



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

GVSU 31st Annual Fall Conference on Teaching and Learning

Quinton Quagliano, M.S., C.S.P.

Psychology Department

Table of Contents

1	Introduction	2
1.1	Motivation	2
1.2	Purpose / Learning Objectives	2
2	Background and Starting Point	2
2.1	Benefits of Attending	2
2.2	Complexity in Motivation to Attend	3
2.3	Attendance Can Make or Break Relationships	3
2.4	“Attendance” and Access Doesn’t Stop at the Door	3
2.5	Recap of Background	4
3	Working Towards Solutions	4
3.1	Goals of These Solutions	4
3.2	Preemptive Limitations	4
3.3	Overview of Common Issues	4
3.4	Poor Class Attendance - The Problem	5
3.5	Poor Class Attendance - A Starting Solution	5
3.6	Demonstrating Class Value - The Problem	5
3.7	Demonstrating Class Value - A Starting Solution	5
3.8	Dealing with “Excuses” - The Problem	6
3.9	Dealing with “Excuses” - A Starting Solution	6
3.10	Designing Flexible Content - The Problem	6
3.11	Designing Flexible Content - A Starting Solution	7
3.12	Embracing the LMS - The Problem	7
3.13	Embracing the LMS - A Starting Solution	7
4	Conclusion	8
5	References	9

1 Introduction

1.1 Motivation

- When I began teaching, I underestimated difficulty of attendance
 - In setting attendance policies, I felt a tension
 - Noticed a wide array of policies
 - As students missed class, I dealt with more complex situations
 - My evening in-person class vs. asynch online class
- Like any researcher, I started reading
 - But like any instructor could say → 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)
 - Still finding value and purpose in in-person classes
 - Sharing that purpose with my students

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 our styles, policies, and form to engage changing expectations
- I'll start by highlighting the [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](#))
 - Evidence of relationship with instructor evaluation ([Davidovitch & Soen, 2006](#))
 - Some activities or plans benefit from/require attendance
 - Especially many active learning activities!
 - Less time-consuming to deal with re-hashing content
 - Professors are busy people! ([Jacobs & Winslow, 2004](#))
-

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, some surprising
- 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](#))
- Various mobility, safety, transportation issues

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 already fraught with transactional issues
 - See flaws of student evaluations of faculty - ([Langbein, 2008](#))
- 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, for some
- 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) serve as vital storage tool for sharing
 - Do they help outcomes? Sometimes ... ([Rubin et al., 2010](#))
 - Some faculty can find it difficult to embrace the learning curve ([Gautreau, 2011](#))
 - Students may not always *like* LMS ([Horvat et al., 2015](#)), but are accustomed
- Instructors choose balance of *how much* to share exclusively in-class vs. how much to share via the LMS
 - Is our course almost entirely shared online?, part of it?, very little? ([Machajewski et al., 2019](#))
 - We make additional decision on the *types* of materials to share or require,
 - * May impact student perception and access; e.g., OER textbooks ([Hilton, 2016](#))

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 intentionally 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

It is *not* to completely de-value an in-person education!

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
- Not all research on absences is likely to apply equal to college students
 - They have more independence than middle/high school students

3.3 Overview of Common Issues

Each of these will be addressed in the following sections

- [Poor Class Attendance](#)
 - [Demonstrating Class Value](#)
 - [Dealing with "Excuses" with Absences](#)
 - [Designing Flexible Content that Works Inside and Outside of Class](#)
 - [Embracing the LMS \(and All of It's Problems\)](#)
-

3.4 Poor Class Attendance - The Problem

Simple - not enough students attending class regularly

- As discussed in the [Background and Starting Point](#), there are many valid reasons this may happen, but it is still an issue
- While the following sections will deal with responding to poor attendance, we still want to focus our attention on getting more students in-class each time
- Does having a “mandatory” attendance policy work? Is that all we need?

3.5 Poor Class Attendance - A Starting Solution

Many strategies proposed in the literature

- Unsurprisingly, I am not the first person interested in this area, a small sample of empirical research:
 - Railsback (2004)
 - Moore (2004)
 - Al-Shammari (2016)
- The first area to address is the mandatory attendance policy, where some degree of absenteeism results in compounding and automatic grade deductions. Success in various areas:
 - Pharmacy (Winkles et al., 2025)
 - Medicine (Subramaniam et al., 2013)
 - Economics (Marburger, 2006)
 - Problem solved, right? Well, somewhat; maybe works at the average level, but individuals may find it taxing
- In summary, it probably is wise to have *some* type of mandatory attendance policy, but there are several ways we can supplement this suggestion...

3.6 Demonstrating Class Value - The Problem

The value of being in-person should be made apparent and explicit

- Metaphor: “Why do we need to be here?” → “This meeting could have been an email” - A feeling we all know too well
- Some, but not all students, have an intrinsic motivation to care about each subject
- I’ve had students who, humbly, explain part of my class does not show this value, because I’ve asked for feedback
 - This isn’t *always* fair, be discerning in what advice to consider

3.7 Demonstrating Class Value - A Starting Solution

Make the language clear

- Try to make it clear what value a class provides when it meets in-person instead of just being recorded
 - Don't assume students inherently recognize this!
- I write some reasons into the syllabus, e.g., easier to pay attention, ask questions when confused, get clarification from peers/groups, get more off-the-cuff examples for concepts
- Use with caution: make in-class activities worth points that cannot be made up elsewhere
 - Some students see points as indicating value
- Similar, with caution: Clearly indicate how an activity plays into the larger picture
 - E.g., “this will be on the exam/quiz”; “you need to do this same process for your paper”

3.8 Dealing with “Excuses” - The Problem

Instructors as an absolute arbiter in regard to absences? *Un-ideal*

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

3.9 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
- Consider the rough percentage of class that can be “made up” via materials on the LMS
 - This will play into the next problem of [Designing Flexible Content](#)
- Set concrete, explicit consequences for absences past the “reasonable” amount
 - Likely written in the syllabus, E.g., “After missing X classes you...”

3.10 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 is it just “get notes from a friend”?
 - Are practice activities done in class still effective at home?
-

3.11 Designing Flexible Content - A Starting Solution

Within reason, ensure that content is *mostly* available via the LMS or other methods (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”

3.12 Embracing the LMS - The Problem

I’ll be the first to admit: Blackboard can challenge me sometimes

- It can be difficult to manage, move, copy, and edit a large amount of content
- Hopeful expectation for high accessibility scores can be difficult to meet
- Hard to speculate what will make the most sense for flow in student’s eye
- More time in LMS means less time working on content and talking with students

3.13 Embracing the LMS - A Starting Solution

Spend time with the functions and settings in a sandbox; get feedback from students

- [GVSU’s eLearning Team](#) can set up template courses to play around in prior to posting in the “real” course
 - Use the “Student Preview” function regularly to check and make sure content appear as expected
 - Try “roleplaying” as a student who missed class, is it intuitive to find relevant materials?
 - In that same vain, model using the LMS in class early on or briefly during each class period (or during recorded lectures)!
 - Use a [Mid-semester Interview in Teaching \(MIT\)](#) via Pew FTLC or otherwise solicit feedback via survey on LMS structure BEFORE the end of the semester
 - I’ve learned that many students greatly prefer a largely chronological flow, rather than categorization by type, i.e., less scrolling when completing work for the week
 - Use hierarchy of learning modules and folders to stay organized
-

4 Conclusion

- I've tried to give many anecdotal ideas and examples of what I see working to make in-person classes more appealing and approachable to students
 - Some of these ideas also help make the class more accessible when students find themselves missing due to reasons outside of their control
 - Unfortunately, we are limited in the circumstances we can change
 - At the core of many of these efforts is a sense of *grace*, showing some leeway and trusting students to not take a mile
 - I understand why this is a difficult thing to always trust in
-

5 References

- Allaire, J., & Dervieux, C. (2024). *Quarto: R interface to quarto markdown publishing system*. <https://github.com/quarto-dev/quarto-r>
- Al-Shammari, Z. N. (2016). Enhancing higher education student attendance through classroom management. *Cogent Education*, 3(1), 1210488.
- Bassett, J. F., Snyder, T. L., Rogers, D. T., & Collins, C. L. (2013). Permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative instructors: Applying the concept of parenting styles to the college classroom. *Individual Differences Research*, 11(1).
- Credé, M., Roch, S. G., & Kieszczynka, U. M. (2010). Class attendance in college: A meta-analytic review of the relationship of class attendance with grades and student characteristics. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(2), 272–295. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654310362998>
- Davidovitch, N., & Soen, D. (2006). Class attendance and students' evaluation of their college instructors. *College Student Journal*, 40(3), 691+. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A150965837/AONE?u=anon~596dca9f&sid=googleScholar&xid=620788ec>
- Fjortoft, N. (2005). Students' motivations for class attendance. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 69(1), 107.
- Gautreau, C. (2011). Motivational factors affecting the integration of a learning management system by faculty. *Journal of Educators Online*, 8(1), n1.
- Hilton, J. (2016). Open educational resources and college textbook choices: A review of research on efficacy and perceptions. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 64(4), 573–590. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-016-9434-9>
- Horvat, A., Dobrota, M., Krsmanovic, M., & Cudanov, M. (2015). Student perception of moodle learning management system: A satisfaction and significance analysis. *Interactive Learning Environments*, 23(4), 515–527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2013.788033>
- Ingraham, K. C., Davidson, S. J., & Yonge, O. (2018). Student-faculty relationships and its impact on academic outcomes. *Nurse Education Today*, 71, 17–21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2018.08.021>
- Jacobs, J. A., & Winslow, S. E. (2004). Overworked faculty: Job stresses and family demands. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 596(1), 104–129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716204268185>
- Langbein, L. (2008). Management by results: Student evaluation of faculty teaching and the mis-measurement of performance. *Economics of Education Review*, 27(4), 417–428. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2006.12.003>
- Machajewski, S., Steffen, A., Romero Fuerte, E., & Rivera, E. (2019). Patterns in faculty learning management system use. *TechTrends*, 63(5), 543–549. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-018-0327-0>
- Marburger, D. R. (2006). Does mandatory attendance improve student performance? *The Journal of Economic Education*, 37(2), 148–155. <https://doi.org/10.3200/JECE.37.2.148-155>
- Moore, R. (2004). Does improving developmental education students' understanding of the importance of class attendance improve students' attendance and academic
-

- performance? *Research and Teaching in Developmental Education*, 24–39.
- Owen, P. R., & Zwahr-Castro, J. (2007). Boundary issues in academia: Student perceptions of faculty—student boundary crossings. *Ethics & Behavior*, 17(2), 117–129. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508420701378065>
- R Core Team. (2025). *R: A language and environment for statistical computing*. R Foundation for Statistical Computing. <https://www.R-project.org/>
- Railsback, J. (2004). Increasing student attendance: Strategies from research and practice. *Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory NWREL*.
- Rubin, B., Fernandes, R., Avgerinou, M. D., & Moore, J. (2010). The effect of learning management systems on student and faculty outcomes. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(1), 82–83. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.10.008>
- Subramaniam, B., Hande, S., & Komattil, R. (2013). Attendance and achievement in medicine: Investigating the impact of attendance policies on academic performance of medical students. *Annals of Medical and Health Sciences Research*, 3(2), 202–205. <https://doi.org/10.4103/2141-9248.113662>
- Van Blerkom, M. L. (1996). *Academic perseverance, class attendance, and performance in the college classroom*.
- Winkles, C. L. B., Barnett, C. W., & Burgoyne, A. P. (2025). An examination of mandatory class attendance and academic performance in a PharmD program. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 89(4), 101389. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajpe.2025.101389>
- Xie, Y. (2014). Knitr: A comprehensive tool for reproducible research in R. In V. Stodden, F. Leisch, & R. D. Peng (Eds.), *Implementing reproducible computational research*. Chapman; Hall/CRC.
- Xie, Y. (2015). *Dynamic documents with R and knitr* (2nd ed.). Chapman; Hall/CRC. <https://yihui.org/knitr/>
- Xie, Y. (2025). *Knitr: A general-purpose package for dynamic report generation in r*. <https://yihui.org/knitr/>
-