



Attendance and Access: How Course Policies Can Balance Equity and Rigor During In-Person Classes

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1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

- When I began teaching, I underestimated difficulty of dealing with attendance
 - In setting attendance policies, I felt a tension
 - Noticed a fairly wide array of policies across different instructors
 - As students missed class, I dealt with more and more complex situations
- Like any researcher, I started reading, trying to find an empirical “good” answer
 - But like any instructor could say → there is no one “right” way
 - Always an edge case that throws the best-laid plans
- My desire to uphold a high level of accessibility and access in my course(s)

1.2 Purpose / Learning Objectives

- Frank, honest, and productive discussion on some strategies ...
 - ... and recognizing limits on said strategies
- Use as a starting point for changing departmental/course policies ...
 - ... or just individual instructor preferences
- Continued reflection on how we adapt our styles, policies, and form to engage students with changing expectations, and what purpose/goal our policies serve
- I’ll start by highlight our [Background and Starting Point](#) for understanding attendance issues, and transition into [Working Towards Solutions](#).

2 Background and Starting Point

2.1 Benefits of Attending

Being present in class is a *good* thing for students (and instructors)

- Better course grades and overall GPA ([Credé et al., 2010](#))
 - Preliminary evidence of relationship with instructor evaluation ([Davidovitch & Soen, 2006](#))
 - Some activities or plans benefit from having more students in-class
 - Especially most active learning activities!
 - Less time-consuming to deal with re-explaining or re-lecturing content for those who do not attend
 - Professors are busy people! ([Jacobs & Winslow, 2004](#))
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2.2 Complexity in Motivation to Attend

Student motivation and choice to attend is *complex*

- Not as simple as, “they just don’t want to come / they are lazy”
 - Think about all the “excuses” you have heard for missing class, we’ve all been surprised
- Student’s individual traits and personality doesn’t always explain attendance ([Van Blerkom, 1996](#))
- Student’s primary motivation may relate to a utilitarian view of what they get out of being present ([Fjortoft, 2005](#))

2.3 Attendance Can Make or Break Relationships

Student’s attendance situation, and instructors’ reactions to those circumstances, can *strain or strengthen* relationships

- Student-faculty relationships are already fraught with transactional issues
 - See flaws of student evaluations of faculty ([Langbein, 2008](#))
- We want to be encouraging and inviting, while also being mindful of boundaries ([Owen & Zwahr-Castro, 2007](#))
 - Asking for personal details may toe the reasonable line
- Tension in wanting to be seen as warm, but not overly permissive or authoritarian ([Bassett et al., 2013](#))
- Recognizing the potential positive academic and professional from cultivating positive relationships ([Ingraham et al., 2018](#))

2.4 “Attendance” and Access Doesn’t Stop at the Door

Policies related to access to materials outside of class play a role too

- Learning management systems (LMS) are omnipresent, and serve as the vital storage tool for sharing materials with students
 - Do they help outcomes? Sometimes ... ([Rubin et al., 2010](#))
 - Some faculty can find it difficult to embrace the learning curve of an LMS like Blackboard ([Gautreau, 2011](#))
 - Students may not *always like* LMS ([Horvat et al., 2015](#)), but they are certainly getting accustomed to it
 - Us instructors choose the balance of *how much* to share exclusively in-class vs. how much to share via the LMS
 - Is our course almost entirely shared?, part of it?, very little? ([Machajewski et al., 2019](#))
 - We make additional decision on the *types* of materials to share or require, which may impact student perception and access; e.g., OER textbooks ([Hilton, 2016](#))
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2.5 Recap of Background

So where does that all leave us? Confused? So was/am I

- Clearly, having students in class is largely beneficial - but getting them there isn't always easy
- Students sometimes miss for complicated reasons - how do we try to address these things while not damaging our relationships
- When students do miss, what do we provide on the LMS, and what do we withhold (if anything at all)?

3 Working Towards Solutions

3.1 Goals of These Solutions

Encourage better in-class attendance (duh), while...

- Addressing common scenarios/issues instructors face
- Accounting for circumstances outside of student control
- Promoting rapport between instructors and students
- Maintaining a high level of access to learning materials when possible

3.2 Preemptive Limitations

I'm not a miracle worker

- Clearly, any solution to the myriad of nuances described before is going to be complicated - this presentation won't solve all our woes!
- This process of revision and reflection will be long
- No one size fits all; tailor to your classes and skills

3.3 Overview of Common Issues

Each of these will be addressed in the following sections

- [Dealing with "Excuses"](#)
- [Designing Flexible Content](#)

3.4 Dealing with "Excuses" - The Problem

Instructors as a Judge, Jury, and Executioner in regard to absences? *Un-ideal*

- Opens up to bias in granting or rejecting, can lead to perception of unfairness
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- Requires additional time (and cognitive load) for professors
- Incentivizes “convincing” or pleading the case

3.5 Dealing with “Excuses” - A Starting Solution

When possible, proactively set aside a “reasonable” numbers of absences without penalty in regard to access or points

- The exact extent of reasonable depends on the course, e.g., labs and practicals may have less than lectures
- Consider the theoretical point-of-no-return for student success in the class
- Consider the rough percentage of class that can be “made up” via materials on the LMS
- Set concrete, explicit consequences for absences past the “reasonable” amount
 - Likely written in the syllabus

3.6 Designing Flexible Content - The Problem

When students miss, what do they stand to lose?

- Interactive discussion, demonstrations, and many forms of active learning may be especially hard to translate to out-of-class activity
- Are lecture slides, notes available or just “get notes from a friend”?
- Are practice activities still effective at home?

3.7 Designing Flexible Content - A Starting Solution

Within reason, ensure that content is *mostly* available via the LMS (even the activities)

- If not confidential, try to post slides and/or lecture notes prior to class
 - Make sure activities are not just verbally administered in-class, but written down somewhere for those who are online (may also help students who are hard-of-hearing)
 - If demonstrating something in the course, see if an alternative YouTube video may be posted to the LMS that shows the same phenomenon or procedure
 - When not possible to provide certain materials, try to explicitly and clearly state why
 - E.g., “Exam answers are only available in-class or during office hours in order to protect the security of the test”
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