

# CLASS ATTENDANCE: IS IT IMPORTANT?

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*"80% of success is showing up." - Woody Allen*

Absenteeism is a significant problem at many institutions of higher learning (Romer 1993) and a major concern for educators (Devadoss and Foltz 1996). Daily absenteeism in college classrooms can be as high as one-third to almost one-half of students in certain disciplines (Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb 2001, McGuire 2003, Moore 2003a, 2003c, 2005). Romer (1993) investigated the links between absenteeism and various characteristics of classes. He found that smaller classes had less absenteeism; the more significant the mathematical component of the course, the less the absenteeism; there was more absenteeism in introductory courses than in upper level courses; the better quality of the instruction, the less the absenteeism; and absenteeism was mainly concentrated in a few students who missed many classes while most students rarely missed classes. Research suggests that student absenteeism adversely affects the overall "well-being of classes" (White, 1992) and creates a "dead," tiresome, and unpleasant classroom environment (Brauer, 1994).

A recent survey of undergraduates at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Clay and Breslow 2006) reported that the most important factors (in order of precedence) in deciding whether to attend lectures are the lectures' quality and clarity, conflicting deadlines for other classes, the professor's use of relevant examples, and the professor's ability to engage and entertain students. Students' responses to this survey suggest that they use a practical decision-making process that considers many factors in deciding what classes to attend and how often. The primary factor involving quality and clarity of lectures seem to support the need for educators to continually seek creative and innovative teaching methodologies to increase class attendance (see Broder 1994 for review).

Some students believe that since they pay for classes, they should be the ones to decide whether or not to attend classes, and should not be penalized for failing to show up (Maize 2006). Some students even suggest that they can learn more from not going to class (Schoenbrum 2007). They believe that instead of wasting time being bored and distracted in classes, they can sit down on their own, focus, and learn the material.

New digital media (user-published blogs, video clips, collaborative wikis, webcasts, and immersive virtual reality) is an emerging concern to some faculty as a possible contributor to student classroom absenteeism (Shapiro, Mentch and Kubit 2007). One student survey of 431 students indicated that videos were not the reason that 70% of students missed classes. Only a small percentage of students reported that they skipped classes and used videos as an alternative

to lectures. Interestingly, 75% of students surveyed indicated that they used videos as a review tool and were most likely to review videos before quizzes and tests, and indicated that they were doing better in classes because of the videos.

Many students intuitively know that it is important to attend class. Moore (2003b) found that more than 90% of students in introductory science classes know on the first day of classes that they have a better chance of receiving a higher grade if they regularly attend class. However, many students believe that the importance of attendance to academic success should be linked to receiving credit for attending class. Also, their attendance rates drop if they do not receive credit for attending class (Launius 1997, Moore 2003b).

Some college administrators believe that class absenteeism is linked to extra-curricular activities such as athletics, social activities and drinking. At the University of Alabama, 24% of high-absence students stated partying too hard was the reason they missed classes. In addition, 20% cited part-time work as the reason they missed many classes (Gasner 2002). School administrators are looking for ways to improve class attendance.

Early research on the relationship between attendance and grades was mixed. A number of studies demonstrated a relationship between high attendance rates and high grades (Brocato 1989, Launius 1997, Moore 2003b, Thomas and Higbee 2000). Research of economics students indicated that effort and intelligence determined the grade, while student's attendance record and the student's overall value of the course were less important in determining the grade (Park and Kerr 1990). One study reported that classroom attendance does not affect academic performance (Berenson, Carter and Norwood 1992). One early study even suggested that mandatory attendance could have a negative effect on student learning and grades (Hyde and Flournoy 1986).

Romer (1993) provides quantitative data that suggests a positive correlation between attendance and learning. While controlling for grade point average and completion of problem sets, the difference in performance between students attending classes regularly and students attending sporadically was approximately one letter grade. In contrast, previous research (Park and Kerr 1990) reported that effort and intelligence were the most important determinates of grades in economic courses and student attendance played a less important role. Recent studies in economics classes indicate that attending lectures corresponds to a significant improvement in exam performance by as much as 7.7% (Chen and Lin 2006, Lin and Chen 2006).

There is some evidence that underperforming students who do not attend introductory classes have a more difficult time in the upper-level courses in their majors (Brauer 1994). This observation lends support to those schools that have mandatory attendance policies for freshman classes. Historically, a high percentage of freshmen have struggled to make the transition from high school to college. The increased freedoms of college life can be a constant distracter from the rigors of academia. To assist with this transition, many colleges and universities have mandatory dormitory residence policies for freshman to help minimize the distractions of independent living off campus.

Some first-year students fail to understand that academic success relies on both attendance and effort. Currently, entering freshmen spend less time studying than previous entering classes, but have higher grades (Sax et al. 2002). An increasing percentage (46%) of freshman had an A average in high school despite the fact that many (33%) studied less than 6 hours per week (Young 2002). In addition, a significant percentage (16%) of freshman acknowledge that they study less than one hour per week. High school students with poor study habits are increasingly rewarded with higher grades and therefore feel that they should be given the same high grades when they exert the same minimal efforts in college.

For class attendance to have the most academic value, both students and teachers must be actively engaged. Students will accomplish little academically if they only come to class to socialize, complete work for other classes or activities, or sleep. Students must choose to participate in their own education and take responsibility for their learning. Class attendance does not guarantee success, but can enhance the probability of academic success.

Teachers too have an obligation to students to present informative and exciting material that keep students interested and engaged. Professors should provide an appealing and exciting classroom environment and thus providing value-added knowledge in class. This value should extend beyond what non-attending students can get from reading the textbook and study guides on their own. This value-added knowledge should matter to students and improve their education and knowledge base.

Most professors assign grades on students' mastery of course content. However, some professors try to ensure high attendance rates by using pop quizzes, taking attendance, or giving away test questions in class. Although, these methods can force students to attend, these methods are viewed as "cheap" or "mean" by some students (Clay and Breslow 2006). Some professors feel that they personally invest in every student by going far beyond the expected duties of teaching and that students should reciprocate by going to class (Niklewski 2006).

Even if a teacher is intellectually stimulating and provides clear lessons, explanations and examples, some students will not be motivated enough to come to class. Teachers and advisors must make students cognizant of the benefits of attending class. They must show students the empirical relationship between attendance, grades, and academic success. Despite the best efforts of teachers, the high-risk student who has no real interest in learning and who does not attend classes will have a low probability of success.

Attendance feedback (Gaudine and Saks 2001) is one interesting technique used in an attempt to improve class attendance. The hypothesis is that when students receive feedback documenting their absences as well as the average number of absences of other students over the same period, their attendance will improve after receipt of a feedback letter. One recent study reported that course grade point average significantly correlated with attendance after the use of attendance feedback letters (Broucek and Bass 2007).

Although opinions are at odds about class attendance, research supports a strong link between classroom attendance and grades. Research indicates that attendance is statistically significant in explaining class grade and overall student performance. A student who frequently

misses class will decrease their chances of receiving a high grade in a given course. Research supports the idea that faculty should strongly encourage attendance with quality teaching and emphasizing the empirical relationship between grades and attendance.

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## **Annotated Readings:**

Broder, J. M. (1994) Empiricism and the art of teaching. *Journal of Agricultural and Applied Economics*, 25 (July), 1-18.

This is an excellent review of some of the major findings of empirical studies on teaching and the teaching evaluation process. Broder also discusses the art of teaching by providing some insightful personal tips that made his teacher experience more regarding. He identifies teaching characteristics that are important to students. Faculty members are encouraged to use their analytical skills to diagnose their teaching efforts. He suggests that students choose to attend class for a purpose and that they appreciate high quality instruction that helps them achieve that purpose. Faculty evaluation plays a vital role in education and should be a shared responsibility between teachers, students, and administrators.

Chen, J. and T. Lin. (2006) Class attendance and exam performance: a randomized experiment. *Society of Labor Economics (SOLE) Eleventh Annual Meetings*, May 5-6, 2006, Cambridge, MA.

Chen and Lin provide an excellent review of literature of the determinants of exam performance based on class attendance. Their careful, randomized experiment provides strong quantitative evidence for the link between classroom attendance and grades on exams. These results and previous research should be part of any faculty members

Devadoss, S. and Foltz, S. (1996) Evaluation of factors influencing student class attendance and performance. *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 78, 499-507.

This study quantifies the effects of student behavior, teacher attributes, and course characteristics on class attendance and performance. This work reinforces the earlier work of Romer strengthening the empirical evidence of the positive influence of class attendance on student performance. These authors present a clear challenge to educators to find and implement suitable measures to increase class attendance. This article provides a detailed list of strategies for faculty, advisors, and administrators to reduce absenteeism and enhance student performance.

Moore, R. (2003a) Does improving developmental education students' understanding the importance of class attendance improve students' class attendance; academic performance? *Research & Teaching in Developmental Education*, 20, 24-39.

\_\_\_\_\_ (2003b) Helping students succeed in introductory biology classes: Does improving students' attendance also improve their grades? *Bioscience*, 29, 17-25.

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Moore's work takes a critical look at the relationship between academic success and how it correlated with high rates of academic success in introductory science classes. He provides a detailed review of the literature and provides strong quantitative evidence that academic success is significantly correlated with high class attendance. He also presents data that indicates that high of class attendance are an excellent predictor of future academic success. This work is logically sequenced and provides clear and concise conclusions based on current research.

Tai, R. H., Sadler, P. M., and Loehr, J. F. (2005) Factors influencing success in introductory college chemistry. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 42: 987-1012.

This interesting research explores the link between high school chemistry pedagogical experiences and performance in introductory college chemistry. The conclusions are based on a survey of 1,531 students enrolled in first-semester introductory college chemistry courses for science and engineering majors at 12 different U.S. colleges and universities. Although, this study does not specifically address classroom attendance, it does emphasize that students must be present and engaged in the classroom to learn. However, they did quantify “encouragement” to take science and to attend classes as a predictor of academic success. This research is a serious attempt to sort out the effects and influences of the various indicators of success in college introductory chemistry courses.