The Case for Class-Attendance Policies during the First Year of College

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The National Policy Center on the First Year of College has published guidelines for evaluating the first-year experience, which consist of a series of institutional self-assessment questions that includes the following: “Does your institution have an attendance policy? Does that policy set higher standards for attendance in first-year courses? Has your campus undertaken any kind of study of classroom attendance patterns?” (National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2001).

Empirical support for this guideline is provided by a study which revealed that every 10% increase in the number of student absences in college resulted in a .2 drop in students’ overall grade-point average (Kowalewski, Holstein, & Schneider, 1989). Additional evidence supporting the relationship between class attendance and college grades is provided by campus-specific research conducted at the University of Mississippi (Anderson & Gates, 2002) and Mississippi State University (Grandpre, 2000). On both campuses, it was found that class absences adversely impacted course performance, and that class-attendance reporting systems for identifying absentee students, coupled with intrusive interventions for these students, had a positive effect on their first-year academic performance (GPA).

Another benefit of attendance policies and attendance-promoting intervention practices is that federal regulations require students to maintain satisfactory academic progress in order to receive financial aid. So, another benefit of attendance policies and practices is that they serve to increase the probability that students will continue to receive financial aid, as well as increase the likelihood that the college will continue to receive federally-funded financial aid to support its students.

Attendance policies can also facilitate the implementation of early-alert policies designed to identify and connect with students who exhibit disengagement very early in the term—well before midterms grades are calculated, processed, and disseminated. Attendance patterns can be used as a more proactive early-alert system than midterm grades, because they can be determined from the very onset of the academic term. For example, at New Mexico State University, attendance-problem requests are sent to instructors during the second week and sixth week of the term. Students demonstrating attendance irregularities who fall into any of the following categories receive a phone call from the Office of Advisement Services: (a) first-semester students, (b) students on academic probation, and (c) students with multiple early-alert reports (Thompson, 2001).

At Marymount College (CA), the offices of Academic Affairs and Student Development Services collaborate to identify and intercept academic problems during the early weeks of the term through a program titled, “R.E.T.A.I.N,” an acronym standing for: Re-Engagement Through Academic Intervention Now. Easy-to-complete forms are placed in faculty mailboxes at the start of the term, which may be used to identify students exhibiting early behavioral signs of disengagement, such as frequent absences. Faculty are given the option of sending these forms to the Assistant Academic Dean, or contacting the Dean by electronic/voice mail to report students exhibiting early “red flag”
behavior. Particular attention is paid to students for whom more than one R.E.T.A.I.N form has been submitted. The Dean contacts the student’s academic advisor to discuss the situation and the two of them decide what intervention strategy to employ. For example, students needing academic support with their class work are referred to the Learning Assistance Center, whereas students whose disengagement stems from “non-academic” (i.e., psychosocial) issues are referred to the Counseling Center. If the Assistant Academic Dean and academic advisor are unable to connect with the student to resolve the problem(s), the Director of Residential Life is contacted to determine whether the student is living in a college residence and may be reached there.

Empirical evidence for the effectiveness of an earlier-than-midterm alert system is provided by institutional research conducted at Vincennes University Junior College (Indiana). When a student begins to miss class at this institution, course instructors tear off one part of a computer-generated ticket whose keystroke input generates two postcards containing messages of concern about non-attendance, one of which is addressed to the student’s local residence and one to the student’s permanent address. Additional absences generate a second, more strongly worded postcard indicating that the student is in danger of being dropped from the course. The system also generates lists for academic advisors, alerting them of students majoring in their academic field who have received attendance notifications. Following institutional implementation of this early-alert system, the number of students receiving grades of D, F, or W was substantially reduced. The beneficial effect of the early-alert system was particularly pronounced in developmental mathematics classes, for which there was a 17% drop in D and F grades and a concomitant 14% increase in A, B, and C grades (Budig, Koenig, & Weaver, 1991).

Final Caveats and Ruminations about the Relationship between Class Attendance, Course Grades, and College Policies

Among the variables that may affect the relationship between class attendance and course grades is the quality of student listening and note-taking while in class. There is a body of research indicating that the accuracy and comprehensiveness of students’ note-taking is positively associated with test performance and course grades. What students actually do when they’re in class would seem to be a critical variable that can strongly influence any relationship found between course attendance and course grades. This may reflect the classic difference between seat time versus engaged time or “time on task.” As college instructors can readily testify, there can be wide variation in the range of attentiveness and engagement among students in the classroom. Some students come to class prepared, listen intently, and actively think and write while in the classroom; others listen, but do little or no note-taking; others do not listen actively, but do reflexively or robotically record whatever the instructor writes on the board; and others are just simply there—occupying physical space, but are somewhere in outer space—cognitively.

This raises the following set of questions that may be relevant to the relationship between class attendance and course performance: (1) Is mere class attendance (simply showing up) the key variable we’d expect to relate most closely to course performance, or is actual student behavior while in class the more important variable? (2) Is the process of actively listening and writing notes while in class (“encoding”) important for promoting learning and course performance/grades, or is it the written product (the
recorded set of notes) that is later reviewed and studied outside of class what really matters? If it’s the latter, then students who miss class, but copy notes taken by an effective note-taking classmate or purchase complete sets of notes from a campus note-taking service, should be expected to do as well as students who are attending class regularly, listening attentively, and writing actively while in class. Some early experimental research relating to these questions suggests that both active recording of notes in class and review of class notes outside of class both contribute to increased student retention and retrieval of instructor-presented information. Perhaps further research on these questions would serve to elucidate the empirical relationship among class attendance, classroom behavior, and course learning.

Lastly, as with most research questions about human behavior, including college student behavior, additional research is needed before it can be determined whether a causal connection exists between class attendance (or student behavior in class) and course learning. However, as we wait for this basic research question to be answered, what institutional policies about class attendance should be adopted in the meantime? Should universities continue to provide note-taking services, allowing students to purchase class notes, which may tacitly condone or reinforce absenteeism? Should course policies be such that class attendance is entirely optional, strongly encouraged, or required in certain courses (e.g., those taken by first-year students)?

Included among the Guidelines for Evaluating the First-Year Experience (published by the Policy Center on the First-Year of College) are the following questions: "Does your institution have an attendance policy? Does that policy set higher standards for attendance in first-year courses?" As we suspend or postpone conclusions about the relationship between class attendance and course learning/performance until more definitive research is conducted, we still have to answer the foregoing questions. What constitutes our best, or most informed response to these important policy questions right now? If local (campus-specific) assessment identifies a relationship, albeit correlative, between class attendance and course performance, does this constitute sufficient evidence to warrant institutional re-examination and possible re-formation of current attendance policies?

References


Measurement, 49, 985-991.

http://www.brevard.edu/fyc/publications/guidelines.htm

Thompson, Karla (2001, April 4). “Early Warning Systems,” Message to fye-list [fye-list@vm.sc.edu]. [kthompso@cavern.nmsu.edu]