



Filling Empty Chairs

Student absenteeism seems to be the main topic of corridor conversation these days among colleagues at our college. Many share the feeling that it is getting worse every semester. For me, who still gets a good number of students even when several are absent, it's not so bad. But for those with far fewer enrollees, it must be very disheartening. The situation begs all of us, though, to ask ourselves "What are we doing wrong?" and "What can we do about it?"

Maybe it only seems like there are more students absent than ever because on-campus enrollment has been going down. Maybe the rate of absenteeism actually remains fairly stable. No one seems to know for sure, so I decided to find out for at least my own classes (biology). In its May 2012 report on absenteeism in public schools, Johns Hopkins University said it is chronic, but hardly, if ever, measured. Data from post-secondary schools are equally elusive. So, it was hoped that my little project might contribute some insight on this and help build a persuasive argument for establishing a workable, positive, institution-wide attendance policy.

First, I should briefly describe my attendance policy. Students in all courses are given the opportunity to earn up to 10 attendance points during the semester. For lectures, they earn all 10 for having perfect attendance or being absent once, nine for 2-3 absences, seven for 4-5, five for 6, two for 7-8, and one point when they have had 9 absences. Students with 10 or more absences get no points. In labs, which are longer in duration and fewer in number, no absences earns 10 points, one gets 9, two gets 6, and three gets 4 points. Students with four or more absences get none. Unlike punitive policies, therefore, *a student's grade is not reduced for being absent but enhanced for being present.*

I began the project by scrutinizing attendance and grading records that I had accumulated over the last five years (2007-2012)...1689, to be exact. They included 93 students who had withdrawn by mid-term and received a "W" and 150 who never attended nor done work but had lacked the wisdom or interest to withdraw formerly and, thus, received an "E" (what I call "virtual" withdrawals). These were removed from consideration, leaving 1446 student records for the study.

I proceeded to work out and compare the numbers of absences per student in each class section of every course I had taught during that period of time with the students' final grades. While doing so, I found that my student retention rate was pretty decent—94%. Figuring in the "virtual" withdrawals, it became 86%. Still not bad.

Furthermore, I found that 89% of those who had been absent five or fewer times earned successful (A, B, and C) grades, and they comprised 72% of the sample. In fact, 96%

of the A's, 76% of B's, and 48% of C's went to them, while 67% of the D's and 87% of the E's went to those with six or more absences.

I decided to get student feedback on the importance of attendance. I created a six-question survey and administered it to all my students. Eight other faculty members from varying disciplines stepped forward to give it their students, too, so I ended up with 419 responses—a decent representation of our on-campus student population.

Students were asked the following questions:

1. Do you think that regular attendance is important to learning and college success?
2. Do you believe that all classes should have an attendance policy?
3. Which classes, if any, do not need an attendance policy?
4. On a scale of 1-5 (#1 being not at all important and #5 being most important), indicate which factors (of 12 given) are most important in a student's decision not to come to class.
5. What do you like or not like about the attendance policy in this class?
6. Should taking a college orientation class be a requirement for all first-year students?

Almost all (98%) of those participating concurred with the anecdotal evidence among educators that attending classes regularly is important for learning and college success. A large majority (75%) said all of them should have an attendance policy, and an additional 19% said that most should. Frequently cited as not needing one were online courses. *Only 6% of students stated that attendance policies are not necessary.* The greatest disagreement among students was on the question of having mandatory orientation for first-year students, with 57% for and 43% against the idea.

As for student opinion on the attendance policy established by the teacher in whose class they had completed the survey, the percentage of favorable comments for those with strict policies in place, whether or not punitive (e.g., student's final letter grade is dropped one level for missing a certain number of classes), was high in comparison to those without any firm policy. It would certainly be interesting for college faculty and/or administrators to conduct in-class surveys like this if (or whenever) the idea of instating an institution-wide attendance policy were to come under consideration.

Of course, the findings of this limited project, showing a firm correlation between the number of student absences and their final grades, will likely surprise no one, but the point is that the data, however few, lend a modicum of *empirical* support to the anecdotal evidence that attending classes regularly matters for students to be successful. These kinds of data are needed in order to promote uniform institutional attendance policies, and more should be gathered.

Even if there were voluminous empirical studies that support uniform attendance policies, however, colleges may still not go for it. Why? One answer might be the emergence of for-profit, online "universities" that has pressed more and more non-profit educational institutions to acquire the posture of regarding students as "customers." This, in turn, has created a problem that may not have been anticipated: perceived and actual student attitudes of entitlement. Because students are increasingly being viewed as consumers of a product that institutions are attempting to sell (using various promotional gimmicks and quality-of-life-after-college promises to do so), we may be sending the concept of learning for intrinsic personal betterment out the window with the proverbial bath water. What is

left is only that which can be economically useful— i.e., a “degree.” In other words, emphasis becomes more on the grade, not the learning. With all these online and other commercial educational businesses guaranteeing ‘degrees’, our approach is understandable, but is it wise? What are we sacrificing as a result? This is something I suspect most of us have seriously pondered.

As a long-time advocate of uniform attendance policies and mandatory orientation for incoming students in all post-secondary schools, I am especially concerned that they at least be established in community colleges, where so many students enter with already weak educational backgrounds and poor personal discipline. In high school, they may have been able to sustain high absenteeism, but they eventually “pay the price,” as the Johns Hopkins report puts it, in post-secondary school. Hence, they need, right from the onset, very strong, consistent guidance and support from us. When asked in my survey about the common reasons for not being in class, students most often cited legitimate family problems, illness, and course time conflicts with outside jobs. A firm, fair, across-the-board attendance policy that is made explicitly clear upon registration and during (mandatory) orientation could help because, for one, students and qualified advisors would be compelled to work harder on scheduling course loads and meeting times to align with the students’ responsibilities in their private lives.

With no institutional attendance policy, on the other hand, already underprepared students wind up facing so many diverse, often subjective, policies that their attitude about attendance is shaky—i.e., it changes according to the class and the instructor.

How can we promote and expect regular attendance without having a uniform voice about it? Surely, an established institutional policy would provide less confusion for the student and take a lot of pressure off faculty for whom administrative support is vital, and, as suggested in this study’s results, it need not be punitive to be effective.

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