UC introductory math outcomes

MYTHS VS. FACTS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Recent coverage of UC data on introductory math courses has raised questions about student preparation, course outcomes, and admissions policy. Understanding the data on non-passing grades in certain introductory math courses requires a closer look at which courses are included, how outcomes have changed over time, and what the data can tell us about admissions policy.

Below are key facts about UC's approach to introductory math and what the data actually show.

MYTH

Nearly 1 in 5 UC first-year students are failing introductory math.

FACT

This claim is inaccurate. Of the incoming 2025 first-year class, only about 40% took introductory calculus or one of the courses leading up to it (precalculus or preparatory math). Of the students who took these courses, most (84%) passed the course with a C or higher. The remaining students – those who earned a D or F, or who withdrew from the course – made up around 6.5% of all first-year students in 2025. For all calculus courses (intro through advanced), the passing rate is 89%.

MYTH

The data show that UC's test-free admissions policy caused the increase in non-passing grades.

FACT

The data do not establish that UC's admissions and testing policies caused a shift in math outcomes. UC only began collecting course-level data in 2020, during the pandemic, so a pre-pandemic baseline is not available. State and national data show that K-12 test scores for math have not recovered as quickly as other subject areas since the pandemic. Attributing outcomes in introductory calculus courses to an admissions policy change alone overlooks other changes in K-12 performance, high school course-taking, campus math placement policies, and changes to math curricula and instruction.

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MYTH

Students who struggle in introductory math are not prepared to succeed at UC.

FACT

Struggling in an introductory math course does not mean a student cannot succeed in college. UC's first-year retention rate reached a record 93% in 2025, and our four-year graduation rate reached a record 74%. UC takes the decrease in passing grades in introductory math seriously. Campuses are examining and adapting instructional approaches, course sequences, and academic support to help students strengthen their skills and succeed in math

MYTH

The decrease in passing grades has been a steady, uninterrupted trend since 2020–21.

FACT

The success rate in these introductory courses has fluctuated over the past five years, but not in a steady pattern. The trend also starts with 2020–21, when pandemic-era grading practices made it an imperfect baseline. Changes in student outcomes are real, but understanding the longer-term trend requires looking beyond a single starting point.

MYTH

The introductory math courses and outcomes look the same at every UC campus.

FACT

UC campuses differ in their introductory math course offerings, degree requirements, placement practices, and academic support. Some offer preparatory courses before pre-calculus or calculus; others provide additional instruction through co-courses, labs or redesigned courses. These differences matter when interpreting campus-level comparisons. UC continues to examine how different approaches to math instruction can better support students with varied levels of preparation.