

A Further Examination of the Long-Term Impacts of Pandemic Related Changes in Academic Policy¹

Report created by OPEIR

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¹ This analysis was produced by OPEIR in response to a request by Vice Provost Matthews. Results are not necessarily generalizable and attempts to use results outside the scope of this project should be avoided.

 THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
CHATTANOOGA

Pandemic-Related Policy Changes

During the Spring 2020 term when the COVID-19 pandemic began, UTC made two significant policy changes to mitigate any potential academic harm that could come to students because of the public health measures which were taken to reduce the spread of the virus. First, undergraduate academic standing was temporarily frozen, so students whose GPA fell below 2.0 would not be put on probation or, if they were already on probation, suspended or dismissed. Second, undergraduates could opt for S/NC grading rather than the letter grade they would otherwise have received.

Performance of Fall 2019 Undergraduates Who Benefitted from Academic Standing Change

Among those previously enrolled in Fall 2019, there were 311 distinct students who benefitted from suspension of changes in academic standing due to having a GPA below 2.0 at the end of the Spring 2020 term, as shown in the first table to the right. There were 66 who were able to remain in good standing and 245 who were already on probation. As of the Fall 2022 term, 4% have graduated, 11% remain at UTC, and 85% have left the institution.

At the end of the Fall 2020 term, an additional 103 distinct students from the 2019 undergraduate population were aided by the policy change; 97 were able to remain in good standing and 6 were already on probation as shown in the second table to the right. Additionally, 108 of the students to whom the policy change applied in Spring 2020 continued to benefit because their GPA remained below 2.0. Like with those in Spring 2020 who benefitted from the change in academic standing policy, very few of the 103 students in Fall 2020 remain enrolled at UTC. As of the Fall 2022 term, 2% have graduated, 16% remain at UTC, and 82% have left the institution. Only those who were considered in good standing remained enrolled as of Fall 2022.

The low success rates for the students who were able to avoid probation, suspension, or dismissal due to the suspension in academic standing changes suggest that while the policy may have helped them remain enrolled for the short term, it did not help them graduate.

Fall 2022 Status of Undergraduates Enrolled in Fall 2019 who Benefitted from Academic Standing Policy Change Based on Spring 2020 GPA

Academic Standing as of Fall 2019 End-of-Term	Students with GPA below 2.0	Graduated by Fall 2022	Still Enrolled as of Fall 2022	Not Retained
Good Standing	66	1	8	57
Probation	245	10	26	209
Total	311	11	34	266

Fall 2022 Status of Undergraduates Enrolled in Fall 2019 who Benefitted from Academic Standing Policy Change Based on Fall 2020 GPA

Academic Standing as of Fall 2019 End-of-Term	Students with GPA below 2.0	Graduated by Fall 2022	Still Enrolled as of Fall 2022	Not Retained
Good Standing	97	2	16	79
Probation	6	0	0	6
Total	103	2	16	85

Effect of Satisfactory/No Credit Grade Option

Among the 778 undergraduates who opted for the Satisfactory/No Credit option for at least one course in the Spring 2020 term, the academic performance of those who received an S grade, but no NC grades, has been in alignment with those who did not take the S/NC option as shown in the table to the right. As of the Fall 2022 term, there is only a difference of approximately three percentage points in the graduation of the former and latter groups.

By comparison, among the 379 students who opted for at least one NC grade, only 17.4% have graduated, while 55.1% have left UTC. However, this does not tell the full story. More than 20% of the students who received at least one NC grade were on academic probation at the start of the Spring 2020 term compared with less than 5% of those with no NC grades. Further, among the 76 students who opted for at least one NC grade and who were already on academic probation, only three have graduated. This would suggest that, for these students, opting for an NC grade was not the cause of their academic difficulties. It was a sign that the students were already at risk.

Overall, it does not appear that the pandemic-related changes in academic policy had a significant impact on student retention and graduation in the long run. While they may have driven a boost in short-term retention by granting a brief reprieve to underperforming students, those who were struggling academically before the pandemic continued to do so even with the policy changes.

Status of Spring 2020 Undergraduates Electing for S/NC Grade Option as of Fall 2022

		Graduated	Still Enrolled	Not Retained	% Graduated	% Still Enrolled	% Not Retained
NC Grades	248	36	65	147	14.5%	26.2%	59.3%
No S/NC Grades	8,469	4,782	1,993	1,694	56.5%	23.5%	20.0%
S and NC Grades	131	30	39	62	22.9%	29.8%	47.3%
S Grades	399	213	120	66	53.4%	30.1%	16.5%
Grand Total	9,247	5,061	2,217	1,969	54.7%	24.0%	21.3%