

ENCOURAGING ATTENDANCE IN YOUR COURSES

Research confirms what is for many instructors a common-sense assumption: there is a positive correlation between class attendance and student learning. While we know this to be true, intuitively and empirically, however, it's not a conclusion that students are always willing to acknowledge.

Students' reasons for absenteeism vary widely, sometimes reflecting poorly on them and their commitment to doing well in the class, and other times reflecting poorly on the decisions we as instructors have made about our assessment design, our course policies, and/or what happens during class time. Below are a series of strategies you can consider using, in isolation or in concert with each other, to encourage better attendance in your course.

STRATEGIES

1. Design your class time together so that it represents an “added value” experience when compared to the materials you make available online. Students are like the rest of us: they will prioritize the “have to dos” (i.e., mandatory) over the “would be nice to dos” (i.e., recommended). If you let your students know that they can miss class and “not miss anything,” either by telling them that outright or by communicating that message implicitly via your teaching practices, then you are making it easier for them to choose to be absent. Your in-class experience has to amount to more than the content of that week's readings or the information on your slides; otherwise, you're making it easier for your students not to attend when they face competing priorities. Add post-assessment activities to your lectures, ideally ones that give students opportunities to practice answering the kinds of questions they will face on your larger, end-of-term assessments. Good teaching happens not when the content is covered, but when *students have learned*. To know if they're learned, you have to create opportunities throughout class when you can informally test their understanding—you simply can't know if your students have learned if you don't hear from them in class each day.

2. Design your assessment scheme so that students are doing things for marks in class on a consistent basis. Nothing drives student behavior like marks. If you design your assessment scheme and lesson plans so that something is happening during class time that will be marked, your students will be more incentivized to attend and more likely to see attending class as a higher priority. If the prospect of weekly grading is daunting, especially for your larger classes, then remember that these don't necessarily have to be assessed for quality of understanding: instead, you can set aside a small portion of the grade for students coming to class and doing the activities and submitting something as proof that they were present and engaged. Online polling services such as [Poll Everywhere](#) can give you data about who was present each day and who participated in your activities. If you don't want to use such technologies, you can give your students a worksheet that they complete over the course of the lecture and which they submit, or you can set aside 5 minutes at the end of class so that can summarize the main things they're learned that day (these, in turn, could be study tools that you give back to them at the end of term, or 'cheat sheets' that they are allowed to bring to the exam).

3. Establish an attendance policy that sets a limit on the maximum number of class meetings a student can miss before earning a failing grade. In your experience, how much time in class can students miss before they have jeopardized their ability to do well on your summative, end-of-term assessments? 20%, 25%, 30%? More, less? Whatever it is, tell your students in the course syllabus that this is your “line in the sand” so that they are aware of it at the start of term. If you're wondering

“Do I have the authority to do this?” wonder no more: [Academic Regulation 5.1 of the Undergraduate Calendar](#) states that “To obtain credit in a course, students must meet all the course requirements as published in the course outline.” If you have a small or medium-sized class (say, less than 80), you could simply circulate a sign-in sheet (first name, initial for last name, last 4 digits of student ID, and signature). For larger classes, you can use [Poll Everywhere](#) to track attendance, or enlist your TAs’ help. While the policy might sound tough, you can use discretion on a case-by-case basis: the best approach might be simply to use the policy to force a meeting with your student and insist on the need for changed behavior. When confronted like this, students typically either realize the need for change and do so accordingly, or they re-evaluate their school, work, and personal circumstances and determine that they need to take the course at a different time. Another added bonus of this policy is that you can learn about any larger circumstances your students might be dealing with and, if appropriate, take those into consideration and/or refer them to the appropriate support services on campus.

4. For smaller classes in which you grade participation, include attendance among the criteria you are assessing. Common sense dictates that if you’re absent, you’re not participating; therefore, absences should impact your attendance grade. Set levels of performance for your attendance criterion: full marks for 0-1 unexplained absences, partial marks for 2-3 absences, and so on, until you reach a mark of zero. Obviously, how many class meetings you think students can miss before the absenteeism substantially impacts their ability to perform in your class, and how many class meetings you have a term (12 or 24), will determine the precise levels of performance in your rubric.

5. Especially for your first-year courses, talk to your students about the importance of attendance and participation, and/or connect them to resources that do the same. Your first-year students may well be experiencing a level of independence previously unknown to them, and so they may not fully understand the importance of developing good study habits early in their university career. University is also a very different, more challenging, and less forgiving environment than high school, so making sure students understand that—and understand that you’re here to help them—is crucial. You can also connect your students to the empirical research that shows the correlation between attendance and performance/learning: see the references section below for possible readings and/or search on the [ERIC database](#) for items of particular interest and relevance. It’s one thing for your instructor to say ‘do this because I say so’; it’s another when students are confronted with a wealth of evidence that re-affirms what the instructor is saying.

6. Track/monitor student attendance, and reach out to those students whose absenteeism is starting to look like it will become a larger problem. Two of the most common objections to tracking attendance are 1) “it’s too time-consuming” and 2) “students are adults and can make their own decisions.” Tracking attendance, however, doesn’t have to be an onerous task: if you’re already collecting the data, you just need a few minutes a week to review it, and a few more minutes to follow up with students who are headed for trouble. Develop a few template emails for the various occasions when you need to reach out to your students. If you’re not currently collecting that data, you can use simple sign-in sheets (for classes under, say, 80 students) or something more elaborate such as [Poll Everywhere](#). Consider, too, if you can’t get your TAs’ help for this in your larger classes: maybe, for example, you make each TA responsible for collecting sign-in information from a certain quadrant of your lecture hall. Meanwhile, in spite of its seeming respect for the student’s autonomy and judgment, the second objection (“students are adults and can make their own decisions”) conveniently removes the instructor from the equation altogether. If you think encountering this or that content or learning this or that skill is crucial to your class, you don’t make optional: you make it mandatory, and you talk to your students about it. If you feel that attendance will help your students learn—and that’s exactly what the research shows—then why not make it mandatory? The other factor to consider: many of your students, in fact, may *not* yet adults, especially in your first-year courses. They have a lot of learn about how to succeed in a university environment, so it’s important for them to have instructors who are instilling in them the sorts of habits that will help them to succeed in their university careers.

FURTHER READING

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