

Setting a Class Attendance Policy: An Important Decision for Construction Management Instructors

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The decision to include attendance as a course evaluation criterion frequently encounters opposition from students and program administrators. This opposition can originate in deeply held views of the role of education and the effects that compulsory attendance can have on student learning. However, supporters and detractors of attendance policies often lack an objective basis to support their position. This paper discusses, from the perspective of a Construction Management instructor, major studies related to the effect of attendance on student performance, and the ethical and philosophical reasons gravitating in favor of and against this policy. The bulk of evidence shows that excessive absenteeism results in lower student grades. Instructors can have justifiable ethical and philosophical concerns about reducing student autonomy. However, this paper documents a significant gap between the student priorities envisioned by many instructors and the responses given by students in several studies. This paper concludes that establishing an attendance policy is a positive, if courageous, step for any instructor.

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Introduction

Setting a class attendance policy is only one of many issues that a Construction Management (CM) instructor must consider to establish its content, delivery and requirements. However, class attendance is a particularly sensitive topic in CM education as well as in other academic fields. The decision of making attendance part of the course evaluation criteria (which will be called “an attendance policy” here for brevity) challenges many unspoken assumptions and attitudes about higher education. Such a decision can result in much effort and distress to the instructor, who will frequently face the double-barreled challenge of having to justify the policy to students and to programs administrators. Students may oppose an attendance policy out of self-seeking (albeit understandable) interests more than from conviction. But, while some program administrators will oppose an attendance policy for philosophical reasons, it is likely that some others will oppose it for lack of information or simply to avoid the significant disruption that a “customer” (a student) may bring to the program. In any case, many supporters and critics of establishing an attendance policy lack the information required to objectively justify their position.

The author, based on the evidence discussed here and his own experience, has concluded that the pedagogical advantages of an attendance policy outweigh the personal inconveniences that it brings, and has implemented an attendance policy in his undergraduate classes. In his scheduling course, which met for two lecture hours (of 50 minutes each) and four laboratory hours each week, attendance and participation counted for 15% of the grade. More than five unexcused absences for either lecture or lab resulted in an automatic zero for this evaluation component. In

his financial management course, which meets weekly for three lecture hours, attendance and participation is 10% of the grade, with the same requirement of no more than five unexcused absences. In the last semesters, the author has included a category of “no fault” absences: any absence notified in writing at least 24 hours in advance counts as excused.

Objectives

This article analyzes from a CM perspective several significant studies about class attendance policies. By doing this analysis, this paper offers evidence and a grounded discussion about the effects, reasons in favor and reasons against the implementation of a class attendance policy. This discussion spans from findings supported by hard data to inherently speculative conclusions about ethical and philosophical issues. The author hopes that this article can lead CM faculty to a factual and rational discussion of the positive and negative aspects of an attendance policy, resulting in informed decisions at the individual and program levels.

The arrangement chosen for this paper consists of a brief discussion of the effect of attendance on academic performance, followed by the main contrarian arguments about establishing such policy. At mid-point, with the help of results from various studies, some common views and assumptions about students as consumers of education and their scale of values are challenged. The latter part of this article discusses ethical and philosophical reasons frequently argued in favor and against mandatory attendance. A conclusion section summarizes and reflects on the information presented here.

Effects of an Attendance Policy on Academic Performance

Most research about the effects of keeping attendance show an inverse correlation between student absenteeism and performance as measured by student grades, as discussed in this section. This issue is particularly relevant to Construction Management. CM is a relatively new discipline, whose acceptance in traditional college campuses steadily advances but has not been fully achieved (Reference masked – It contains the author’s name). Any strategy that can improve student academic performance – in this case, requiring class attendance – should be of interest to everyone involved in this growing and evolving profession.

Marburger (2001) analyzed the effect of absences on student grades for a course in microeconomics. He kept track of the material covered in each lecture and individual students absent for the lecture. This detailed record allowed him to check whether each student was present in the lecture covering each of the 28 questions in three exams (for a total of 84 questions), and thus find whether students attending the lecture had a better performance than absent ones. He concluded that “the findings suggest that the mean exam score was significantly affected by absenteeism.” However, he also discusses limitation of his results, warning that “other differentials may be observed in alternative teaching environments.”

Schmidt (1983) analyzed data from 216 students, who took optional tests in their economics courses. These tests were not counted for their grade, and served as the basis to recommend ways

to improve their academic performance. A basic factor considered was the time allocation of each student towards learning their subjects. Schmidt found that “when treated as an aggregate measure, time spent in an economics course does not alter student learning. On the other hand, [...] hours spent in lectures, in discussion sections and in studying for the second examination are all positive and significant.”

Gump (2005) compared final grades and attendance of three hundred undergraduate students for an introductory course on Japanese culture. He concluded that “The data in this study clearly suggest a link between attendance and the final grade.” However, he includes the caveat that “simply coming to class will not guarantee students an A in the course.”

Durden and Ellis (1995) examined a course on Principles of Economics over three semesters, performing a regression analysis of student grades against their number of absences. They found that students are not adversely affected by a “few absences,” but that an absenteeism of five absences in one semester “is associated strongly with poor academic performance.”

Clump et al. (2003) studied the effect of attending class in a course in General Psychology, comparing the performance of students “who were present on days in which unannounced quizzes [with no value for their grade] were given with those who were not present.” They conclude that “we can safely state that attending class is one of the best things students can do with regards to their grades. This is the case for both the immediate future and for the entire course.”

Romer (1993) surveyed one session of every undergraduate economics class at three schools, and analyzed the effect of several factors on the observed absenteeism. He found that roughly one third of students were absent on the observed classes; small course size “appears to have an important effect on [reducing] absenteeism;” “absenteeism is also lower in courses with a significant mathematical component;” absenteeism is “somewhat higher in core courses than in field [i.e., elective] courses;” and finally, “students attend class more often when the [perceived] quality of instruction is higher.”

Not all studies find a significant correlation between attendance and academic performance, as detailed in the next section.

Arguments against Establishing a Class Attendance Policy

Arguments against an attendance policy can be compelling. Although there is ample empirical proof of a correlation between grades and attendance, a true causality between the two has never been proven. There are many underlying factors in a student’s life that can bring about this correlation without causality. It could be that students attending class have more opportunity to learn, from voluntary or involuntary cues from the instructor, what material is likely to appear in exams. It could be that the best motivated students are more likely to show up for class, and therefore there could be a “built-in” bias in grades that do not reflect the effect of absenteeism. It could even be, as suggested by Hyde and Flournoy (1986), that the smartest students choose to stay at home because they can “learn” the material by reading the textbook or similarly published

information. In fact, the third leading cause for absenteeism reported by Friedman et al. (2001) was “course content is available from another source.”

Some studies have failed to find a positive correlation between class attendance and academic performance. Hyde and Flournoy (1986), write that their results “suggested an attendance policy would not affect academic performance.” Moreover, Browne et al. (1991) describe an experiment in which the performances of two groups of students were compared. One was mentored but did not go to class, while the other took the class in a traditional setting. At the end, there was no statistical difference between the grades of the two groups. St. Clair (1999) provides some other examples of non-conclusive results.

Criticism of establishing attendance policies includes ethical and philosophical issues. Some authors take the more contentious view that passing attendance is ethically wrong, since it is forcing an undesired behavior from a group of young adults, who should be allowed to exert their freedom (e.g., Stephenson, 1994). Other authors offer more specific suggestions. St. Clair (1999) points out that compulsory attendance has the negative effect of curtailing student motivation. She suggests that instead of establishing an attendance policy, improving other factors can bring about a better attendance. These factors include the nature of academic tasks, the reward and goal structure and the instructor’s behavior. “If a class is enjoyable because lively discussion ensues and the instructor is energetic and effective, students are more likely to attend.”

Viewing the CM Student as an Education Consumer

A popular trend in CM education, as well as in other specialties, is to use business parlance referring to the relations between students and faculty. Students are the instructor’s “customers,” with the satisfactions and expectations of customers involved in a commercial transaction. This phenomenon has received much attention in recent education research, and will be considered here only in its ramifications to CM attendance policies.

Equaling student and consumer needs and rights has been called student consumerism or “commodification of higher education” by many authors (e.g., Delucchi, 2000, Delucchi and Smith, 2005, Hassel and Lourey, 2005, Petress, 1996). The basic point of these authors is that commercial terminology and concepts have entered academia, changing student expectations and the objective of a liberal education.

The gap between viewing students as consumers vis-à-vis a traditional academic perspective is subtle but deep, and affects the whole issue of attendance. If the student, like the customer, “is always right,” then any inconvenience such as attending lectures is unacceptable, and the whole point of this article becomes moot. If program administrators would take this consumer perspective simply as a framing to guide instructors, this practice would be harmless to the educational process. However, students understand very well that this is not a vision or paradigm, but a very real policy with negative consequences to any instructor challenging it. As Petress (1996) points out, “[Students] claim that they are customers and it is the seller (university / professor) who is obliged to make the product (class) appealing enough to attract students.”

CM students are no strangers to this perception, and anecdotal evidence suggests that as in other programs, a demanding instructor is punished with low marks in her end of semester student evaluation. As Delucchi (2000) states, supporting his claim with ample evidence, instructor evaluation committees frequently take poor student evaluations “as evidence of poor teaching” and conversely, “may overvalue faculty who have full [attendance in their] courses and high global ratings because of grading leniency or theatrical style, but who contribute little to student learning.” With this reality in most campuses, the scant use of attendance as a class evaluation item cannot be surprising.

Construction students were apprentices of their instructors’ knowledge in guilds and other ancient construction education contexts. In these environments, the need to show up to work / class was self-evident. Considering students as apprentices would be too rigid nowadays, but CM instructors still have the essential responsibility towards their students of transmitting this knowledge, with the parallel objective of giving an education that “fosters a well-grounded intellectual resilience, a disposition towards lifelong learning, and an acceptance of responsibility for the ethical consequences of our ideas and actions” (AACU, 2006). History and moral duties make it difficult to discount students as simple customers.

Differences in Instructor and Student Perceptions of Academic Life

Important differences between student and instructor attitudes, assumptions and expectations have been documented, and greatly affect any discussion about class attendance. If there is a major misunderstanding of student expectations and priorities, any discussion about the appropriateness of compulsory attendance is fundamentally flawed. If the individual envisioned by an instructor does not exist, then the prescriptions devised by the instructor will apply to the non-existing person. The following examples are especially relevant to this discussion.

Hassel and Lourey (2005) report that in their study, 70% of respondents expected instructors to extend due dates.” Moreover, they write that “5 percent of students thought that an F signifies that they need extra credit, not that they were failing. Additionally, 62 percent think it is an instructor’s responsibility to offer extra credit, and 52 percent expect instructors to be flexible in grading.” Norcross et al. (1986) got similar results, with 56% of their sample thinking that extra credit should be routinely offered. Only 3% of surveyed students thought that extra credit should never be offered. In stark contrast, Norcross also found that 28% of faculty thought that extra credit should be routinely offered to all students and 21% of faculty considered that extra credit should never be offered to all students.

Although obtaining a passing grade in their classes has always been a critical concern for students, it is important to realize the overriding importance that grades have in student minds. Gaultney and Cann (2001), analyzing the grade expectations of psychology students, asked the question “What do you hope to accomplish by taking this class,” and found that 65% of their sample hope for a good grade or passing the course over “learn new information to apply in my life” and “personal enrichment.” Moreover, student grade expectations may differ from what instructors consider reasonable proportions. The same study by Gaultney and Cann (2001) found

that students thought that instructors should give about 30% for each of As, Bs and Cs, the remaining 10% consisting of “fewer Ds and even fewer Fs.” (Such distribution should not be out of the ordinary when, as reported by Seligman (2002), at Harvard University about half of all course grades are A or A-, and in 2001 91% of seniors graduated with honors.) There has been no parallel survey of professors’ perceptions of what a “fair” grade distribution should be, but in the anecdotal experience of the author, the proportions suggested by students would be outlandish to most instructors.

The point made in this section must be clear, because it is sensitive and somewhat embarrassing. Opponents of an attendance policy may be substantially wrong when they insist that a student decision to attend class reflects the quality of the instruction received in the classroom. The evidence shows that other factors weigh heavily in this decision, and as discussed later, the idea of a self-correcting and rational academic environment may be absurd.

Ethical and Philosophical Arguments

For the sake of keeping a good logic flow, some ethical and philosophical arguments were previously discussed in the section on the case against establishing an attendance policy. This section is more inclusive, and considers the arguments of both proponents and opponents of this policy. Proponents and critics tend to have quite vitriolic opinions of their counterpart positions, probably due to the interest that both sides have in offering the best possible education to their students. Almost any discussion in this topic involves issues that go beyond simple statistics, touching ethical and other sensitive areas that can quickly cloud its logic; however, it is important to acknowledge that virtually all instructors interested in this subject act in good faith.

Some lessons on the contentious nature of any discussion involving ethical issues, and how easy it is to shift from a dispassionate discourse to highly charged contentions, are offered by the responses to the previously discussed study by Romer (1993). Some of Romer’s critics have bitterly criticized a statement in his paper stating that his findings were “suggestive enough to warrant experimenting with making class attendance mandatory in some undergraduate lecture courses.” Critics have consistently ignored his clarifications that this suggestion was made “to perform a genuinely controlled experiment that could isolate the true impact of attendance on mastery of the material” (Romer, 1994), interpreting instead that he advocated for compulsory attendance. Powell and Shugart (1994) pronounce that “perhaps Romer was absent from his principles class on the day this lecture was presented.” Others, such as Stephenson and Deere (1994) make less personal criticisms, but still seem to take offense from this suggestion for further research. But, however challenging, ethical issues such as student freedom are necessary points to address when pondering the reasons in favor and against an attendance policy. An honest discussion must review the assumptions, explicit and unspoken, underlying any educational philosophy.

From a classroom management viewpoint, there are many logistical reasons to require attendance. Group projects are very negatively affected when a group member does not show up for labs. Class morale is lowered when students show up late and have no clue of the topic being

discussed. Students claiming that coming to class is unnecessary to get good grades influence other students, even if they do benefit from attending class.

However, class expedience is a secondary issue, compared to every instructor's responsibility to teach her course as effectively as possible. Learning is a joint and wonderful journey between each student, her peers and her instructors. Although the world of academia is rapidly changing with an ever increasing distance-learning component, the sole reading of a textbook (or watching of a screen) cannot be compared in richness and effectiveness of a classroom experience. Presence is indisputably necessary in some subjects like learning to play tennis, to sing opera or to drive an airplane.

The point of the previous paragraph is, at what point does attendance become irrelevant? Even if there is a magic line that can divide courses into attendance-sensitive and attendance-impervious (which is a questionable notion), it is very unlikely that any class in a CM curriculum could refrain from requiring attendance. Construction is a "team sport," and not requiring the physical presence of all players seems illogical. An aspect of education frequently missed in the discussion about attendance policies is that of using attendance as a means for inculcating responsibility. Even if attendance did nothing to improve a student's learning (contrary to what research shows), what message does an instructor send to his students when he establishes the value of showing up to class at zero? As Hassel and Lourey state, "Instructors who link class attendance to grades send a message to students – learning is an interactive experience and your time in the classroom is valuable – as do instructors who are slack on attendance."

The evidence discussed here suggests that students are more interested in getting good grades than in learning any particular subject. This is an understandable position, considering that good grades can result in better job offers while the benefits of academic knowledge are subtle and oftentimes in the far future. Students can be smart and honest individuals, but as discussed below, their main concern frequently is getting a degree, not an education. This statement must be read carefully: Studies such as Gaultney and Cann's (2001) show that students do want an education, but this desire falls below the urgency of getting a degree.

Rational Student Decisions?

As previously discussed, some of the criticism for implementing an attendance policy is that it assumes that students cannot judge what is good for them, and that they, not the instructor should decide if they should attend a particular class on a particular day.

Freedom is generally a good thing, and any attempt to curtail it must be carefully considered. Bestowing total freedom to attend class assumes many qualities from students. To make a rational decision to attend or skip class, a student must judge the value of each of these two options. But, it is in the human nature that immediate necessities are preferred over long-term advantages (Kahn et al., 2004). To assume that a young person can appreciate the long-term value of education is a weighty assumption.

Rational decisions can be at odds with learning priorities in many ways. At the beginning of almost every semester the author gets office hour visits from one or more students displeased with the class attendance policy. A very common situation is that they work twenty, thirty or more hours per week and are not be able to attend all lectures (many times they register for class knowing that they will have a conflict with their work hours). The human dimension of such cases is moving. These students do not have the luxury of wealthy parents, and can be first-generation college students. Since this conversation usually happens at the start of the semester, students have not had the chance to assess the influence that attending a particular class may have in their learning. What should these students do? Quit their jobs or work fewer hours? These students may need to make many rational decisions at odds with the need to be in class, even if they know that skipping class may be detrimental to their learning.

Situations as compelling as described above are common in CM, but not always the grounds to miss class are as reasonable. Friedman et al. (2001) found that the fourth most common reason given by their sample to miss class was “I felt tired or overslept because I had fun the night before,” trumping “The teacher digresses, is repetitious, confusing, or goes too quickly, so I don’t learn much when I attend.”

In all cases, any decision seems rational from the viewpoint of the person taking it. In the case of class attendance, students may skip class for reasons that have nothing to do with bettering their learning. If the student is viewed simply as the instructor’s customer, then any student decision is, by definition, right. The same way that the instructor chose not to stop by the coffee shop and get his coffee before coming to class, the student chose to skip it. In both cases, it is a consumer’s decision

The author hopes that readers will be disturbed by the previous paragraph. However, it is so much in line with the academia-as-business paradigm in vogue, that some reflection is granted. Probably the best insight is provided by Romer (1994), in response to the onslaught of criticism to his original article (Romer, 1993). The following paragraph is included in its entirety to appreciate its context.

Many everyday actions make sense only if we recognize individuals’ difficulties in making rational intertemporal choices. People avoid keeping cigarettes and alcohol in their homes; they commit themselves to forced savings programs and create various kinds of artificial deadlines for themselves; they hire people to monitor their progress in losing weight; and so on. And many common educational practices, ranging from the use of frequent quizzes and problem sets, to distribution requirements for undergraduates, to course requirements for graduate students, seem to be intended mainly to encourage students to take actions that have short-run costs but potential long-run benefits. Requiring students to attend class seems little different from these other devices. (Romer, 1994).

Conclusion

This article shows that there is enough and consistent evidence to conclude that requiring student attendance improves student academic performance. Detractors of this policy contend that this proof is not overwhelming, but few claim that it decreases overall class grades. But, there are other issues that can gravitate against implementing an attendance policy. As mentioned in the discussion on the case against an attendance policy, the substance of contrarian views gravitates mostly on philosophical and ethical considerations, which indeed must be pondered to reach a balanced conclusion.

Expecting that students be present in class should not be to a higher scrutiny than any other conditions to declare that a student has successfully completed a course. It is certain that a student taking a course on swimming cannot be successful if he does not attend class, and that the failure to swim would be easily detected by looking at the bottom of the pool. But in most cases, there could always be a way to get a passing grade in a class without having been present to any meeting. A student of oratory could conceivably study on her own the whole textbook; a surgeon could pass his final exam without being in an operating room. These students would have learned little from their classes, and yet unless an attendance component is included in the course evaluation, they could get As in each case. The educational system can avoid such absurd situations because class instructors usually have the prerogative to specify the evidence of success for passing their courses.

Requiring students to attend class takes courage. An unpopular instructor is frequently equated to a poor instructor, with dire consequences at annual review time. A step such as establishing an attendance policy can result in lower marks in student course evaluations, and few administrators will take the time to find the origin of a negative attitude from students. The divide between conviction and convenience is sometimes hard to bridge, and this is the case here.

Post scriptum

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