

Advances in Learning and Behavioral Disabilities, 14. London: JAI.

The Truth Behind Truancy: Student Rationales for Cutting Class

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In a survey on attitudes toward skipping class given to 75 undergraduates at a prominent state university in the Midwest, 84% of 38 respondents answered that they have been or may be inclined to skip a class because of reasons associated with "health": they are tired or just not feeling well. All women (n=20) chose this option, while only 67% of the men did. Beyond gender lines, college year also influenced answers: While 50% of juniors and seniors chose "weather" as a reason to skip class, only 20% of first-year students and sophomores did so. These results suggest that instructors should consider the gender and college-year compositions of their classes as they determine attendance policies or decide whether to offer incentives (e.g., credit, bonus points, or pop quizzes) in their attempts to reduce truancy.

Introduction

Numerous studies have confirmed the intuitive relationship between attendance and grades in the college classroom setting: As absences increase, grades generally decrease. (Some recent studies include

Clump, Bauer, & Whiteleather, 2003; Friedman, Rodriguez, & McComb, 2001; Gump, in press; Gunn, 1993; Launius, 1997; Romer, 1993; Rose, Hall, Bolen, & Webster, 1996; Van Blerkom, 1992; and Wyatt, 1992.) While most studies have concluded that academic success is a function of many more factors than attendance alone, a strong correlation between attendance and academic success remains. (For simplicity, this article follows the definition put forth in a seminal article by May, 1923, who defined “academic success” by high grades.) Instructors should want their students to succeed academically; and thus instructors who believe their classes to be worthwhile should want their students to attend. Some instructors (see, for example, Friedman, Rodriguez, & McComb; Launius) may even take student absences personally. Thus, according to Wyatt, student truancy negatively affects not only educational effectiveness but also faculty morale.

In attempts to reduce student truancy, instructors may verbally comment on the importance of class attendance, print statements to such effect on their syllabi, or even offer positive reinforcements for attendance, such as attendance points or unannounced extra credit quizzes (as given by Thorne, 2000; and Wilder, Flood, & Stromsnes, 2001). Yet students do and will continue to miss class, frequently for endogenous reasons—reasons well within their control.

A product of exploratory “Classroom Research” as described by Cross and Steadman (1996), this small study investigates rationales for student absences along the lines of larger surveys by Beaulieu (1984); Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb (2001); Galichon and Friedman (1985); and Wyatt (1992). The results suggest that both gender and year in college affect the reasons for which students admit they may skip class. But why are such findings important? As Wyatt also suggests, the more aware instructors are about reasons students may skip their classes, the more able instructors are to tailor their courses—depending on the demographics of the students enrolled—so as to minimize absences. For example, if instructors who desire attendance learn that students are likely to skip class out of boredom, the instructors should try to make their classes more interesting or appealing to the students (Gump, 2004). But even when students skip for reasons that cannot be directly controlled by the instructors, instructors may choose whether they wish to offer rewards contingent on attendance with the intent to minimize absences (Beaulieu, & Sheffler, 1985; Launius, 1997; Thorne, 2000; Wilder, Flood, & Stromsnes, 2001).

Subjects, Setting, and Procedure

The subjects ($N=75$, 51% male) were students in three sections of a general education course (Introduction to Japanese Culture) on the main campus of a major state research university in the Midwest. The students, who came from all four years (first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior) and all colleges within the university, were enrolled in weekly discussion sections on Mondays under the same instructor. Students were also expected to attend two lectures each week (presented by another instructor); but attendance at the lectures was not part of this study.

During the first discussion section meetings of the spring 2003 semester, the instructor administered an optional three-question survey to all 75 students enrolled in his three sections of the course. The results and discussion presented here are based on responses to the third question, which provided six rationales (as seen in Table 1) and asked students to identify all applicable rationales that have led or might lead them to skip class. (The rationales had been identified in the literature as some of the reasons most commonly cited by students for skipping class.) Also, space was provided for students to write in reasons not already listed. Absences that are excused by university policy (such as illnesses with doctors' notes, school-sanctioned excursions, or deaths in the family) were excluded from this survey.

Table 1: Results of Survey on Rationales for Student Absences (N=38)

	Options	Students choosing that option ^a	
		<i>n</i>	Percent
A	Weather (either it's too beautiful to sit in class or too cold/wet/ugly to leave home)	16	42
B	Health (you're just tired or are otherwise not feeling well—but are not sick enough to go to the doctor)	32	84
C	Preparedness (you haven't done the readings or another assignment due that day)	3	8
D	Preoccupation (you're working on an assignment for another class or studying for another exam)	25	66

E	Inconvenience (the class meets at an inconvenient time or location)	6	16
F	Personal choice (you feel that going to that class is not the best use of your time; you're unhappy with some aspect of the course)	10	26

*Students were asked to choose all options that applied.

Results and Discussion

Aggregate results of answers given to the third question on the survey instrument, which returned an overall response rate of 51% (38 students out of 75), are provided in Table 1. That the survey was both optional and not blind lowered the response rate: Students wrote their responses on the backs of self-completed information cards that included their names and other identifying factors. (Identification was necessary so that students' survey answers could ultimately be compared with their actual attendance patterns and final grades.) Students were assured both orally and in the instructions on the survey instrument that the instructor would not let his impressions of them as students be affected by their answers. In fact, students were asked not to participate in the survey unless they felt they could answer the questions honestly.

The most common rationale given for missing class (chosen by 84% of the respondents) was "health": being tired or otherwise sick—but not sick enough to see a doctor. (This qualification was included because providing a doctor's note warrants an "excused" absence, while this study investigates so-called unexcused absences.) All women ($n=20$) chose "health," while only 67% of the men ($n=18$) did. "Preoccupation," the second most common answer overall (chosen by 66% of the respondents), was the most common answer for men (72%). Only one additional answer was written in: "instructor has told me not to come/not worth it."

Overall, out of 6 possible rationales for potentially missing class, students chose an average of 2.4 reasons ($SD=1.2$). Men chose 2.6 ($SD=1.6$) rationales, while women chose 2.3 ($SD=0.7$). Despite choosing fewer rationales than men, the women who completed the survey had an average of 0.8 absence ($SD=1.1$), while the men had an average of 0.7 absence ($SD=1.1$). Thus the "insignificant differences in absentee rates between men and women" found by Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb (2001, p. 128) as well as Galichon and Friedman (1985) and Launius (1997) were replicated in this study as well. But in the total pool of 75

students, men had an average of 1.0 absence ($SD=1.4$), while women had only 0.8 absence ($SD=1.0$). While the differences in attendance rates by gender are statistically insignificant due to the small sample, these data are nevertheless in contrast with Wyatt's 1992 study that found being female was positively associated with class absenteeism.

As expected, based on the studies mentioned earlier that positively relate attendance to grades, women, with their fewer average absences, had higher final averages than men: 86.7% ($SD=6.2$) versus 86.5% ($SD=7.4$). Ironically, perhaps, the slight magnitude of the difference in final averages differentiated by gender plays down the theory that attendance amounts for much variation in final grades. Only when the statistics in this sample are presented without regard to gender does the attendance-grade relationship become apparent. Overall, including all 75 students enrolled in the sections, the 43 students with grades of "B+" or higher (averages greater than or equal to 87.0%) had an average of 0.5 absence ($SD=0.7$), while the 32 students with averages below 87.0% had an average of 1.4 absences ($SD=1.5$) each.

The least common rationale chosen (by just 3 students) was "preparedness," suggesting that most students would not let being unprepared for class keep them away. This finding corroborates the conclusion by Clump, Bauer, and Whiteleather (2003, p.244) that "attending class is one of the best things students can do with regard to their grades." Students who agree with that conclusion would likely assume that grades should be more related to motivation than to ability; and instructors who offer credit for class attendance unfortunately reaffirm that assumption. The advice to attend regardless of preparation seems more appropriate to lectures, where learning may be more passive than active, and where presence without preparation might not interfere as much with learning. In sections that focus on discussions of outside readings, however, unprepared students frequently have little to offer. How can they engage with their prepared fellow classmates if they have not done the required readings? Passive learning in an active-learning environment seems difficult or, at best, impractical. As Rhodes (2001, p.65) states (and as reproduced on the section syllabi for this course): "Education is not a spectator sport; it is a transforming encounter. It demands active engagement, not passive submission; personal participation, not listless attendance." The experimenter's students are required to come to class prepared; yet, for them, missing class on account of not being prepared is viewed as worse than coming to a discussion section and having nothing to

offer. (The survey was taken, however, before the instructor distributed his syllabus or explained his teaching philosophy.)

With respect to year in college, first-year students and sophomores ($n=10$) collectively chose fewer responses (an average of 1.9 each; $SD=0.6$) than did juniors and seniors ($n=28$), who chose 2.5 responses each ($SD=1.3$). Does this difference indicate youthful optimism, or does it reflect the attitudes of students who have had longer college careers and, thus, more opportunities for missing classes? For example, only 20% of first-year students and sophomores chose “weather” as a reason to skip class, while 50% of juniors and seniors did so. This finding implies, perhaps, that the younger students have not experienced any (or as many) of the depressingly frigid winters that linger long into the spring semester. The students who have been on campus longer had learned that one way of coping with the weather is to avoid it by staying indoors all day, thus occasionally missing class.

While the experimenter’s studies of the same students have reported a strong negative correlation between absences and final grades (see Gump, in press), analysis of the data in this study yielded no statistically significant correlation between actual absences or final course grades and the number of answers given to the survey question. Students who chose more potential rationales for skipping class, then, were no more likely to miss class in the end than students who chose fewer rationales. This finding offers many interpretations. First, this survey was not targeted toward one particular course: Students responded to the survey instrument based on their entire college experiences. Thus no correlations between numbers of answers and actual attendance or final grades in this one class should have necessarily been expected. Second, questioning students on attendance during the first class period may have reinforced how important the instructor considers attendance; thus, the students may have been primed by the survey and may have come to class more than they otherwise would have. The influence of demand characteristics, then, is supported by the finding that the students who did not complete the survey ($n=37$) had an average of 1.0 absence ($SD=1.3$) over the course of the semester, while the 38 students who did complete the survey had only 0.8 absence ($SD=1.1$) each. Finally, some students may miss class frequently for the same reason or reasons. The survey instrument questioned students on what reasons they would consider rational for skipping class; students were not questioned about how many times they actually missed classes for those or any other reasons.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As the product of a Classroom Research assessment, the findings from this survey are inherently context-specific; yet, when examined with care, the results are nonetheless generalizable to other populations. This exploratory study demonstrated, then, no correlation between actual student attendance rates and the numbers of reasons these students considered plausible for skipping or potentially skipping class: Frequency of absences is a distinct issue. Thus, blind surveys that merely investigate student *attitudes* toward truancy are of little use. Actual attendance must also be questioned (à la the complex questionnaire developed by Friedman, Rodriguez, & McComb, 2001); and self-reported responses must be trusted.

This survey also does not allow for differentiation among different course types, sizes, or frequencies. Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb (2001, p.129), for example, divided courses into five “content categories” for their study and also found that course size correlated negatively with attendance. In the survey question in this study, “class” refers overarchingly to lectures, labs, discussions, recitations, studios, and workshops. An excuse that a student would consider valid for missing, for example, a lecture that meets three times a week may likely not be considered valid for missing a laboratory section that meets only once weekly. Such a hypothesis, questioning, in part, issues of intrinsic versus extrinsic interest in course content (see Hodgson, 1984), could easily be tested. Furthermore, as Wyatt (1992) has shown, courses that fulfill general education requirements (such as the course in this study) may be considered to be different from other courses with respect to attendance patterns, especially for students who may not see the relevance of such courses. (See also Gaff, 2000.) Regarding the nature of elective classes versus requirements, Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb concluded as follows: “If students said a course was one they wanted to take . . . , they had fewer absences” (p.129).

Finally, students who may *potentially* miss class for any number of reasons may actually never miss class at all. Indeed, the 21 respondents who had no absences all semester nevertheless chose an average of 2.3 rationales ($SD=1.2$) for skipping as plausible. The 17 students who missed one or more classes (the most missed was 4 out of 14 class meetings) chose an average of 2.6 rationales ($SD=1.2$) as plausible, a statistically insignificant difference.

By questioning possibility as well as actuality, then, the results of this survey may best be used by instructors to assess student perceptions toward truancy. Besides health, instructors may consider none of the six rationales

on the survey instrument as valid “excuses” for missing class. But students, who may consider themselves to be customers (Petress, 1996) and who thus expect to be catered to, have their own opinions, as this study of accepted student rationales for truancy has demonstrated. Instructors who are aware of these opinions are more capable of accommodating for them in the overall structures of their courses and grading schemes, ultimately bringing about both lower rates of student truancy and higher rates of student success.

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