

The Dilemma of University Undergraduate Student Attendance Policies: To Require Class Attendance or Not

Kenneth C. Petress

Academic policy making is rarely simple. Multiple, complex constraints typically intersect with what, on the surface, seems to be an easy call. An undergraduate attendance policy, or the lack of such a policy, is one such case. There are reasonable rationales **for** such policy¹ and familiar reasons for not supporting an attendance policy.² This article analyzes some major arguments on each side of this issue and concludes that pro attendance policy arguments seem more constructive to quality education than do anti attendance policy claims.

One anti attendance policy argument comes from students who remind would be rule-makers that they are adults who can decide for themselves what behaviors are in their best interests. The author's professional experience clearly demonstrates that not all students are mature; student behavior and academic failures indicate that, for the most part, the very students who get themselves in trouble due to excessive absences are the very ones who vociferously object to attendance policies. Most mature students assiduously attend their classes and therefore see attendance rules as unnecessary.³

Another student refrain against attendance rules is their claim that they are customers and it is the seller [university/ professor] who is obliged to make the product [class] appealing enough to attract students. This quasi-economic model falsely suggests that an education is a linearly sold tangible product rather than a multi-person, developmental process. Education is desired to be fun [sometimes it can be]; however, the attitude of school as hard work escapes some students. An education involves cooperative professor/ student/classmate effort. Too frequently, student peer classroom interaction, challenge, and insight are overlooked or diminished. The need for this cooperative, team-work, and peer presence needs accentuating as it is a rationale for required student attendance at all class sessions.⁴

One objection raised by faculty to an attendance policy is: how can student absences be categorized as "excused" or "not excused" without faculty 'playing God'? It is assumed here that absences need to be differentiated rather than simply defining them for what they are: absences.⁵ If we examine a used car salesman's job as a guide, we will discover that when the car seller calls in to say he is ill, has a family emergency, needs a day off for rest, or

is hung over, that individual may be empathized with, may receive employer sympathy, may be excused for the day without prejudice, and may have some of his work delayed until his return to work; however, any cars sold by others during his absence will not be credited to his commission account. In short, not showing up to work results in no pay. Further, should that employee be absent from a sales job too frequently, his position will become jeopardized. This analogy should extend to the classroom.⁶ Lack of attendance is a failure to tend to one's duties regardless of reason. Empathy, sympathy, and work delay may be reasonable; however, full reward for work not done seems unfair and absurd.

Another faculty complaint relevant to an attendance policy raises the attendance procedure issue. Requiring students to sign a daily attendance sheet and counting heads are not complex nor arduous tasks. Claiming a need for name-by-name roll calls is a bogus objection. Comparing signature lists and head counts will almost always reconcile themselves. To claim otherwise invalidates student claims to be mature adults.

Another claim forwarded by some faculty against uniform attendance policies involves "academic freedom." Some interpret attendance policies as infringing on individual teaching styles. Academic freedom has limits. These limits involve classroom delivery/planning/evaluation practices that are contrary to the law, that infringe on rights of other students or professors, or that are contrary to valid and appropriate classroom activities. Attendance policies do not limit what is taught in the classroom nor how it is taught. Some students receive veteran benefits; others are subsidized by welfare payments; and still others receive scholarships or grants. In some of these instances, law requires some school official to certify students' attendance. Such attendance certification is not really legitimate without attendance verification. Valid verification requires attendance be taken. Where attendance is not legally required, it surely ought to be morally demanded so that subsidizing agencies know they are getting their money's worth.

Too frequently, absent students do not take proper imitative to consult their professors and classmates to discover what was accomplished in class in their absence. This would not be such an urgent issue if it did not infringe on classmates' need to tolerate accommodation to absent students. Equally frustrating are student requests for catch-up time on class assignments not afforded to regularly attending classmates and student activity delays and class time taken for questions directly attributable to student absences. If faculty fail or refuse to accommodate

absent students at a cost to regularly attending peers, that are labeled as uncaring, unprofessional, or worse. The notion of "adult" responsibility seems too frequently to evaporate when student absences are tolerated. If co-workers on the job were interfering with others' employment progress, most would expect superiors to remove the interfering employee from the workplace. Absent students comprise an obstacle to peer progress and to their right not to have to tolerate incessant catch-up time and frustration to accommodate absentees.

Certainly, common sense, basic humanity, and professional rationality will enter into the attendance policy enforcement. No one wants a contagious student present and hospitalization [for short periods] needs to be sensibly dealt with. These are, after all, rare occasions. Not feeling good, over-sleeping, and personal inconveniences have no place as reasons for classmates and professors being inconvenienced and having class time wasted in catch-up activities. Class attendance remains a requisite for true education to be accomplished.

It appears arguments in favor of an attendance policy outweigh arguments against such a policy. Student attendance contributes to superior classroom management, student learning, and meeting legal and moral professional responsibilities. It seems sensible that students, faculty, and administrators can meet to form a reasonable and understandable attendance policy. Such a policy would clearly demonstrate an institution's search for quality education.

Endnotes

1. See: Betty Ann Kube and Gary Ratigan. (1991). A non-nonsense policy for school attendance. Education Digest, 57 (4): 67-68; Gary Ratigan and Betty Ann Kube. (1991). Developing a student attendance policy that works. Spectrum: Journal of School Research and Information, 9 (4): 37; Betty Ann Kube and Gary Ratigan. (1992). Does your school have a clue? Putting the attendance policy to the test. The Clearing House, 65 (6): 348-350.
2. See: Glynn Ligon and Elaine Jackson. (1991). A failed attendance policy: 2,713,598 excuses. Spectrum: Journal of School Research and Information, 9 (1): 16.
3. See: Bernice W. Einstein. (1967). Guide to success in College. New York: Grosset & Dunlap.
4. See: James C. Hearn. (1988). Determinants of postsecondary education attendance. Educational Evaluation and policy Analysis, 10 (2): 172.
5. See: Robert E. Rood. (1989). Advice for administrators: Writing the attendance policy. NASSP Bulletin, 73 (516): 21-25.
6. See: Lance E. Hazzard. (1990). A union says yes to attendance. Personnel Journal, 69 (11): 46-49.