

## **College Faculty Absences Need To Be Treated More Seriously**

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The old saying: "What's good for the goose is good for the gander" does not seem to apply when university student and faculty absences are considered. Some universities have formal student attendance policies;<sup>1</sup> many schools state in their catalogs that student attendance is expected; and most schools make attendance policy a matter of instructor discretion. In our experiences as a student and as a teacher, we have noticed only on rare occasion instructors making absolutely no attendance demands on students. Attendance demands on students varied from draconian measures such as forced course withdrawals to severe grade reduction penalties to less harsh work make-up demands.

Good reasons typically accompany these attendance demands by instructors upon their students. These reasons range from student equity in terms of grading to class-room management strategies to getting one's money's worth out of course enrollments.

College faculty absences seem to be treated less consequentially. In personal contact with colleagues at conferences, in telephonic conversations, and in written correspondences, we have polled 117 instructors and 19 administrators<sup>2</sup> [department chairs and deans] as to how they and their colleagues handle faculty absences.<sup>3</sup> It must be noted here that each respondent spoke for himself/herself and for unstated numbers of colleagues whose practices were known.

Of faculty respondents, 114 of the 117 stated that when they or colleagues were absent, no replacement or makeup class time was expected nor offered; two respondents reported that they and some colleagues occasionally offered voluntary makeup time for missed classes; and one respondent stated that voluntary makeup time was typically offered. None of the 19 administrator respondents reported knowing of any required faculty makeup time except for extended absences due to illness.

Of the 117 faculty respondents, 84 reported that their students were still responsible for material that was assigned for days when faculty were absent.<sup>4</sup> There were 27 respondents reporting that some negotiation of student expectation frequently occurs when more than one faculty absence occurs but that such arrangements were neither uniform nor required. The remaining 6 respondents stated that they routinely forgave or renegotiated work assigned during faculty absence.

Eleven administrators reported no awareness of policy on their campuses regarding relieving students from responsibility for assigned/expected work during faculty absence days but they all assumed faculty would "act responsibly" in that regard. The remaining 8 administrators said they "saw no need for excusing students from assigned work." There appears to be a gross inequity here.

Vocational attendance and its productivity impact on work-place morale goes beyond the college campus. Even a unionized assembly plant has deemed worker attendance worthy of serious and elaborate concern.<sup>5</sup> The education literature is replete with articles about student elementary and high school attendance policy and practice.<sup>6</sup>

Students pay for their education and faculty attendance is part of an implied contract. While faculty illness, personal exigencies, and emergencies sometimes necessitate absences, these situations need to be worked out in ways so as not to disadvantage students.

Not only are individual faculty members ethically responsible and probably legally so, should that be tested in the courts, but so are administrators who represent institutions that promise to deliver a service to student clients. Beyond legal and ethical responsibility lies professional duty and good public relations for the professor, the institution, and the profession.

There have been several possible remedies for classroom voids that faculty absences cause suggested by students in an Argumentation class; among the solutions are the following:

In cases where professors know they will be absent, such as for conferences or anticipated personal reasons, videotaping lectures can, in part, substitute for normal faculty presence. Using weekend mornings and/or afternoons might work to compensate for missed classroom time. Assigning well thought out, supervised substitute community activity such as relevant laboratory experience, field work, or data gathering for independent writing

could also meaningfully substitute for limited traditional class sessions. Substitute adjunct professors<sup>7</sup> could be on call to substitute for regular faculty or in-house colleague assistance<sup>8</sup> could be summoned to substitute for short-term absences.

When faculty treat their classroom absences as just a matter of life, with little responsibility to their students; but concomitantly treating student absences as serious matters related to grade determination and matters of conscience, it is no wonder that legitimate feelings of betrayal, of being cheated out of the tuition they paid, of being treated inequitably, and of being treated cavalierly are present.

Educators share the noblest profession; and an education is the most priceless experience we and our students have. We, as educators, must do all we can to deserve the privileged place we hold in society and we must never knowingly taint the product we produce. We must not dilute our work, cheapen our dedication, nor stain our reputation by acting arrogantly. We must treat our absences as serious events and do what we can to compensate for them.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Such schools as West Point, William & Mary, and Embry-Riddle are examples.
2. These respondents were predominantly speech communication, English, political science, history, journalism, and mass communication instructors and administrators. Care must be taken in interpreting this study's data beyond the scope of the study range.
3. We would like to thank the cooperativeness of professors and administrators from: Speech Communication Association and Southern Speech Communication Association conferences who responded to our questions and to colleagues at other schools where authors have attended or taught.
4. It must be noted here that none of the respondents were laboratory science teachers or administrators. No valid conclusions about that domain can be validly made from this study.
5. Hazzard, Lance E. (1990). A Union Says Yes To Attendance. Personnel Journal, 69 (11): 46-49. This article notes efforts to both reduce worker absenteeism and to reward good, long-term attendance.
6. See Dismuke, Diane. (1988). Where Are All Your Students? NEA Today, 6 (10): 13; Kube, Betty Ann and Ratigan. (1992). Does Your School Have a Clue: Putting the Attendance Policy to the Test. The Clearing House, 65 (6): 348-350; Kube, Betty Ann and Ratigan. (1991). A No-Nonsense Policy for School Attendance. Education Digest, 57 (4): 67-69; and Ligon, Glynn. (1991). A Failed Attendance Policy: 2,713,598 Excuses. Spectrum, 9 (1): 16 for representative concerns over common school attendance issues.
7. Such adjuncts would need to be carefully screened for their subject matter and general teaching competence in given professors' classes.

8. Such collegial assistance, unless minor and infrequent, should carry at least nominal compensation.