

RESEARCH BRIEF

GRADE DISTRIBUTION: FALL 2019 AND FALL 2020

Executive Summary

A comparison of final (not verified) grades for fall 2019 and fall 2020 indicated a slight decrease in the percentage of A and B grades from fall 2019 to fall 2020, especially in graduate courses, and slight increase in the percentage of DFW grades, especially in undergraduate courses. There was a marked increase in the number of incompletes in graduate courses. These very preliminary results suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic did not have a marked effect on students' academic performance, although the stress associated with the pandemic may have contributed to an increase in course incompletes.

Background

This research brief provides a high level analysis of the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student grades at Daemen College. The grade distribution for fall 2019 (pre-pandemic) was compared to the grade distribution for fall 2020 (post-pandemic). Final grades were used for the comparison, not verified grades, since some students opted for the SC/UC grading system that was allowed during the pandemic. For students selecting the SC/UC option, final grades would reflect the grades actually earned by students (e.g. A- or C+) prior to their conversion to a verified grade of SC/UC.

Data Analysis

All gradable courses for all registered students in fall 2019 and fall 2020 were included in this analysis. Plus and minus grades were combined into the base letter grade (e.g. B+ was simply counted as B). Separate analyses were conducted for undergraduate courses (i.e. those with a course number of less than 500) and graduate courses (i.e. those with a course number of 500 or greater).

The table below left shows the raw number of grades awarded in undergraduate courses, while the table below right shows the number of grades expressed as a percentage of the total.

Count of final (not verified) UG grades			
	Term		
Grade	2019FA	2020FA	Total
A	3417	3284	6701
B	1969	1691	3660
C	860	755	1615
D	208	220	428
F	297	396	693
CR	555	477	1032
I	205	287	492
P	146	105	251
UW	13	21	34
W	257	265	522
Total	7927	7501	15428

Final (not verified) UG grades: percent of total			
	Term		
Grade	2019FA	2020FA	Total
A	43.1%	43.8%	43.4%
B	24.8%	22.5%	23.7%
C	10.8%	10.1%	10.5%
D	2.6%	2.9%	2.8%
F	3.7%	5.3%	4.5%
CR	7.0%	6.4%	6.7%
I	2.6%	3.8%	3.2%
P	1.8%	1.4%	1.6%
UW	0.2%	0.3%	0.2%
W	3.2%	3.5%	3.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

These data indicate a slight decrease in the number of B grades in undergraduate courses from fall 2019 to fall 2020, and a slight increase in the number of DFW grades. There was a modest increase in the number of incompletes.

The table below left shows the raw number of grades awarded in graduate courses, while the table below right shows the number of grades expressed as a percentage of the total.

Count of final (not verified) GR grades			
Grade	Term		Total
	2019FA	2020FA	
A	2303	1847	4150
B	1202	918	2120
C	181	181	362
D	6	6	12
F	54	45	99
CR	734	669	1403
I	149	371	520
P	1175	908	2083
PC	6	19	25
UW	3		3
W	39	52	91
Total	5852	5016	10868

Final (not verified) GR grades: percent of total			
Grade	Term		Total
	2019FA	2020FA	
A	39.4%	36.8%	38.2%
B	20.5%	18.3%	19.5%
C	3.1%	3.6%	3.3%
D	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%
F	0.9%	0.9%	0.9%
CR	12.5%	13.3%	12.9%
I	2.5%	7.4%	4.8%
P	20.1%	18.1%	19.2%
PC	0.1%	0.4%	0.2%
UW	0.1%	0.0%	0.0%
W	0.7%	1.0%	0.8%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

These data indicate a modest decrease in the number of A and B grades in graduate courses from fall 2019 to fall 2020. There was a marked increase in the number of incompletes from fall 2019 to fall 2020.

Conclusions

From fall 2019 to fall 2020 there was a slight downward shift in the overall grade distribution, but the effect was not marked. The primary difference was the increased number of incomplete grades, especially in graduate level courses, in fall 2020, possibly reflecting pandemic related stressors. It is of course possible that many of the incomplete grades will convert to an A or B, thereby reducing the gap in A and B grades from 2019 to 2020.

As a caveat, it should be noted that the availability of the SC/UC grading system may have impacted students' academic behaviors. For example, a student may have spent less time on what they considered a less important course (planning to do a minimum amount of work sufficient to earn an SC grade) so that they could spend more time on another more challenging or more important course in order to earn a high grade in that course. However, the potential impact of the SC/UC grading scheme is still speculative.