

The ToolBox

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A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



If You Are Here, Please Raise Your Hand: The Attendance Dilemma

At first glance, the question of whether attendance should be taken in college classrooms would seem to be a no-brainer. It would seem to make perfect sense that a person spending (or borrowing) tens of thousands of dollars per year for the privilege of attending college classes and earning a degree would logically choose to attend class on a regular basis. Further, it would also be logical to assume that class attendance would dramatically contribute to enhanced levels of learning. Finally, going out on a limb, could we also assume that students, faculty members, and administrators would all agree that these propositions are reasonable and rational? Nothing could be further from the truth.

The flurry of discussion and activity around the issue of classroom attendance policies can be addressed from three different perspectives: 1) Political, economic, and cultural arguments, 2) The empirical evidence regarding the value of classroom attendance, and 3) Strategies for increasing student attendance patterns.

Political, Economic, and Cultural Arguments

Ironically, or so it would seem, many faculty members, as well as students argue against the logic and necessity of attendance policies. Petress (1996) summarized some of the key arguments posed by these two groups:

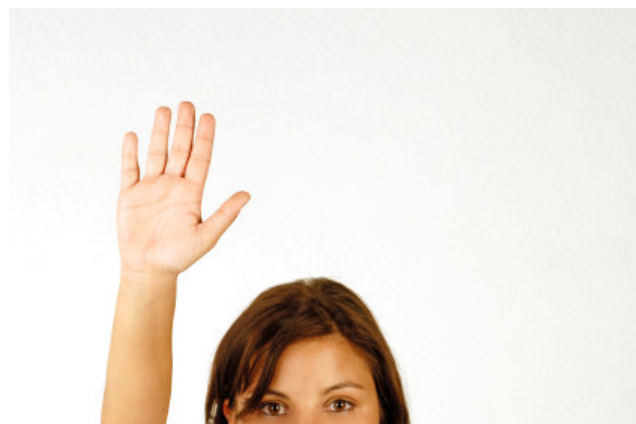
- Students claim that they are adults who should be given the freedom to decide whether or not they attend classes.
- Students also assert themselves as customers and call on university officials to assure the college courses are solid enough to attract them to attend on a regular basis (i.e., make classes worth attending).
- Faculty members resist the role of making distinctions between “excused” and “unexcused” absences.
- Faculty frequently express concern about the procedural burden imposed by implementing a classroom attendance policy.

- Faculty also raise the issue that mandatory attendance policies infringe on their academic freedom.

Advocates for attendance policies suggest that regular class attendance promotes enhanced levels of learning (see the data supporting this contention outlined below).

Attendance policies are more than just a philosophical concern. They also play out rather dramatically in the worlds of culture and politics. Some universities, for example, have made a decision not to schedule classes on Fridays because those classes typically demonstrate poor attendance patterns. For students, this is a wonderful gift as it results in an abundance of “three day weekends.” According to Young (2003), several universities are now in the process of “reclaiming Friday” as an instructional day of the college week.

In the political arena, the former New York City Mayor Rudy Guiliani threatened to take away \$110 million dollars in City money from the City University of New York because they failed to enforce classroom attendance policies. In a sarcastic attack on school officials, Guiliani remarked, “You get a book like this. You put down the names of the students at the beginning of the semester. And then you call out their names at the beginning of class. And if they’re there, you mark ‘yes,’ and if they’re not you mark ‘no’” (Archibold, 1998, B4).



Political, Economic, and Cultural Arguments (Continued)

It is safe to assume that as college costs rise and budgetary restrictions increase, there is a high likelihood of continued rhetoric on the issues of classroom attendance policies and their implementation.

As a final note in regard to attendance and political, economic, and cultural arguments, it is relevant to note that today's students are tomorrow's employees. Good attendance is a critically important financial and productivity issue for employers (Paton, 2004)

Empirical Evidence Regarding the Value of Attendance Policies



Numerous research studies have been conducted to investigate the nature of a relationship between the attendance patterns of college students and their levels of academic achievement and learning (Clump, Bauer, and Whiteleather, 2003). These studies have demonstrated that students who attend classes are often those who "regulate their own learning" (VanBlerekom, 2001).

These are the intrinsically motivated students who not only feel an obligation to attend class but also to complete assigned readings, pursue excellence in assignments, and to accrue as much knowledge as possible from their college education.

One interesting study by Moore (2003) revealed that students believe that better class attendance is a contributing factor in receiving a higher grade (and hopefully more learning), feel that they should receive credit for attending class, but also feel that their final grade should be based upon what they know rather than whether or not they attend class. Overall, however, students believed that attending class in college is generally less important than attending classes in high school.

Strategies for Increasing Attendance

With the pressure to increase the levels at which students attend college classes, there has also been an effort to develop strategies for encouraging students to attend class. The question becomes whether the "carrot" or the "stick" is a better tool for facilitating regular class attendance patterns.

Some of the ideas used in this regard include:

- Spending time at the beginning of the semester discussing the value and rationale for the course attendance policy (Moore, 2003)
- Giving in-class quizzes on a regular basis (Thompson, 2002)
- Making classes more engaging and interesting for the students (Gump, 2005)
- Providing, and talking about, incentives and penalties for attendance

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Considerations in Crafting and Implementing A Classroom Attendance Policy

Include your course attendance policies in your syllabi ... It is critically important to advise your students of the policies that will govern attendance in your classes. They need to know your attendance expectations for the semester. Be clear and precise.

Clearly articulate your attendance expectations and any consequences for choosing not to attend class. If you choose to connect classroom attendance with certain consequences (e.g., grade or point total deductions), the parameters of those deductions need to be clearly and specifically defined. For example,



students need to be aware of the specific number of unexcused absences that will result in lowering of their final grade and at what rate those deductions will occur. Develop a

sound rationale for the penalties that will be enacted and confirm that these rules are consistent with university policies.

Talk with your students about the rationale to connect attendance policies with classroom performance and assessment. If you believe that classroom attendance is important, talk with your students about your convictions and the reasons that lead you to require attendance as part of your expectations for classroom performance.

Consistently collect and record attendance data. To fairly administer a classroom attendance policy, it is of utmost importance that faculty members develop and implement reliable data collection strategies. Taking the time to correctly document and record attendance records is a vital part of this process. It is strongly recommended that faculty plan to document specific dates that students were absent from class.

Identify and define possible exceptions to the rules. It is a virtual certainty that for every acceptable reason for an "excused" absence that you may define, students will invent and submit additional and previously undiscovered reasons why their absences are valid and reasonable. Sometimes the reasons are valid—other times they are not. Strive to be consistent in making these decisions.

Inform students of their attendance status. An attendance policy is intended to increase the likelihood that students will actually be in class. Develop a strategy for keeping students informed of their absence patterns. With the availability of electronic systems such as Blackboard, this has become a very easy part of the total process.

Expect requests for a last minute reprieve. As the semester draws to a close, protests and questions will increase in number. Be prepared to respond in a manner that respects the dignity of the student but also the significance of regular class attendance.

Administer your attendance policy consistently, fairly, and without malice. Be fair yet firm in administering your attendance policy. Always remember that the purpose of these procedures is to increase opportunities for student learning.

