

# Absence Excuses in Freshman College Classes and Solutions<sup>\*</sup>

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Class attendance is directly tied to student learning and student-faculty satisfaction. Although learning style and attitudes have evolved in college students of the internet generation, the reasons why students skip classes and assignments, and measures to improve the situation have not been comprehensively studied. Increased numbers of students who commute and work part-time, and rogue internet companies that promote dishonesty have added another layer of complexity to classroom attendance. This manuscript analyzes the causes of unsatisfactory attendance and various categories of excuses that students self-revealed as most efficacious based on a survey of 100 college freshmen. Sickness, technology, family, transportation, advisor meeting, part-time job, school activity, and others are on the made-up excuse list in the order of popularity. Solutions to counteract each of these fake excuses are proposed. These measures to improve attendance can potentially increase retention rate of college freshmen, enhance learning, and prepare students to a successful college experience.

*Keywords:* Internet generation, freshman, attendance, excuses, commuting

## Introduction

I got into an incident. Glass and hot water were thrown in my face on Friday night. I suffered cuts and burns on my face. I have to stay here on Monday to set up all the legal things that have to do with the situation, which means I have to leave on Tuesday morning and I would be back on time. I will bring back a note from the police department and hospital documents to the next class.

Above is from an email of a former student who showed up in the author's next class on Wednesday with perfectly suntanned smooth face and no documentation supporting her excuse. When asked, she shrugged her shoulder, said the accident was "no big deal", she was feeling "good" and she had misplaced the notes. The past year was the author's first time teaching non-major freshmen science classes. Although already warned by senior colleagues, the author was still unprepared to see the large number of students missing classes and mediocre excuses like the one above. At the end of the spring semester, the author conducted an anonymous opinion survey from 100 students and collected the following data for analysis. Students were asked to vote for the most effective absence excuses that either they themselves have used or know someone who used it in their classes. They were also asked to explain the reason why those excuses were effective. The collected information prompted the author to think about what faculty members could do to improve the attendance situation, which is known directly linked to student performance and student/professor satisfaction (Marburger, 2006; Credé, Roch, & Kieszczyńska, 2010). This article discusses the type of excuses that students in our classrooms commonly use, why they perceive them effective, and what faculty members can do to improve

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attendance and enhance learning.

### **Why Do Students Skip Classes**

According to an unofficial small-sized survey, an average student at the author's institution misses 20-25% of all their classes, but still feels confident to pass the course. Three out of 10 students would skip class regularly for non-legitimate reasons. While it is easy to understand that such students would make up excuses and lie to their professor so as to avoid penalty on their GPA (grade point average), what drives them to skip lectures at the first place seems to have evolved from earlier student generations (Devadoss & Foltz, 1996). Based on the reasons that students self-revealed in the survey, the situations that cause them to miss classes and/or deadlines for assignments can be grouped to the following categories.

#### **Part-Time Jobs**

At the author's institution, a large number of students hold part-time jobs, mostly in the service industry, such as cashier, waiter/waitress, stocking associate, and food delivery driver. These students use the income to pay for their tuitions and are well aware of their disadvantage compared to those others whose parents would pay for the tuition. In general, these students consider their part-time jobs more important than class attendance. Many have fears that their employers would fire them for failing to show up on a job shift. When situations arise, student workers would choose to skip classes for job reasons (e.g., covering the shift of a sick coworker). This is particularly encouraging when attendance is not rewarded in any tangible means.

#### **Commuting**

It is estimated that 82% of students from the author's institution commute to school and many travel for longer than one hour in each direction. These students tend to choose to stay at home unless attendance is absolutely required. Bad weather, unreliable public transportation schedule and automobile problems are often found to blame by students who failed to show up in the classroom.

#### **Concurring Assignments**

Many students at the author's institution enroll in 15 to 18 credits per semester, equaling to five to six courses. It is not surprising that professors from different classes may have tests or assignments due on the same day. For these students, especially when they are freshmen and are still acclimating to college teaching, there is simply not enough time to stay on top of every subject. Many students confessed that when they are falling behind a class, they may choose to skip a class to work on the missed assignment. When they return to classroom again, however, they would find themselves more left behind.

#### **Attitude**

For those of us who teach core curricula, improvement on students' motivation has always been a challenge. When students do not find a direct connection of the course material to other required classes or their future professions, they would less likely engage. This attitude, often contagious, can lead to apathy of the course content and test grades. Students would easily skip these classes that they consider less important when there is a schedule conflict.

#### **Quality of Teaching**

Although this was not mentioned by students who responded to the survey, the quality of teaching is traditionally recognized as a key factor for classroom attendance and student performance (Uhari, Renko, &

Soini, 2003), therefore, also listed here.

### **Popular Excuses From the Students**

More than a decade ago, Segal (2000) summarized that college students might present five broad categories of reasons when they were absent from a class or late to turn in an assignment. These include the family, the best friend, the evils of dorm life, the evils of technology, and the totally bizarre. This survey showed that majority of these excuses remains popular, while a few new categories rise to the top of the list.

#### **Sickness (30%)**

There is no doubt that most excuses we hear from students are sickness related, be it stomach flu, menstrual cramps, mononucleosis, car accident, dental appointment, or dislocated joints. Students believe this is the most effective excuse for the following reasons: (1) Professors can relate to being sick, and may be sympathetic. Students recognize that specific reasons would be more convincing and the really clever ones would follow up after first notice to the professor. For example, “I was sun-burnt in the weekend, and sitting in the classroom chair is painful”; “Sorry to be so graphic but I am having diarrhea and at the same time I vomit”, and then, in a follow-up email on the day of the next class, “I am still sick unfortunately. I cannot eat food because it runs right through me”; “I recently re-fractured my ankle. I have to keep an air cast on it at all times... the pain med(ication)s knock me out and I cannot have direct contact with the flashing lights on the computer... Not to mention all the physical therapy appointments”; and in a follow-up email, “I awoke this morning and my whole right ankle is swollen. I am off to the ER (emergency room) but will have the all work-emailed tonight”. It is difficult to tell whether students were really sick or not, but one could tell when the student shows up cheerfully and frolicking in the class the next day totally forgetting about the broken knee cap; (2) Students like to use sickness as excuses, since they know some illnesses which are hard to disprove and many self-resolve after plenty of rest (e.g., menstrual cramps and stomach flu). In such cases, students do not have to see a doctor, however, the illness could still possibly make them incapable of doing certain academic activities. Unfortunately, most viral diseases are contagious and can self-resolve after rest. Smart students would say “I missed the class because I did not want to give my germ to others”, or “My sickness (or medication) makes me dizzy. I would not be able to pay any attention even if I was in your lecture”; and (3) Finally, students also revealed that professors hardly question them when they lied to have a doctor’s appointment or ask for a note when sickness was said to be the absence reason.

#### **Technology (18%)**

Our students have different levels of computer literacy, therefore, it is difficult to tell when a student faked a technology excuse. Some of the common excuses that faculty members hear often include: “Blackboard would not allow me to log in last night”; “My printer broke”; “My printer was out of ink”; “I am a new Mac user and I am experiencing strange problems”; “My Mac cannot open the assignments”; “My computer magically deleted my homework from the hard drive. I do not understand it myself”; “My computer crashed last night and I lost my homework”; “My computer was stolen/robed in the weekend”; “My charger stopped working and my computer run out of battery”; “I lost internet last night”; “I did not see it in the assignment folder”; or “It was not posted on the site”. Students found most professors forgiving on their lack of knowledge in technology and do not believe that they should be punished for technical issues.

**Family (15%)**

The third most popular excuse is related to family. Students believe that “Family commitment is completely outside of the professor’s control” and “It is just not right to challenge a student’s personal issue truth or lie”. In this category, over 1/3 of votes were for funeral, somewhat unsurprising as grandmas never die (Abernethy & Padgett, 2010). Funeral excuse is ranked most effective as “It hits the emotional soft spot”, “professors feel uncomfortable to ask for a formal note”, and “Funeral notes are the easiest to forge”. Several students, however, voted against this, worrying that the lie could come back against them, however, these students still confessed that many others they knew have faked funeral excuses to cut classes in high school or in college. Other family excuses include moving houses, pre-planned family vacation, babysitting sick relatives, caring for a terminally ill-parent or grandparent. One student created a situation that his best friend was dying and he was asked by his friend’s parents to be at the bedside for a number of weeks. The author is listing this here as well as since friend issues can be applied mostly to this category.

**Transportation (10%)**

As stated earlier, long distance students may occasionally have traffic issues that prevent them from coming to school. Some students would take advantage of this and make up excuses. On a bad weather day, it could be “My parents took the only car that we have at home”, and on a perfectly calm day, it could be “The bus left one minute early before its schedule and the next bus did not come”, “There was traffic jam” or “I had a flat tire”. On a positive note, more commuter students mean less numbers of “roommate’s fault” excuses. The author only had one student ranking “My roommate locked me out when I was in pajamas” as the top excuse.

**Meeting With the Advisor (7%)**

Our students often have meetings with some administrator or counselor to schedule a class or discuss other matters. Many students confess that even though there was in fact no meeting, they use it as an excuse to skip classes that they do not want to attend. A meeting with the academic advisor is considered legitimate by students as many such meetings are scheduled inconveniently during students’ class time and they could be regarding crucial issues such as financial aid.

**Employment-Related (5%)**

Students who work to pay for the tuition consider job the priority that overweighs school. Even though not many students voted this as a top excuse, it has been frequently used in classes, especially for those late comers. “I have to work, otherwise I will be fired”, “My work schedule will be changed next week so that I can come to your class”, and “I had to skip class because of a job interview” are among these excuses.

**School Activity (4%)**

Pledging events for a fraternity or sorority, obligations to the student government, required extra-curricular activity scheduled by another class, and sport events are amount some of the excuses in this category. Such excuses are largely based on students’ conception of priority in college life.

**Others (11%)**

Top rated excuses that do not belong to the above categories are summarized here. Some of these can be facts, yet students still hope to gain sympathy, because it is not done intentionally and would presumably not happen a second time. For example, “I set my alarm clock using my phone every day and it actually works, however, my phone battery died while I was sleeping”, “I did the wrong assignment”, “I overslept because I

was up all night doing homework”, “I had other assignments that were due at the same time, and I need extra time to finish your assignment”, and “I was going to drop this class then I realized that I cannot, which is why I missed half of the semester’s classes”. There are also students who tell the professor that they had no excuse when they were asked for one, and most of the times the professor would be baffled by the honesty and excuse them. Other excuses are entirely fictional, e.g., “When I got out my car on a rainy windy day where I live, my papers fell out and the homework flew away and got wet terribly”, and “Someone broke into my car, stole everything including my backpack with a final paper saved on that laptop inside the bag”. The sudden occurrence makes such excuses skeptical. The odds that the car breaks down or the tires blow out on the day of a test or a paper due is hard to believe, and it often comes from a student that has less than an “A” average in the class. There are still a third category that are between truth and fiction, e.g., a student told the professor that he could not come to class because of the ticket he got, and without realizing that it was really a concert ticket the professor let him go.

### **Preventing Excuses and Enhancing Learning**

Made-up excuses degrade students’ moral and those who do it often also tend to plagiarize. Professors with their busy schedule sometimes overlook attendance issues or grant student excuses without much scrutiny, which eventually cause more students to miss classes. Granted, enforced mandatory attendance with harsh penalties is one way to solve the problem and has been applied by many (Marburger, 2006). Such paternalistic tactics, however, can incur student resentment and discourage learning. As follow, the author proposes a few alternative measures that prevent students from absence based on the excuses mentioned above.

#### **Discuss the Issues Early**

Issues that might affect attendance should be discussed as early as possible. For freshmen, the topic should be brought up during student orientation. To achieve the three R’s (respect, responsibility, and relationship) that we expect from the students, we need to inform our students a few tips. Students should be reminded to check emails every day and actively communicate with professors. When issues occur that prevents them from attending a class or finishing an assignment on time, they should be encouraged to inform the professor before hand or even afterwards rather than staying silent. Commuter students need to know the delays that most commuters experience, and how to plan ahead for various weather and traffic conditions. For students who work part-time, the importance of classroom attendance should be stressed. Examples and statistics should be used in orientation whenever possible to impress upon the audience. In a short run, missing a class or a homework assignment, leaving class early, and come to the class late are destructive behaviors for the learning of the entire class, as it disrupts lecture progression and leaves the student unprepared for the next lecture. For the long run, absence would result in poor GPA, poor preparedness for other classes, unsatisfying college experience, and likely a less desirable career. Although students may show some dislike, to hammer these ideas into their minds, faculty members also need to reemphasize the importance of attendance in the first class meeting.

#### **Customize Teaching to Students’ Need**

Our students have different levels of preparedness for college level classes. Many started with poor GPA and are scared of certain subjects. It is important that professors communicate with all students individually to recognize their fears and dispel them as early as possible. Persist negative feelings would lead to unsatisfactory

attendance, incomplete assignments, and a silent unproductive classroom environment. A sense of humor in the classroom can put many students at ease, and discussion forums in the virtual classroom give students an outlet to voice their frustrations and fears. Conversational lectures with frequent pauses and questions promote student participation. Aside from the fear, students' motivation to learn a certain topic can be inspired when the subject relates to one's major or everyday life. Therefore, for those who teach non-major students, teaching materials should be tailored for the current audience. Faculty members should also recognize that our students of the Internet generation have different learning styles, and various instructional techniques should be offered to ensure that each student is reached. It should be mentioned that in-classroom activities and group discussions can be especially effective as students of this generation are more kinesthetic as compared to learners of earlier generations (Baker, Matulich, & Papp, 2007).

### **Be Empathetic**

For most college freshmen, it is the first time that they leave their hometown and parents. Learning to deal with homesickness and self-independence may take a while. Therefore, academic advisors and our faculty should be more empathetic and work together to offer extra help. The early-alert system has shown some great effectiveness. Constant encouragement and increased accessibility (both physically and virtually) of the faculty are also great ways to gain students' trust and enhance student learning. Identifying a student as the point of contact can be found useful by some faculty to learn about possible student issues (such as overlapping tests). Additionally, grading policy should be clearly explained in the syllabus and reiterated in the first class meeting. A resource guide relevant to the class should also be handed to students as early as possible. This guide may include contact information of the tutoring center, computer workshop, freshman counseling center, writing center, your office hour, course Website address, class calendar, and videos that guide students through the use of various tools in your class. Such practices can significantly reduce the number of excuses that demonstrate student disengagement, such as "I am not aware of the due date" and "I was not sure whether we have a class or not".

The author also recommended professors to share a list of popular excuses with students in the first class meeting. When the author did this last semester, he observed that the same excuses were used significantly less, although attendance could still be improved. Due to the many unexpected events mentioned earlier (not including the ones that documentations could be available), faculty members should probably also privately allow a limited number of excuses per student. Once the bottom line is set, the policy, however, should be implemented strictly and consistently.

### **Be Proactive**

For students who are absent due to a said sickness, faculty member should consistently ask for doctor's notes. Even when an illness does not require the student to visit a doctor, this practice will make it inconvenient/uncomfortable enough to stop the fakers from attempting such excuses. The author, however, want to caution our faculty that internet companies that forge doctor's notes have become popular in recent years. These companies provide fake medical/dental appointment notes, ER forms, funeral, jury duty and medical evaluation forms, etc.. Many even offer it free during the first trial and guarantee a "get one out of almost any situation" excuse for as little as \$20. A list of these companies can be found at the end of the reference list. Social networks also allow some students to blatantly share their favorite and successful excuses, some of which are rather complicated and embarrassing for the professor who inquired the absence. To

counteract faked documentation, the author urges our faculty to make active efforts to call the phone number on the notes, at least screen them randomly, and work with school administrators to make faked notes a violation of the honor code. Faculty should make this policy transparent to students to deter them from attempting. For those students who claim that they did not see a doctor or they have lost the documentation, extra homework should be assigned so that students could keep up with the lecture. In this way, students with true sickness will not be punished for missed classes, while those who had mild sickness and those who faked sickness do not miss the opportunity to learn a certain subject.

### **Offer Technology Workshops**

Technology excuses are most commonly used in late homework submissions. As our students do not have the same technology proficiency, our university should provide and require workshops (and/or video tutorials) for all college freshmen. Contents that may be included are Microsoft offices (Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook), Paintshop or Photoshop, PDF reader (and writer), e-Portfolio, Blackboard navigation, online literature search, and proper citations to avoid plagiarism. Pair up with upper classman is another way for students to quickly learn about the technical tips. These measures should prevent most of software-related excuses. For hardware-related excuses, such as printing issues, it is easily avoidable when professors accept electronic submissions. Most professors do not perceive electronic submission as an attendance threat, however, prefers print-out essays they are much easier to grade. Electronic grading, however, also has many advantages, such as providing a record of student's homework that can be used later for education or assessment purposes, and blocking opportunistic fakers who accuse the faculty to have "lost" a submitted homework. For those who worry that online submissions may quickly breach email quota, there are many free cyber spaces that allow secure online data storage. Good organization is the key to successful online archiving. It is also a good practice to always post the assignments at least one week before the due date and announce it immediately in the class. This will allow plenty of time for students to work on the homework. It is also important that professors make it very clear in the syllabus that late submission will be penalized, and that this policy is verbally repeated before each assignment and enforced consistently.

### **Work With Administration**

To reach the goal of student and faculty satisfaction, university administrators and faculty need to work together with the students. Academic advisors should better assist students to select courses that do not conflict with their work schedule, sport activity, or other school events. Faculty members need to post detailed class calendar ideally before class registration. Counselors and deans should avoid class time whenever possible when they book up a student for appointment, or else a written note should be provided. For students who have severe family issues, such as death of a family member, the university may set up "Grief Absence Policies" similar to the one from Purdue University (see link in the reference). This practice not only avoids professors the unnecessary suspicion of an excuse, but makes it convenient for the students, as they only need to contact one university office (the counseling center) and that they can be assured that they would not lose points due to the absence.

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