade Students During the Pandemic?

Would it help if your school switched to pass or fail? Would it be better not to have grades at all? Or do grades still play an important role during this time of remote learning?





Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge, Mass., adapted its grading system because of the pandemic.

Credit...

Cody O'Loughlin for The New York Times

By Shannon Doyne and Michael Gonchar

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How teachers teach students has changed in response to [the coronavirus pandemic](#). Should how schools grade students change, too?

Many colleges are considering this question. Some are offering pass/fail or credit/no credit as the default grading systems instead of letter grades. Some students are pushing for a “universal pass,” a semester during which nobody fails. Should high schools and middle schools also consider changing their grading policies?

In “[With Coronavirus Disrupting College, Should Every Student Pass?](#)” Anemona Hartocollis writes:

Carlos Polanco was living in a dormitory just two weeks ago, taking classes and thinking mostly about getting good grades and life after graduation. Now he is back in Clifton, N.J., home schooling his 12-year-old sister, doing household chores and worrying about the health of his relatives in the Dominican Republic.

“It would be amazing if I could just focus on my classes,” said Mr. Polanco, a junior at Dartmouth College, “but I have a lot of people depending on me.”

Students like Mr. Polanco, who have returned to a home life disrupted by the coronavirus, have been pushing their institutions to set aside grades during the outbreak, arguing that online classes are often a poor substitute and that the chaos caused by the virus falls hardest on those with the least resources.

Over the past few days, colleges across the country have begun to respond, with schools as varied as Ohio State, Columbia and Carnegie Mellon adopting a seemingly endless variety of pass/fail or credit/no credit systems, at a scale not seen since the protests against the Vietnam War disrupted classes in the late 1960s.

Some universities will still offer the option of letter grades, while others have dropped them altogether. But that’s not good enough for some students, who are seeking a “universal pass” — meaning that nobody would fail, regardless of performance and whether they can continue to take online classes, and that letter grades would be abolished.

The idea has acquired [petition campaigns](#) on scores of campuses and even an acronym among the cognoscenti: UP.

“The reality is, there are people who will not pass their classes, there are people who will not finish the semester, who will not graduate on time,” Mr. Polanco said. “The most vulnerable will be drastically harmed.”

Not all students, however, are in favor of replacing the grade they earn with a “universal pass”:

But some institutions, and even students, have resisted proposals to give everyone equal marks, saying that the idea gives “gut courses” new meaning. It is possible to work hard, they say, even when your world has been turned upside down.

The debate is of particular concern to students trying to raise their grade-point averages in their final year or two of college to qualify for law, medical or business schools. Some fear it will hurt their chances if their college careers end with a “pass” instead of high marks.

That dynamic is playing out for Lydia Burleson, a junior majoring in English at Yale. Administrators there have instituted an optional pass/fail, allowing students to choose

whether they want a letter grade. But undergraduates have started a “[@NoFailYale](#)” Facebook page, where many are calling for a universal pass policy.

That would be problematic for Ms. Burleson, who said she struggled during her first year of college because her high school in rural Texas did not prepare her for the academic and social demands of an Ivy League school. But she has matured, she said, and this semester she is taking 5.5 credits, instead of the normal four or five, hoping it will be her breakthrough year.

She was working three jobs — as a dining hall manager, writing tutor and gym attendant — until the virus hit. She is still getting paid and living off-campus in New Haven, Conn. Despite the crisis atmosphere, she believes that she is still capable of getting good grades.

“I have not been working 70 hours a week to not feel confident,” Ms. Burleson said. “I want those grades. I’ve been working for those grades for the majority of the semester. So yeah, I will ask for grades if the option remains available to me, which is still up in the air.”

Students, read the entire article, then tell us:

- What new grading policies should high schools and middle schools adopt during these weeks or months of remote learning? Why?
- What about colleges and universities? What do you think is the best way for them to handle grading and credits for the current semester?
- How important do you think grades are in motivating students to work hard? How important are they for you? If your school were to change its grading system to pass/fail or a “universal pass,” would you be less motivated to do your schoolwork?
- Carlos Polanco, a Dartmouth College student, says, “In reality, we go to school to learn, not really to receive a grade.” Do you agree with this statement? Do you think most of the other students at your school would agree with you?
- In your experience, how is online learning different from being in a classroom at school? How is it similar? Do you feel that you are working harder, less hard or about the same to learn new concepts?
- The article raises the idea that during this pandemic many students have other obligations that interfere with their ability to learn and possibly to do well academically, such as having to help take care of younger siblings. What are some of the various challenges that students might be facing right now as they try to do school from home?

- What, if anything, is making it harder for you to learn at home?