Education



Building on the Wisconsin higher-ed reform model

By Ben Eisen and Mike Nichols

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Across the United States, there is growing concern about the performance of higher education institutions. Students are studying less, grade inflation has weakened the value of transcripts as signals of excellence, and there is worrying evidence that, despite massive costs to taxpayers and families, many students are not developing critical thinking skills and marketable competencies.

Wisconsin is not exempt from these problems, but there are opportunities for reform and reasons for hope. Building on Daniel Buck's "Wisconsin Higher-Ed Reform Model," this chapter argues that Wisconsin can pursue practical, targeted reforms that improve accountability, strengthen academic standards and better align universities with the needs of students and taxpayers without dismantling the university system itself.

Key points and recommendations:

- Wisconsin's recent higher-education reforms demonstrate that meaningful change is possible even within a state traditionally divided evenly between ideological camps.
- Grade inflation has substantially weakened the value of transcripts as signals of student ability. It has reduced incentives for academic effort and may harm students' long-term outcomes. The University of Wisconsin System should combat grade inflation by making transcripts more transparent and reporting course averages alongside individual student grades.
- Ethnic studies requirements increasingly compel students to engage with a particular ideological worldview rather than focusing on broadly valuable academic competencies. Ethnic studies should not be a mandatory graduation requirement in any public universities. Undergraduate curriculum requirements should instead focus on competencies such as critical thinking, communication, analytical reasoning, quantitative literacy, and artificial intelligence literacy.
- Wisconsin's 2015 tenure reforms improved managerial flexibility by permitting administrators to release tenured faculty when academic programs they worked within are eliminated. This change did not produce the catastrophic consequences critics predicted. Wisconsin should build on those reforms by allowing greater flexibility when academic programs are significantly reduced or modified, not only when they are formally discontinued. Further, it should carefully monitor developments in other jurisdictions as part of a comprehensive review of the tenure process.
- Wisconsin can continue to serve as a model for practical higher-education reform by pursuing targeted, evidence-based changes that strengthen accountability and improve outcomes for students and taxpayers.

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Introduction

Across the United States, there is widespread concern about the performance of our institutions of higher education. Students are studying less.[1] Many courses of study aren't translating into high-paying careers.[2] Grades, increasingly inflated, have lost their value as a motivator and signal of excellence.[3] Most troubling of all, there are reasons to be concerned that many students simply aren't learning very much.

The 2011 book "Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses" by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa sent shock waves through the higher education system with its well-researched claims that many students showed precious little improvement in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing during their time in college as measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment.[4]

And it costs a fortune. States continue to pump more and more money into their college and university systems out of a well-intended desire to invest in the next generation. Students and their families are investing massive amounts of money often paid over decades (not to mention the opportunity cost of not working full-time during college), with growing anxiety that they are getting a credential and often a lot of fun but not genuine improvement in their human capital.

Wisconsin is not exempt from these problems. Grade inflation is rampant in the UW system. The graduation rate is below the national average, and although statewide student retention is middling, it is much lower and beneath the national average outside of the flagship university in Madison. The evidence for a clear return on time and money is underwhelming for many students, depending on institution, credential and field of study.

There is a growing recognition in Wisconsin and across the country of the need for higher-ed reform. Fortunately, there are signs Wisconsin can be a leader in this area and help show the way of reform to many other states despite ideological divisions and governance challenges posed by the fragmentation of authority between the Legislature, which controls the purse strings, and the Board of Regents that directly controls the university system itself.

Wisconsin's opportunity was most clearly recognized and articulated by Daniel Buck in an analysis published by the Badger Institute and the American Enterprise Institute in which he outlined "the Wisconsin Higher-ed Reform Model."[5] Buck argued that while there may be constraints limiting sweeping reforms in Wisconsin, the state's recent history shows that positive change is possible and that it can serve as a template for other

jurisdictions with ideologically divided governance institutions.

Buck identifies three components to the Wisconsin model. First, he notes that state legislators have shown that states can use budget negotiations as leverage to generate reform. He documents how lawmakers have used budget negotiations to impose additional teaching requirements on faculty and force the governor to accept a reduced role for DEI practices in university processes.

Second, Buck notes "simple opposition" as a component of the Wisconsin model. He notes that for many progressives the solution to all the state's problems (including those in higher education) seems to be throwing more money at dysfunctional processes. Buck notes that lawmakers opposed to such a mindset have succeeded at blocking attempts to rapidly increase spending. He writes that, given the desire in some circles to spend recklessly, slowing "the ever-increasing tuition costs and stresses on the taxpayer" should be recognized as a limited but important victory.

Finally, Buck notes that there is room for simple "good governance" reforms that can make things better for students. He identifies a rule change reforming the treatment of transfer credits as a recent example.

These build on previous higher-education policy changes that prove reform is possible in Wisconsin. In 2015, a reform law changed tenure from a hard statutory protection into a governance framework that provided university presidents with more managerial flexibility and accountability tools. Fears expressed at the time that this amounted to the end of "real tenure" were proven to be overblown, as the ratio of tenured faculty to students has remained approximately constant in the subsequent decade.[6]

Reforms

How does Wisconsin take leadership in improving higher ed? This chapter identifies several important policy problems in our system and lays out specific options for policy reform.

Fighting grade inflation

Grade inflation is increasingly recognized as one of the most important problems in American higher education. The problem has become so severe that, as prominent economist Alex Tabarrok put it, adopting the principle that "grades must be objective and useful discriminators of talent" is essential for regaining trust in higher education.[7]

There are multiple reasons grade inflation is troubling.

First, it weakens labor market efficiency for recent graduates: It makes it harder for employers and graduate schools to distinguish between truly excellent students and mediocre ones. A prospective employee with an ostensibly impressive 3.5 grade point average may, in fact, be a middling student.

Second, grade inflation weakens incentives for students to work hard because merely adequate work may be enough to earn top grades. This directly undermines a key objective of higher

education: human capital development. A 2011 study found that average weekly time spent studying fell from 40 hours in 1961 to 28 in 2003. An analysis published by the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal argues this is likely linked to grade inflation, writing that "student effort fell in lockstep with rising grades."[8]

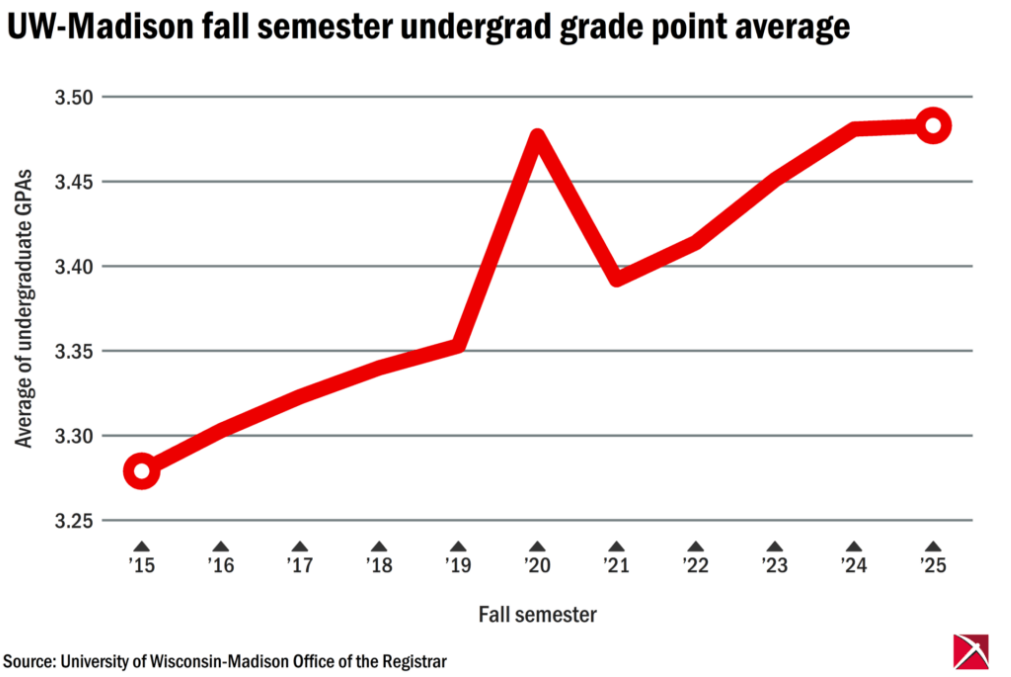
New research from the high school level supports the view that grade inflation weakens incentives for student effort. A recent paper, "Easy A's, Less Pay: The Long-Term Effects of Grade Inflation," co-authored by University of Texas at Austin economist Jeffrey Denning, analyzed grades for hundreds of thousands of students in the Los Angeles Unified School District between 2004 and 2013 and students in public high schools in Maryland from 2013 to 2024. In the Los Angeles district, the mean GPA increased from 2.25 to 2.45, and the increase in Maryland was "remarkably similar," according to the study.[9] That is consistent with national research from the National Center for Education Statistics showing that average high school grades increased almost half a GPA point between the 1980s and 2020. These higher grades do not seem to reflect superior academic performance. Standardized test scores did not increase at the same rate, suggesting a shift toward lower grading standards.

The study from Denning and his coauthors found that grade-inflating high school teachers have a negative impact on students' future test scores, enrollment in post-secondary education, graduation from associate's degree programs, odds of employment, and even future earnings. In sum, students learn less and earn less when they have less incentive to study in order to get top grades. They get an ego boost and a nice grade point average, but do not fare as well in either college or the real world.

The evidence suggests grade inflation weakens the signal of transcripts, reduces student effort, and harms future earnings. Yet grade inflation continues unabated in Wisconsin. At the University of Wisconsin's flagship campus in Madison, the average GPA for undergraduates was 3.48 in the most recent fall semester, up from 3.28 just 10 years ago and close to the 3.5 midpoint between an A and B average, according to reports available from the Office of the Registrar.[10] The nearby graph illustrates these trends.

Grade point averages are even higher in some academic disciplines. The average undergraduate GPA in the School of Education, which had more than 2,400 students, was 3.63 last fall. The average undergraduate GPA in the School of Pharmacy, which had only 40 students, was 3.75. The college with the lowest average GPA last fall was Agricultural and Life Sciences, where the average GPA was 3.39.

The problem is not new. A 2012 study by Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy, "Where A is Ordinary: The Evolution of American College and University Grading, 1940-2009," found that, on average across a wide range of universities, 43 percent of all letter grades were A's, an increase of 28 percentage points since 1960 and 12 percentage points since 1988. But the UW-Madison data suggest the phenomenon has grown worse.[11]



Guidance for instructors to maintain similar class average grades over time, combined with publishing those averages alongside individual student scores, could help relieve the pressure to inflate grades. Even 10 years ago, when Madison Professor Emeritus Donald Downs stopped teaching, "giving a student a C was a tough thing to do," he said. Students with low grades could cause trouble for a professor, he said, adding that he himself never experienced that. Student dissatisfaction might also show up on evaluations.

Other forces are at work as well, including a shift in how some universities and professors see their role. Downs cited a new book by Jonathan Alpert, "Therapy Nation," that documents the shift to a therapeutic mindset. In a recent essay in the Wall Street Journal, Alpert noted that the number of students receiving accommodations on deadlines or tests due to a diagnosed impairment such as anxiety, ADHD or depression has surged.

"Therapy was never meant to function as a governing model for companies and schools," wrote Alpert. "But its language now substitutes for institutional judgment about standards, expectations and limits for student and employee behavior."[12]

UW-Madison officials have attributed rising GPAs to several factors, including changes in academic policy, student support, pandemic-era grading rules, and stronger incoming students.[13] Some of those explanations may account for short-term fluctuations. They do not plausibly explain the long-term national rise in grades unaccompanied by comparable gains in student performance. The central problem remains: Inflated grades make transcripts less useful as signals of performance, reduce incentives for students to study, and can leave both

students and institutions worse off.

Given the problems caused by grade inflation, the researchers in the Denning study noted that changes in grading policies "are a potential low-cost strategy that could be implemented by teachers, schools, and school districts to improve teacher quality and students' long-term outcomes."

They did not suggest specific remedies, but several have been proposed. Harvard University's faculty recently voted to cap A grades in undergraduate courses at roughly 20 percent beginning in fall 2027 and to use average percentile rankings, rather than GPAs, to determine internal awards and honors. [14] The honors reform is especially promising because it recognizes that academic distinctions should depend not only on a student's raw grades, but on how those grades compare with classmates facing the same course standards. The package is a major step toward addressing grade inflation and an improvement over the status quo. Still, grade caps have been criticized because they may dissuade students from taking difficult courses with stronger classmates.

Some Canadian universities, including the University of Toronto, have implemented another remedy: They include class GPA averages for each course on transcripts right next to the grade received by the individual. It is immediately apparent how an individual performed in comparison to peers in the same class.

A Harvard report on grade inflation noted that recording the median grade for every course on transcripts could "reduce the pressure students currently feel to take easily graded courses, since the benefits of doing so would be less."

That is "at least something to which they should give serious thought," Downs told the Badger Institute. "Absolutely."

This reform would also be an improvement on the status quo and is preferable to Harvard's newly approved cap on A grades. It would not completely solve the problem. Professors would still be motivated to give higher grades to students who do not really deserve them. But at least the façade of excellence attached to the kid with the 3.5 GPA would be revealed for what it is: an illusion.

Further, students would still have an incentive to select classes with less academically talented peers, where exceeding the average grade may be easier. More sophisticated reforms, including an "achievement index," would adjust grades based partly on the academic strength of the students enrolled in each course. This would make it easier for employers and graduate schools to compare academic performance across courses and fields of study.[15] But simply reporting course averages would be a practical and easily understood first step.

The entire University of Wisconsin system should take grade inflation seriously. At minimum, universities should make transcripts more transparent by reporting how students performed relative to classmates in the same courses. It would restore some meaning to grades, better incentivize student effort, and make transcripts more useful to employers again as a signal of recent graduates' ability.

Remove ethnic studies requirement from core curriculum[16]

A decision by the University of Wisconsin System in July 2025 to standardize course requirements led backers of ethnic studies to worry that schools were dropping the longtime requirement for undergraduates.[17]

System officials clarified in response that they do not impose a blanket standard for ethnic studies — a loosely defined academic discipline that regularly includes content related to race and sexuality. But all 13 four-year universities retain individual discretion, and every campus has chosen to require that every undergraduate continue to take at least one such course.

Ethnic studies rules have come under fire as a politicized threat to intellectual diversity.

Scholars such as Jonathan Haidt, the social psychologist at New York University's Stern School of Business, point out that there are virtually no conservatives or libertarians in the humanities and social sciences.[18] Recent analysis of faculty voter registration in history, economics, journalism, law and psychology departments at major research universities supports this view, showing a voter registration ratio of 11.5-to-1 in favor of Democrats over Republicans.

Political orthodoxy undermines consideration of controversial topics and impedes trustworthy research.

The same research shows there is wide variation between academic departments regarding the extent of viewpoint diversity. For instance, the Democrat-to-Republican ratio is 4.5-to-1 in economics compared to 33.5-to-1 in history.[19]

Experts argue that courses designated for ethnic studies requirements are often particularly lacking in viewpoint diversity, which can exacerbate these problems.

"Universities exist to cultivate intellectual rigor, open inquiry, and exposure to differing viewpoints," John Mac Ghlionn of the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal commented to the Badger Institute. "Many ethnic studies programs, however, are built around ideological frameworks that privilege activism over analysis and present contested political interpretations as settled truth."[20]

"When such courses are required rather than elective, students are compelled to engage with a specific worldview," he added. "This undermines academic neutrality and intellectual freedom."[21]

Ethnic studies is an enormous part of what is offered at UW-Madison. In 1989, there were 95 courses approved as part of the initiative, 60 of which were expected to be offered the following year. By June 2001, 189 courses fulfilling the ethnic studies requirement had been approved, 124 of which were taught between the fall of 1998 and the spring of 2001.

The current UW-Madison course catalogue is thousands of pages long, and lists scores of classes that fulfill the ethnic studies requirement "intended to increase understanding of the culture and contributions of persistently marginalized

racial or ethnic groups" and "equip students to respond constructively to issues connected with our pluralistic society and global community," according to UW-Madison's Undergraduate Guide.[22]

Examples include:

- Race and language in STEM and environmental education
- Outdoors for all: inequities in environmentalism
- Yiddish song and the Jewish experience
- Code and power
- Culturally responsive science communication
- Race, intersectionality, and equity in education

Some of the courses would likely be popular with students, who should retain discretion to choose an array of courses in any given major. But there is a troubling mindset apparent in many of these courses that racism not only exists but infuses every aspect of American life, from what we eat to where we hike and how we program computers.

The ethnic studies requirement requires students who may simply wish to learn to code or develop competencies in science, technology, engineering or math to engage deeply with a specific worldview that sees everything through the lens of race, power or inequity. Universities can do more to help students understand that individuals have true agency and opportunity by giving them a choice whether to pursue this approach to their education.

Every other university in the system maintains an ethnic studies requirement: Reporting from the Badger Institute published in 2026 provides details on each university's specific rules.[23]

There's a strong suggestion in some of the course descriptions of an intent to form activists and spread the perspective of racism and marginalization an idea of a country with predominant structures of domination and injustice and exclusion.

This is a subjective worldview, and there is no compelling justification for requiring students to immerse themselves in it in order to graduate.

Curricular requirements should ensure that students graduate with critical thinking, communications, and analytical skills that will equip them to succeed in the knowledge economy. Literacy with respect to engagement with artificial intelligence is a good example of an emerging competency that should be recognized as a requirement of undergraduate education.

Students should have the opportunity to take some of the courses currently included in the ethnic studies area, if they so choose. But ethnic studies courses should not be required. Instead, curriculum requirements should be used to ensure students are equipped with the skills and knowledge they need to prosper in a rapidly changing world.

Go further on tenure reform[24]

The University of Wisconsin's 2015 tenure reform provides an important example of the state's higher-education reform model in practice. The reform was controversial at the time, but evidence from the years since suggests that the strongest criticisms were overblown. The next step is to build on that reform by

giving university leaders more flexibility to manage program changes, enrollment declines and shifting student demand.

The number of tenured faculty in the University of Wisconsin System has fallen roughly in line with the decrease in student enrollment since 2015, the year the Legislature removed tenure guarantees from state statutes. At the time, critics described the move as "destructive" and "remarkably chilling," with one professor comparing it to "a death in the family."

Nearly a decade later, the feared consequences have not materialized.

The number of tenured professors in the system decreased approximately 8 percent, from 4,561 to 4,209, according to the Legislative Fiscal Bureau, between the 2016-17 school year and 2021-22. Student enrollment was down 9 percent over the same period. Evidence in retrospect shows that the much-derided change in tenure protection, which took place in stages first in the Legislature and then at the Board of Regents in 2015 and 2016, has had very little negative impact in the years since.[25]

The changes were relatively simple. Beginning in the 1970s and up until July 2015, tenured faculty in the UW System were protected by state law and the Wisconsin Administrative Code. Tenured faculty generally could be laid off only in cases of a campuswide financial emergency.

In 2016, the Board of Regents enacted a new policy that allows layoffs when programs are cut and gives chancellors more latitude to act without as much faculty involvement. The Board of Regents policy states that a tenured faculty member "may not be terminated except for cause, for reasons of financial emergency, by resignation, or by retirement." A second regents policy allows schools to lay off tenured faculty if a program is discontinued.

The new policy has rarely been used. As of late 2025, the Badger Institute reported that only once since the change had the tenure policy been seriously tested: in August 2024, when the regents approved allowing the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee to end the College of General Studies at its two-year branches in Waukesha and Washington counties and lay off 35 tenured faculty.[26]

Professor Emeritus Mark Mone, former UWM chancellor, has reportedly cited the 2016 changes in explaining his decision to close two branch campuses and lay off at least some tenured faculty. Mone has also cited enrollment declines and reduced tuition revenues, saying the status quo is "no longer sustainable." Those circumstances illustrate why universities need flexibility to respond to financial pressures and changing student demand.

Wisconsin's reform is part of a broader national reassessment of tenure. Across the country, lawmakers have increasingly scrutinized tenure rules as part of larger debates about university accountability, faculty performance and the cost of higher education. A Badger Institute canvass found that legislative bodies in nearly a third of states had taken aim at tenure in some way over the previous two years, with the pace of action accelerating. Recent reforms or proposals have included annual or periodic tenure reviews, greater

authority to remove tenured professors for underperformance, and broader administrator discretion when academic programs change.[27]

Wisconsin's experience is instructive in that national context. It shows that tenure reform can be adopted without producing the catastrophic consequences critics predicted. But it also shows that Wisconsin's existing reform remains too limited.

Even if the reforms have not been used often, the changes adopted by the Board of Regents in 2016 were a step in the right direction. They gave chancellors a greater ability to manage enrollment decreases and financial challenges and to reduce tenured faculty positions when programs need to be cut.

And programs are cut frequently.

A Badger Institute special report in 2016, "The Trouble with Tenure," pointed out that UW System campuses eliminate, suspend, and add programs nearly every year. Tenured professors can now, at least theoretically, be eliminated when programs are no longer necessary.[28]

In practice, however, this flexibility appears to have been used only rarely. That suggests the 2015 and 2016 reforms did not threaten the basic existence of tenure. But it also suggests that the reforms did not go far enough to ensure that faculty staffing can be aligned with student needs, enrollment patterns and program demand.

The Badger Institute recommended eight years ago that the Board of Regents go further. The board could have allowed layoffs of tenured faculty for reasons that included significant program reduction or modification, not simply program discontinuance, but it declined to do so.

That recommendation remains sound. Giving chancellors that sort of latitude would be appropriate and consistent with the broader Wisconsin model of higher-education reform: practical, targeted changes that improve accountability and managerial flexibility without dismantling the university system.

The number of tenured faculty is decreasing. The key question is whether the remaining faculty positions are consistently aligned with the programs, courses and skills students most need. Wisconsin should build on its earlier tenure reform by allowing more flexibility when programs are significantly reduced or modified, not only when they are formally discontinued.

Conclusion

Wisconsin is unlikely to transform higher education through one sweeping reform. Authority is fragmented, ideological divisions are real, and the University of Wisconsin System is a large institution with its own internal governance structures.

Still, recent experience shows that practical reform is possible. Lawmakers can use budget leverage, resist the assumption that every problem requires more spending, and along with the Board of Regents pursue good-governance reforms that make the system work better for students and taxpayers.

The reforms proposed in this chapter follow that model. They are not designed to dismantle the university system or micromanage academic life. They are targeted changes intended to improve accountability, strengthen academic standards, and ensure that students graduate with skills and credentials that have real value.

Specifically, Wisconsin should:

Fight grade inflation by making transcripts more transparent. The UW System should report course averages alongside individual grades so employers, graduate schools, and students can better understand what grades actually mean. This would restore some meaning to grades, improve incentives for student effort, and make transcripts more useful as signals of recent graduates' ability.

Replace ethnic studies requirements with requirements focused on core competencies. Students should be free to take courses in ethnic studies, race, identity, and related subjects. But these courses should not be required of every undergraduate. Graduation requirements should focus on broadly valuable skills such as critical thinking, communication, analytical reasoning, civic knowledge, quantitative literacy, and emerging competencies such as AI literacy.

Build on Wisconsin's tenure reform. The state's earlier tenure changes improved managerial flexibility without producing the catastrophic consequences critics predicted. Wisconsin should go further by allowing greater flexibility when academic programs are significantly reduced or modified, not only when they are formally discontinued, so faculty staffing can better align with student needs and program demand.

Wisconsin's higher education system faces serious challenges, but it also has a reform model worth building on. By pursuing practical, evidence-based changes rooted in accountability and student success, Wisconsin can improve its own institutions and help show other states how meaningful higher-ed reform can be achieved even in difficult political and governance environments.

About the authors



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ENDNOTES

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