

A Case Against Compulsory Class Attendance Policies in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: Compulsory attendance policies have been instituted in higher education with the expectation that academic achievement will improve. The empirical research findings of the relationship between class attendance or attendance policies and academic achievement are equivocal. Pintrich's theoretical model of motivation in the college classroom posits that students' motivational beliefs, classroom context, and students' behaviors are important variables in academic achievement. A case against compulsory attendance policies which is based on evaluation of the empirical research and the application of Pintrich's model to the question of the value of compulsory attendance policies in higher education is presented.

Faculty and administrators in higher education have differing views regarding class attendance policies for students. Informal surveys reveal that there are educators who insist on enforcing compulsory attendance policies while others believe class attendance should be noncompulsory. In either case, administrators and faculty want students to attend class. If they do not attend class but are, nonetheless, able to pass courses and obtain degrees, an institution's reputation will suffer. If students do not attend class and failure is prevalent, the future of the institution is again in jeopardy. In both cases, an institution will not attract students, will experience reduced enrollment, and will eventually cease to exist. It is unlikely either of these extreme scenarios is a serious administrative concern. The disagreement, then, arises from the question of whether or not compulsory attendance policies are justified. Is there a positive relationship between the frequency of class attendance and level of academic achievement? If so, it might be reasonable to suggest that a compulsory attendance policy would foster higher attendance rates and a higher level of academic achievement. On the other hand, neither attendance rates nor a compulsory attendance policy may be related to academic achievement.

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Although there is a dearth of empirical research on this question, what is available can be helpful when making a decision about an attendance policy. Results of an investigation by Hyde and Flournoy (1986) suggested an attendance policy would not affect academic performance; Berenson, Carter, and Norwood (1992) and Levine (1992) reported that attendance policies did not conclusively affect grades. On the other hand, Street (1975) reported that grades were lower after implementing an attendance policy allowing an unlimited number of absences. Kooker (1976) found similar results. Furthermore, from investigations of frequency of attendance, achievement, and other variables, Budig (1991), Slem (1983), Van Blerkom (1996), and Nist (1995) reported positive relationships between attendance rates and academic performance although they did not investigate the effects of attendance policies on academic achievement.

Deciding for or against a compulsory attendance policy, however, cannot be based solely on the empirical research findings. The research has not consistently revealed a positive relationship between attendance and achievement, nor whether or not a compulsory attendance policy influences achievement. A theoretical analysis is not only expected when empirical research is provided, but necessary when empirical research is equivocal.

There is no theory that specifically integrates the research on attendance or attendance policy, and achievement, but Pintrich (1994) developed a model which identifies the construct of motivation as an essential element to understanding academic achievement in the college classroom. Motivation is a psychological construct used to explain voluntary behaviors (Weiner, 1986, 1992). Motivation to do something involves conscious or unconscious consideration of one's cognitive processes and one's perceptions of the context. The cognitive processes, behaviors, and context that comprise motivation are the key elements of Pintrich's model. The model's structure can accommodate, then, class attendance as a voluntary behavior. The assumptions of the model, and the empirical research findings, can facilitate making an individual or institutional decision about a compulsory attendance policy.

The purpose of this article is to present a case against compulsory class attendance policies in higher education. The small body of research literature on the relationship between attendance and attendance policies, and academic achievement is evaluated; and Pintrich's (1994) model of college student motivation in the classroom is applied to the issue surrounding attendance policies.

The Research Evidence

At the University of Oklahoma College of Medicine, Hyde and Flournoy (1986) analyzed class attendance, achievement in a microbiology lecture course, and scores on the National Board of Medical Examiners examination. There were nearly as many top performers in the course and on the examination among the students who attended most infrequently as among those students who attended most regularly. Hyde and Flournoy concluded that some students can learn as well independently as can some by attending lectures and that being overly concerned about attendance by instituting a mandatory attendance policy could adversely affect some students' academic performances.

In a remedial mathematics course, Berenson, Carter, and Norwood (1992) assessed the benefits of an enforced attendance policy on the academic achievement of students at risk for dropping out of college. Although attendance improved following establishment of the attendance policy, class attendance was not a significant predictor of academic achievement. They emphasized that students who are at risk are individuals with a complex mix of characteristics. No one intervention, including an attendance policy, will work for all.

Levine (1992) compared frequency of absences data from several classes, each conducted under one of three different attendance policies. One policy explicitly required attendance, another implicitly did not require attendance, and the third explicitly did not require attendance. She found students with frequent absences were more likely to be from classes in which attendance was explicitly not required. Number of absences was only moderately negatively correlated with achievement; and type of attendance policy had no significant effect on achievement. It was suggested that the modest relationship between attendance and achievement may have been due to motivation level, or to the extent to which examinations reflected material presented in class. Her recommendation was to explain the correlation to students, but explicitly not requiring attendance. This approach would be better for the student and easier for the teacher.

Street (1975) was most interested in establishing a rationale for state-supported institutions to adjust students' fees to fit their attendance records. Following implementation of a noncompulsory attendance policy, Street analyzed achievement and attendance data. The results indicated "that 52 percent of the variability in students'

grades can be explained in terms of the number of absences from class" (p. 126). What is missing from this study is a comparison of attendance data before and after the policy change. It is impossible to determine if any variation in patterns of absenteeism corresponded to changes in policy; yet at least one researcher (Slem, 1983) claimed this study demonstrated a meaningful relationship between absenteeism and academic achievement.

Kooker (1976) examined students' grades before and after changing from a compulsory to a noncompulsory attendance policy. The statistical analysis suggested a difference in grade distribution after the change in policy. There were fewer Bs and more Ds and Fs after the change, but there were also slightly more As. This inconsistency was not explained. What is more important is that attendance data were not analyzed. Again, without analysis of attendance data before and after the policy change, it is impossible to verify that attendance policy was related to academic achievement. Kooker recognized, however, that other variables, such as student characteristics, may have contributed to the change in grade distribution.

Budig (1991) relied on the axiom that, if instructional activities require students' presence, then students can learn only if they attend class. She compared achievement scores of students who attended developmental and occupational classes at a community college under an attendance monitoring system with those who attended without the system. The system was designed to notify students and parents of accumulated absences. In addition, students were notified if they were dropped from classes for not attending. There was an increase in academic success for students under the monitoring system but in only one mathematics class and in classes that met at "undesirable" times. Budig indicated that these very specific findings could have resulted from factors related to the instructor.

Although Slem (1993) was primarily interested in studying the relationship between psychological characteristics and absenteeism, he reported a negative relationship between absenteeism and grades. The negative relationship, however, was based on "the number of times a student was not in class when assignments and tests were returned" (p. 2) and grades on a midterm and a final examination. Data from such limited attendance records are not enough to conclude conclusively that attendance was related to academic achievement. It could be that students who performed poorly on examinations chose to discontinue attending class regularly. Slem's study is another example of how research findings can be overinter-

preted. The focus on personality factors does confirm, however, the need to examine variables other than attendance when exploring correlates of academic achievement.

Van Blerkom (1996) found a modest yet significant correlation between class attendance rates and final grades in four upper-level psychology courses. He acknowledged that in the upper-level courses there is little variability in attendance rates or grades, which might explain the modest correlation; thus, the same measure in lower-level courses could be higher. Even if a stronger correlation were to be found, it is impossible to determine whether poor academic performance is a result of infrequent attendance or infrequent attendance results from poor academic performance. Nist (1995) pointed out this inability to determine causality in her study of the relationship between several variables, including class attendance and academic performance. She also found a modest positive relationship.

The empirical research evidence on the relationship between attendance rates or attendance policy and academic achievement is inconclusive. Not one study, nor all the studies taken together, provide enough justification to establish a policy that requires attendance and punishes absenteeism. Nevertheless, some faculty and administrators institute a compulsory attendance policy because they believe students' grades will be higher even when the available research does not predict this.

Levine (1992) noted that her colleagues agreed that students who had high absenteeism did poorly academically. This conclusion seemed reasonable but she emphasized the lack of empirical support for it. As Slem (1993) pointed out, academic achievement could be related to any number of psychological variables. These variables might include the student's intelligence, persistence, or personal circumstances; the instructor's style or ability to teach; or course difficulty and requirements. It does seem reasonable that poorly prepared students may benefit from regular attendance. It also seems reasonable that attendance may affect achievement of students with learning styles which require the classroom-based interactions, auditory emphasis, or individual attention for maximum performance. What seems reasonable, however, is not always empirically supported. If the many variables affecting academic achievement could be controlled, a clearer picture of the relationship between attendance and academic achievement might be realized. Unfortunately, attempts at such an investigation would only emphasize the uniqueness of each student and each college course. Unless a within-subjects experimen-

tal design can be conducted, determining if absenteeism causes poor academic performance is impossible. Measuring academic performance with and without absenteeism is indeed impossible. A feasible approach to making an informed decision about a compulsory attendance policy in higher education is to consider the research evidence and a theoretical explanation for high academic achievement which is based on motivation.

A Model of Motivation in the College Classroom

As mentioned previously, motivation is a psychological construct that is used to explain voluntary behavior. Being academically motivated means desiring to perform well in an academic setting. This desire is reflected in voluntary behaviors that eventually lead to measurable academic achievement. Class attendance is a voluntary behavior, which combines with others to reflect the degree of academic motivation.

Paul Pintrich (1994) explained academic motivation in the classroom in terms of reciprocal interactions among these components: the classroom context, the students' emotions and beliefs about their own motivation, and the students' observable behaviors. The classroom context influences the students' motivational beliefs and emotions. These two components, in turn, influence the students' observable behaviors. Behaviors also influence thoughts and ideas, as well as what happens in the environment. High levels of motivation would be indirectly related to high levels of academic achievement. When we attempt to attribute the cause of low levels of achievement only to absenteeism, however, it is obvious many critical factors related to academic achievement are ignored. Classroom attendance will not, by itself, guarantee high academic achievement, nor will an attendance policy guarantee attendance.

According to Pintrich, observable behaviors that reflect level of motivation are of these types: making choices among alternatives, being active and involved in tasks, and persistence at tasks. Students make many choices. For example, they decide to take a course, work on an assignment, attend a class session, or do something else. The decision to attend class and be active and involved in the classroom suggest high levels of academic motivation; however, there is no evidence to suggest that being active and involved consistently accompanies even persistent attendance.

In Pintrich's model, students' emotions and motivational beliefs are related to the choices made, the involvement devoted to academic tasks, and persistence. Three belief structures influence observable behaviors: expectancy, or belief about one's ability to perform a task or behavior; value, or belief about the importance of performing a task or behavior; and affect, or feelings about the self or the behavior.

Expectancy involves not only how efficacious students feel about an impending task, but also the level of control they believe they have over the environment. If students believe they can perform well in class, then they are more likely to do well. If they believe they cannot, then there is no reason to be involved in class. It seems attending class would be a task anyone could perform effectively. Some students, however, might feel overwhelmed with other responsibilities and believe they are not capable of attending class, nor of being active and involved, nor persistent. More important, students' feelings of control over the environment may influence attendance. When students perceive that they have no control over their environment; that is, they do not believe it is their choice to attend class, they may be less likely to attend. Making attendance compulsory is likely to diminish the amount of control students feel they have about their decision to emit academically motivated behaviors, specifically, attending class and being involved.

If students do not see any value in engaging in academic pursuits, there will be less effort expended. Thus, when students do not believe there is any value in attending class, they may be unlikely to attend. It might be better for the student to use the time spent in class on other, more valuable tasks. If students believe the value in attending is to avoid punishment for not attending, they may persistently attend but may not willingly be involved. Therefore, it can be implied that it is the faculty's responsibility to provide a valuable classroom environment to encourage attendance.

Compared to research on control and value, the beliefs students have about themselves and how they feel about their behavior has been less researched. Yet Pintrich pointed out that how good students feel about academics can make a difference in performance (p. 35). Thus, the emotions tied to attending class could be a determining factor in attendance rate. If students believe they will feel guilt, shame, or anxiety when they do not attend, they may be more likely to attend regularly. On the other hand, frustration and anger about attending a class that is not valued could lead to infrequent attendance.

The classroom context is yet another of the numerous factors related to level of academic motivation. Pintrich divided this component of the model into four kinds of factors that affect academic motivation: the nature of academic tasks (such as writing papers, completing laboratory experiments), the reward and goal structure of the course (grade determination, group versus individual work), the instructor's methods (lectures, discussions), and the instructor's behavior (voice inflection, humor). Although the classroom context is complex, it is clear that the faculty's behavior is the basis of the classroom environment. If a class is enjoyable because lively discussion ensues and the instructor is energetic and effective, students may be more likely to attend. Some students who purchase class notes from note-taking services admit that they do not miss much by not going to class if the professor is "dry" and "mechanical" (Collison, 1992).

Attendance is one voluntary behavior among many that reflects motivation. Each component of Pintrich's model interacts with every other component. Numerous sets of circumstances are possible, but each leads to the conclusion that class attendance alone will not guarantee high academic achievement. It follows that a compulsory attendance policy will not guarantee high academic achievement, whether students abide by it or not.

Conclusion

Attending class arises from a decision which is influenced by motivational beliefs and class context. By making class attendance compulsory, students can lose their feeling of control, begin to feel bad about their decision to enroll in college, and may decide there are more important things to do than attend class. There is limited opportunity, then, to even discover whether the context is enjoyable or not. An enjoyable class, however, does not guarantee high academic achievement because students may not feel capable of being successful. In addition, enjoyable does not mean the same as valuable. Under these circumstances, a compulsory attendance policy can do more harm than good.

The level of control students have over their environment, how valuable they believe the expected behavior is, and how good they feel about doing something, all contribute to the actual decision to do something, be involved, and persist. Classroom environments that

engage students, emphasize the importance of students' contributions, and have content directly related to knowledge assessed will undoubtedly provide encouragement to students to attend regularly. Just as employees who enjoy their jobs are likely to be absent less than those who do not, students who enjoy their "jobs" as learners may be more likely to attend than those who do not. If students believe it is valuable to attend class, have a choice in attending (as going to college is a choice), and feel good about themselves and what they do, then it follows that students will be likely to decide to attend class provided the class context lives up to being valuable. There is no need, then, for a compulsory attendance policy.

This does not imply that it is always inappropriate to institute an attendance policy. Some funding sources require monitoring attendance of students receiving financial aid, with some punishment for absenteeism. In some college courses it is necessary to attend class to demonstrate knowledge. For example, in foreign language classes it would be impossible to evaluate students' conversational skills if students were not present to demonstrate the skills. Laboratory and studio courses generally require students complete assignments and demonstrate knowledge in the classroom. In some cases it may be impossible to perform any work outside the classroom. In these cases, attendance is compulsory because it is part of the grading structure.

When attendance is not required by a funding source, nor an element of the grading structure, it is advisable to keep the policy non-compulsory. In a discussion about assigning grades in college courses, Frisbie, Diamond, and Ory (1979) emphasized that "course grades should reflect each student's competence in the course content" (p. 22). Grades should not be used to reward or discipline students for having or not having certain personality traits, participating or not participating in class, nor attending or not attending class. They acknowledged that it is assumed class attendance facilitates academic achievement, and assumed absenteeism affects performance adversely; but they also pointed out that excessive absenteeism may reflect the quality of the class context.

College students vary in their accumulated experience at learning independently. Even the least experienced, however, can recognize under what circumstances attending class will be critical to academic success. Faculty are responsible for providing a valuable academic experience, but students should decide to attend class or not attend. Recognizing that students decide to attend college, it follows that they can make an informed decision to attend class. Their intrinsic

motivation to attend college is paralleled by their motivation to achieve academically. Wanting to achieve academically is reflected in behaviors that lead to an appropriate measure of achievement. Attendance is among those behaviors. When students are in control of their behaviors, the responsibility for their achievement rests with them. By making attendance compulsory, administrators and faculty are accepting more responsibility for the academic achievement of the students than can be justified.

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