Journal of Teaching and Learning
Vol. 19, No. 3 (2025), pp. 149–169
https://doi.org/10.22329/jtl.v19i2.8221
www.jtl.uwindsor.ca

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Chronic Absenteeism Among Undergraduate Students at a Historically Black University: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

This research examines chronic absenteeism at an American public, historically Black university. Chronic absenteeism, which became a problem during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, has contributed to rising failure rates and a 34% graduation-to-retention rate among students. Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) method, the authors, who are college instructors, interviewed 13 students with histories of absenteeism. Student cases were analyzed separately and together to identify relevant absenteeism themes. Significant themes include life conflicts (such as a flat tire or illness), lack of perceived relevance of courses (such as courses that fall outside of a student's major), and lack of course structure (such as inconsistent policies within a course). These barriers impact all students to some degree, and these obstacles have become more frequent and

substantial post-COVID-19. The barriers are described using examples and recommendations, to mitigate the problems that include, among others, clear course policies of student support in syllabi. During course introductions, course time devoted to making clear, the items that are relevant to the students' academic majors, and care taken to ensure correspondence between what is in the course schedule and what happens in class.

Introduction

High rates of student course incompletion, withdrawal, failure, and absenteeism during the COVID-19 pandemic inspired the authors and faculty at a historically Black university in the United States to study the problem of chronic absenteeism more carefully. Even as the pandemic crisis lessened, students and faculty continued to face isolated outbreaks, an increase in virtual and asynchronous courses and course loads, and the financial pressures of the post-COVID-19 economy. The problem of chronic absenteeism persists.

Until recently, the authors believed their university was the only one affected by chronic absenteeism. That belief changed in March 2023, when they presented their findings and provided a workshop at a teaching-and-learning conference in Savannah, Georgia. The session was standing room only. The authors were flooded with questions, indicating that chronic absenteeism was no isolated phenomenon:

- How do you know if your student is sick?
- How many grandparents do these kids have?
- What about courses that students don't typically like? Nobody's banging on the door to get into my algebra courses.
- How do you make them want to be there?
- and so on . . .

The workshop participants' questions were consistent with the forthcoming analysis of students' experiences: motivation is a key component for understanding and preventing chronic absenteeism. In what follows, the authors discuss the results from their qualitative study of chronic absenteeism, explore the role played by motivation in student attendance, and make recommendations for how instructors can support students' inner motivational resources.

COVID-19 and higher education

The COVID-19 pandemic left behind a wake of destruction. In addition to millions of deaths and stress placed on the entire healthcare system, this crisis impacted all aspects of higher education.

To control the spread of infection, colleges and universities introduced social distancing protocols, including limiting the number of people in each classroom. For example, lecture halls with 300 seats could only accommodate 30 students; classrooms with 30 desks could only accommodate 12 students; and so on. It often made sense to forego classroom meetings entirely and meet online. The American Sacred Heart University faculty reported that instructors found themselves in a new online environment and began experiencing burnout (Taylor & Frechette, 2022). Not only were these instructors adapting to a new environment, but they were also adapting to more courses with higher enrollments.

A cross-sectional study of over 200 faculty in Mexico found that college professors experienced sleep disruption during the early stages of the pandemic: They stayed up later and slept in, and their weekend sleep was reduced by an hour (Arrona-Palacios et al., 2022). Overall, faculty reported less quality sleep, which correlated positively with burnout, emotional exhaustion, and feelings of depersonalization (symptoms of feeling like a robot or cog in a machine).

Students were also affected. Researchers at Universidad Nacional de Colombia surveyed over 500 college students about their stress and anxiety levels during the pandemic (Montoya-Restrepo et al., 2022). They found high levels of perceived stress and anxiety, which were linked to social distancing protocols and the disruption of ordinary classroom experiences (such as an inability to attend education centers). The students reported feelings of confinement, anxiety, and fear, and they showed signs of burnout.

Undergraduate students in Switzerland reported greater levels of stress, anxiety, loneliness, and depression during the pandemic (in 2020) than did students who attended pre-pandemic (Elmer et al., 2020). These students worried about missed social opportunities, health concerns for themselves and others, and concerns about the future.

COVID-19 at Albany State University. A distant regional board of representatives chose the authors' school's social distancing protocols. The COVID-19-safety protocol began in the middle of the Spring 2020 semester, shortly after the town made national news as a COVID-19 infection hotspot.

In preparation for Fall 2020, the faculty were instructed to prepare for three possible social-distancing scenarios. Until classes began, it was unclear how the instructors would be able to teach and how students would be able to attend. Consequently, in-classroom attendance rates plummeted to as low as 5-10%. It was not unusual for a teacher to show up to an empty classroom. The result was growing withdrawal and failure rates, particularly in general education courses.

Even after attendance rates recovered post-COVID-19, this school's college of arts and sciences and the general-education program concluded that chronic absenteeism was the most significant factor limiting student achievement, as measured by course failure rates, learning-outcome achievement, and graduation.

Chronic absenteeism in higher education: A review of the literature

In this article, chronic absenteeism refers to students who miss a significant enough number of class periods that their grade, or academic standing, in that course is affected. At the authors' school, chronic absenteeism was seen as dwindling attendance figures, paired with rising failure and dropout rates, decreased the achievement of general educational-learning outcomes (as determined by institutional assessment), and decreased graduation rates (falling from 34% seven-year graduation rates to 25% over a five-year period).

This problem has received attention in primary and secondary schooling, but limited research has been done on chronic absenteeism in higher education. Still, various models for explaining this issue in higher education have been developed (Clores, 2009; Khan, 2021; Sarmento-dos-Santos et al., 2017; Triado-Ivern, 2020). These frameworks emphasized the causes of absenteeism: competing student responsibilities, personal emergencies, low motivation, and poor instructor-student relationships.

Higher-education researchers at Ateneo de Naga University in the Philippines interviewed 10 students who had failed courses due to absences. The interviews yielded what

Clores (2009) found were three distinct factors that led to high rates of absenteeism: 1) disempowering circumstances, in which students "expressed helplessness in […] missing classes" (p. 154); 2) mixed-up priorities, in which absenteeism is "caused by lack of self-discipline, peer pressure, lack of study skills or time management, and extra-curricular activities" (p. 157); and 3) pedagogical dilemmas, which includes student loss of interest. Throughout the discussion, Clores emphasized the importance of student motivation and the role played by instructors in creating an environment that facilitates student motivation.

At the Government Teachers' Training College in Bangladesh, a purposive sample of ten bachelor-of-education students and three teachers were interviewed about the circumstances leading to student absenteeism. In their analysis, Khan (2021) identified seven factors responsible for student absenteeism: financial crisis, distance of commute, safety of commute, teacher absenteeism, insufficient classroom accommodation, insufficient learning resources, and inequality of classroom accommodation. Whereas Clores' factors were related to student motivation, those of Khan's were primarily linked to student (and school) poverty—insufficient room and materials for learning; inconsistent, unreliable, or unsafe transportation; and financial crises.

Triado-Ivern et al. (2020) at the University of Barcelona surveyed nearly 1900 college students about their reasons for course absenteeism. On a scale of 1-4, where four represents the highest level of agreement that the reason is responsible for student absenteeism, the following factors stood out:

- Because of the course, lessons became burdensome and/or boring (2.91)
- Because of the lecturer's teaching, lessons were burdensome and/or boring (3.16)
- The lecturer dictated the notes or read the slides (2.81)
- The lecturer did not make attendance compulsory (2.78) (excerpted from p. 142)

In summary, students missed classes when they did not perceive attending was important. In their analysis, Triado-Ivern et al. (2020) described an interaction between the reasons for absenteeism and year of college matriculation. Triado-Ivern et al. (2020) explained,

> First-year students explain absenteeism mainly through external sources, while second-year students think [that] their own planning and the teaching methodology are more important. On the other hand, third-year students focus on their own planning and on the teaching and learning methodologies. Last year students find all [of the] factors important. It seems that the reasons for absenteeism increase the higher the year. (Triado-Ivern et al., 2020, p. 143)

Looking at the above four studies and others (Sarmento-dos-Santos et al., 2017; Triado-Ivern et al., 2013), reasons for absenteeism appear wherever one looks: external factors, socio-economic complications, classroom issues, and motivational causes. These factors impact student attendance differently at each school, based on the regional and social demographics of the students. Without understanding the unique populations of a university's students, it is impossible to predict which influences will be most salient for understanding absenteeism at a school. For example, the students at the authors' institution come primarily from low-income families, with over 80% eligible for Pell Grants (which indicates low income on US-poverty scales). Therefore, it is anticipated that the data yielded in Khan's (2021) study, which indicated poverty and inadequate resources, would be most insightful for understanding the chronic absenteeism in these students.

Particularly in the reports by Clores (2009) and Triado-Ivern (2020), student boredom and disinterest are too vague to help instructors understand why students have chosen not to attend. Boredom and disinterest are indicators of low psychological well-being and low psychological needs satisfaction, which predict absenteeism (deCharms, 1976). Boredom and absenteeism are dependent on a mediating variable. By understanding this mediating variable, instructors can increase student interest and attendance.

Reviewing the literature, a multiplicity of dynamics outside of the classroom (e.g., social, economic, and transportation) and inside the classroom (e.g., curricula, instructional style, classroom management) contribute to chronic absenteeism. To emphasize what instructors can influence, this study focuses on the issues within the classroom. The key words from the relevant literature include boredom, insufficient learning resources, lack of self-discipline, and low motivation. There is a strong theme of student motivation running through each of these. To this end, the authors discuss the leading motivational theory that is applied in educational psychology: self-determination theory. This is particularly important, because self-determination theorists maintain that college instructors' actions can influence the motivation to learn.

Attendance and retention problems at historically Black colleges and universities

In 2014, *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* published a chart compiling the graduation rates of Black students at all historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) from data collected from the US Department of Education. Of the 64 schools listed, only five had a Black-student graduation rate of 50% or higher.

This statistic seems to indicate that HBCUs are part of the problem. Indeed, when compared to graduation rates at non-HBCUs, Black students are less likely to graduate from an HBCU. According to data collected from the US Department of Education in 2009, six-year graduation rates for Black students were 31% at HBCUs and 52% at non-HBCUs (Richards & Awokoya, 2012, p. 11).

However, it would be a mistake to attribute this disparity to the HBCU status of colleges and universities. There are additional factors that, once controlled, explain much of this difference. HBCUs enroll a disproportionate number of students of lower socio-economic status, first-generation student status, and with lower measures of academic preparation, as measured by achievement tests and high school GPAs (Richards & Awokoya, 2012). When compared to non-HBCU schools, HBCUs tend to have a lower percentage of faculty with a Ph.D degree, lower faculty salaries, and tend to spend less money on instruction-related costs per student (Kim & Conrad, 2006). More specifically, Kim et al. (2006) explained how “the HWCUs in our sample are more affluent than HBCUs[,] in terms of institution-wide academic resources” (p. 414).

When Richards and Awokoya (2012) controlled for the variable of academic preparation in the six-year graduation rate comparison between HBCUs and non-HBCUs, they found that only 5.9% of the difference could be accounted for by the school, whereas 64.7% could be attributed to academic preparation. This means that students who enroll in HBCUs have lower high-school GPAs and score lower on college achievement tests, such as the ACT, than those enrolled in non-HBCUs. Richards and Awokoya (2012) explained, “Low income [sic] students often come to college less academically prepared than their more-advantaged peers, with troubling implications for racial achievement [sic] gaps” (p. 8).

In summary, the students who enroll in HBCUs tend to be less prepared academically than those enrolled at non-HBCUs, regardless of race. Given their unique problems with

persistence, attendance, and graduation rates, HBCUs must be diligent in cultivating an environment that increases each.

Self-determination theory and its relationship to student motivation and attendance

Self-determination theorists explain that human beliefs, values, and behaviours, including a student's decision to attend class, can be regulated in four ways: no regulation, external regulation, internal regulation, and intrinsic regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). A student's presence in the classroom does not indicate everything about why that student is there.

Table 1: Behavioural regulation in the decision to attend class.

Regulation Type	Definition	Example
No Regulation	The person is passive and disengaged.	Student skips class, or attends and is disengaged.
External Regulation	Behaviour is present, but the stimulus for the behaviour is outside the person exhibiting the behaviour.	Students attend class to get extra credit or to avoid losing points.
Internalized Regulation	External reasons for behaving are adopted by those who internalize them as their own.	Students begin to see the value of in-class activities for developing their sets of career skills.
Intrinsic Regulation	Behaviour is present, and the stimulus for the behaviour comes from the student.	Students attend class because they find it satisfying to do so.

The locus of behaviour regulation (none, external, internal, or intrinsic) predicts the level of satisfaction and psychological well-being that college students experience (Bonneville-Roussy et al., 2020; Neufield & Malin, 2020; Salmela-Aro et al., 2022). Students experience low interest and psychological well-being when their behaviour is regulated externally. When regulated internally or intrinsically, they experience high levels of interest and psychological well-being, which have shown a significant relationship with attendance (van Egmond et al, 2020). These students attend class because they perceive that doing so is worthwhile, meaningful, and psychologically satisfying. A complete analysis of Self-determination theory (SDT) in education can be found in Reeve et al. (2022), and a practical guide to its application in higher education can be found in Whitehead (2023).

Aims of the Study

The authors will next examine students' lived experience of missing class to pinpoint the location of behavioural regulation. Following self-determination theory, instances of externalized regulation associated with absenteeism will be explored.

Methodology

The authors have designed a qualitative study using the interpretative phenomenological-analysis method (IPA) (Smith & Nizza, 2022; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2022). Smith and Nizza (2022) emphasized three interrelated philosophical principles of IPA: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography.

Phenomenology, made famous in its methodological form by Edmund Husserl (2012), is the rigorous study of human experience. Husserl believed phenomenology is as rigorous and insightful as the natural sciences' experimental methods. The phenomenologist examines descriptions of lived experiences and seeks to describe their underlying structure. Husserl (2012) has called this the eidetic, or essential structure of an experience. Contemporary research methods for applying Husserl's (2012) phenomenology can be found in Giorgi (2009, 2019) and Churchill (2022). Significantly, the phenomenologist resists the natural attitude, which is the belief that phenomena can be explained and controlled by environmental variables. For this study, the belief that there is some social or environmental factor that, once identified, will solve the problem of chronic absenteeism was suspended. Instead, the goal is to understand how chronic absenteeism occurs and what it is like for the student.

However, IPA is not only phenomenological; it is also hermeneutic. German philosopher Martin Heidegger (2008) recognized that the phenomenologist could never be separated from (or bracketed out of) the phenomenological investigation. Therefore, for Heidegger, phenomenology can only ever reveal what experience means to the person doing the investigation. This is why Heidegger maintains that phenomenology is always hermeneutic phenomenology. A hermeneutic phenomenological process has been described by Canadian scholar, Max van Manen (2014, 2018). In its application in IPA, hermeneutics means that any phenomenological analysis will always depend on the personality and perspective of those participating in the study. In what follows, the perspective is that of five faculty members confronting the problem of chronic absenteeism in their general-education courses.

Finally, IPA is idiographic; the focus is on the individual case. In the hermeneutic tradition from Heidegger onward, German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer (2013) explained that all research depends on a thorough analysis of an individual case. Particularly with qualitative research, case studies allow a researcher to become immersed in the significance that an experience has for a unique individual, without being distracted by the experiences of others (Whitehead, 2021). This means that each protocol is examined by itself, searching for significant themes that illuminate the phenomenon in question. Only later are those themes compared across participants to clarify any generalizable significance.

In IPA, the researcher brings these three components together. Interviews are conducted with participants, and are then transcribed and analyzed as separate instances of a phenomenon (in this situation, of chronic absenteeism). Once each case has been considered and analyzed separately, the analyses are compared in search of common elements or themes that the individual cases share. Finally, these themes are taken in their phenomenological form, meaning they are not taken as matters of fact, but as descriptions of lived experiences.

IPA is a qualitative method, and therefore, has different assumptions than quantitative research. While the latter derives its explanatory power through sample size and measures of validity and reliability, qualitative research derives its power through the posture adopted by the researcher. It aims for generalizability, whereas qualitative research is more interested in fidelity to the research subject (Keen, 1982; Whitehead & Wright, 2017). Phenomenological research requires that the researcher adopt a "posture that depends[,] by its nature[,] on one's being able to

look at a lived experience[s] using what German philosophers have called 'intuition' and its derivative 'empathy.' This 'letting be' and 'allowing to show' is an attitude that one assumes […] from the beginning" (Churchill, 2022, p. 36). Consequently, research samples for IPA are much lower than those expected for quantitative studies that rely on statistical analyses.

Design

The authors applied for, and received approval from, the university's institutional review board. Before getting started, these researchers met to discuss the problem of chronic absenteeism and reflect on their own experiences. This was an initiation step taken from the qualitative method of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). "The task of initial engagement is to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern[,] that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27). This was included because many of the authors had never conducted qualitative research. Reflecting on the personal importance of the absenteeism problem and its impact on students helped the researchers to avoid thinking about absenteeism as the outcome of independent variables, and begin thinking about it phenomenologically, that is, as an experience imbued with personal meaning.

The authors recruited participants by reaching out to former students and arranging interviews. Following the methodology of IPA, outlined by Smith and Nizza (2022), the investigators targeted a sample of 10 to 12 undergraduate HBCU students who fit the narrow parameters of the study: undergraduate students who had experienced missing classes and were willing to discuss their absenteeism during in-depth interviews. The participants (n=13) agreed, and all of the interviews were kept for analysis.

Demographic details were not collected beyond self-reported absenteeism and enrollment in undergraduate courses at HBCU. The rationale for omitting these was to discourage the parsing out of predictive factors to explain chronic absenteeism—a practice cautioned against in IPA research (Emery & Anderman, 2020; Smith, 2010).

Interviews took place in-person and used video-conferencing software over eight weeks. While Smith and Nizza (2022) have reservations about conducting digital interviews, recent research has supported the practice with video-conferencing strategies and skills (Whitehead & Senecal, 2024). These were scheduled via video-conferencing software, to be as flexible as possible with the participants, regarding interview scheduling. The interview questions included:

- If you have skipped or missed a class, describe this decision or these decisions.
- What are some of the reasons you chose not to attend class?
- Describe your decision or decisions to attend class.
- What are some of the reasons you choose to attend class?
- Did you think that class was worthwhile?
- Describe the scenarios in which you think class is worthwhile.
- Describe the scenarios in which you think class is not worthwhile.

Interviews ranged in length from 20 minutes to one hour and 20 minutes. They were transcribed and distributed to all of the authors. Each one read all of the interview transcripts one at a time. They were instructed to mark up the transcripts by identifying where topics and themes shifted during the interview, such as when a student was reflecting on the guilt for missing a class, and then switched to tell a story about something that occurred during class that caused attendance to be less likely. By breaking the transcripts

down in this manner, the authors could begin to see the significance that each part of the interview played in the overall structure of absenteeism for the student.

Once the authors performed their individual analyses, they reconvened to debrief. The interviewer involved with each transcript led the discussions of that transcript to share their intuitions and insights from the conversation. At this stage, relationships between the participants may have been recognized, but not discussed.

Next, working separately, the authors examined the bigger picture for themes that emerged across all participants. A second meeting was held to discuss them. Five themes were identified, and three were kept for analysis, in light of the authors' research question.

Finally, the primary investigator, working from the two discussions with co-researchers, selected representative excerpts for each significant theme to construct Tables 2 and 3. These were subsequently shared with the co-researchers for feedback and revised.

Results

Emergent themes for chronic absenteeism

Participants' responses took two forms: reasons for attending and skipping class. All participants mentioned several reasons for attending or skipping their classes. These responses were organized into the following themes:

- Course perceived as relevant or irrelevant to college major or career goals.
- Lack of support from, or connection with, the instructor.
- Pandemic-related issues or ordinary-life conflicts.
- Lack of course structure (inconsistent schedule, disagreement between syllabus and schedule; instructor absenteeism).
- Inconvenience and student apathy (inclement weather; student apathy and indifference; boredom).

Table 2: Sample interview excerpts and their preliminary thematic classifications.

Sample Interview Excerpts	Experiential Theme
"I prefer being in class in order to ask questions about [the] material."	Preference for face-to-face
"Courses are best when they connect to what I'm doing."	Course relevance
"Pandemic was an excuse not to come to school."	Pandemic issues: life conflict
"Well, my mom, she died during the pandemic. She died right when the pandemic started. So, sitting out trying to, because I was busy, I was still trying to work here (REDACTED State), and I had my son at home, and then I was attending school. So, sitting at home trying to do all that stuff... it was hard."	Pandemic issues: life conflict
"I was working at Lowe's, and I was here and I was a parent and I was going to school."	Life conflict, personal responsibility
"Faculty need to adjust to student learning needs/styles."	No connection with an instructor

"So, for instance, that. See. So okay, so we go into class and we talk and I'm talking among my peers and they let me know that the teacher is not really teaching or we don't have really work to do. So, that's when I decide like, no. So, I just decide to take a self-care day or I just get my work done. I try to move past like some work."	Relevance of course
"Boring. What else? My teacher. Without PowerPoint? Yeah, that's the main thing. My teachers that don't speak fluent English, but they go too fast. And you already don't speak fluent English. And it's really pointless going back to the PowerPoint. It's pointless. I feel like for me to go to class, if I could get on my computer and read the same PowerPoint, you couldn't read to me. So, I want to be on my battery. Right. That's actually how it is."	Relevance of the course
"And so, for me, it's different because I was here pre-COVID. So, like I understand how it was before trying to figure out a balance and then having COVID and then them giving us the option to balance and then their option being taken away."	Inconsistent expectations; lack of structure
"I enjoy like hands on when people who are in our field come and talk to us. So, we like understand the process of what has to be done rather than just because I mean, like in the book, it's all right. I'm fine with that. But having hearing and seeing someone's personal experience is like more of a motivation to, like, keep going or, oh, I know we're having a speaker come, I'm going to go to class or just stuff more relatable to us."	Relevance of the course
"So, it's like just you feed me information, I'm supposed to retain it. It's not really what works."	Relevance of the course
"Something might be going on today, like feelings might be hurt or like it might be depression or something, but really like outside sources but it never really pertains to college itself...it's really like, oh, some stuff that can really affect me"	Life conflicts
"I don't like lecture-only classes."	No connection with an instructor
"I guess like sometimes the route to succeed in certain classes be like a roller coaster when our lives are already a roller coaster in general. So, ...say like there's a student here, you know, like a couple of students already passed here. They're trying to go to class, but like they got to do certain....They got to do such, such, and such and such for this class, but they've been so hung up on this work and it's like they could just do the assignment if they just like logged in, did their simple quizzes, did their essays."	Life conflicts
"I'll skip class if it is raining or too far of a walk"	Personal decision; external factors

Based on their prevalence and apparent importance across participants, the following themes were extracted and analyzed concerning the research question in greater detail: a) life conflicts, b) lack of perceived course relevance, and c) lack of course structure. Examples of participant responses that represent these themes are provided in Table 3, and a detailed discussion is below.

Table 3: Key themes for understanding chronic absenteeism.

Theme	Sample Response
Life conflicts	"Well, my mom, she died during the pandemic. She died right when the pandemic started. So, sitting out trying to, because I was busy, I was still trying to work here (REDACTED State), and I had my son at home and then I was attending school. So, sitting at home trying to do all that stuff... it was hard." (R1) "Something might be going on today, like feelings might be hurt or like it might be depression or something, but really like outside sources but it never really pertains to college itself...it's really like, oh, some stuff that can really affect me." (R6)
Lack of perceived relevance of the course	"So, it's like just you feed me information, I'm supposed to retain it. It's not really what works." (R5) "So okay, so we go into class, and we talk and I'm talking among my peers, and they let me know that the teacher is not really teaching, or we don't have really work to do. So that's when I decide like, no. So, I just decide to take a self-care day, or I just get my work done." (R2)
Lack of course structure	"It is helpful when the class actually lines up with the syllabus." (R2) "Let them [students] know from the beginning what will be expected [and stick to it.]" (R1)

A chronic absenteeism flow chart (Figure 1) was created using the interview data. Life conflicts make it impossible for a small percentage of students to attend class. Some students overcome these conflicts, while others have no life conflicts. The next factor that inhibits attendance is the lack of perceived relevance of the course. This is where motivation is not strong enough for students to choose to attend, even if conflicts are not preventing them from attending. Finally, the students for whom factors one and two have not resulted in skipping class, a lack of course structure may inhibit attendance.

COVID-19 represented a significant life-conflict factor, impacted all students, faculty, and administrators. For many students, this crisis alone was sufficient for missing class. However, even for others, the COVID-19 pandemic put enough strain on the daily routine that more minor problems—problems that would not ordinarily result in missing class—resulted in chronic absenteeism.

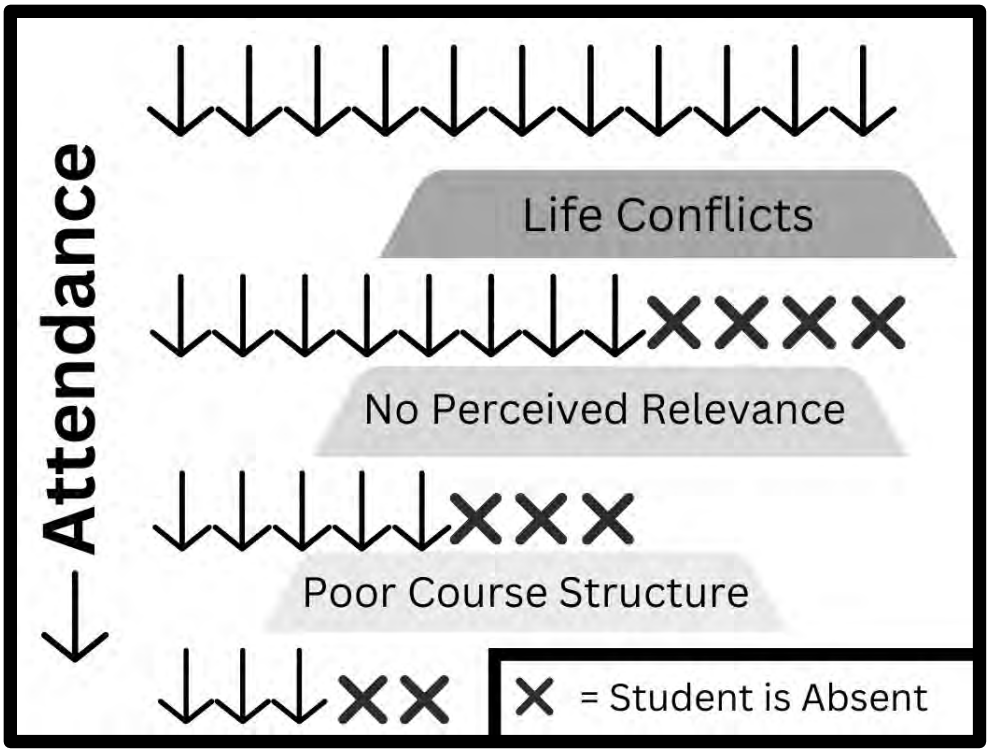

Figure 1: Chronic absenteeism flow chart.

Phenomenological analysis of themes

Life conflict. The most common and familiar reasons for absenteeism stem from life conflicts. These have little or nothing to do with the university, or how instructors design their courses. Personal problems, job conflicts, family responsibilities, accidents, injuries, court dates, doctor's visits, flat tires, illnesses, and so on, make attending class on a particular day impossible. In extreme cases, such as a broken-down mode of transportation, it would be unfair to call absenteeism a choice. However, drawing a line between choice and no choice is not always easy. Is a doctor's appointment a choice? Is working a part-time job to pay for classes a choice?

Respondent six captures the variety and confusion of life circumstances, when explaining, "Something might be going on today—like feelings might be hurt or, … like it might be depression or something—But it never really pertains to college itself . . . .I guess like sometimes the route to succeed in certain classes be [sic] like a roller coaster when our lives are already a roller coaster in general."

Khan's (2021) data analysis revealed the impact of students' life conflicts. University students in Bangladesh were absent due to transportation issues, commuting distances, lack of financial resources, and perceived lack of safety. However, the authors learned from the interviews that these factors are not separately influential—they combine to form a Gestalt, or single roller coaster, of conflict.

Each interviewee shared personal difficulties that presented attendance and coursework challenges. For example, respondent nine explained how class was missed "for medical appointments, for other school duties, such as lab hours, [and] illness. Because I live about one-

and-a-half-hours away, I sometimes miss my night class, because I am tired." For this student, the class challenge is magnified by a 90-minute commute. While fatigue from a minor cold might not be a reason to skip a two-hour lab, it turns into a five-hour commitment, when paired with a three-hour round trip, before factoring in medical appointments.

In other cases, students could persevere and continue their coursework, despite facing external conflicts. Respondent eight explains, "I started school at about 19 or 20, and I never missed. I was pregnant in another town, working two jobs and going to school. I never missed." We can imagine that respondent eight, thankfully, never encountered the precise combination of external conflicts that would prevent her from attending class.

It is no surprise that students have vibrant and full lives outside of the classroom, but it is sometimes easy to forget just how serious some of their difficulties can be. COVID-19 amplified these struggles worldwide, and these students experienced added stress (as did the authors). When asked how the pandemic affected them, respondent one had to ask for clarification, "Me personally?" Then they reported,

> Well, my mom… she died during the pandemic. She died right when the pandemic started. So, sitting out trying to…—because I was busy, I was still trying to work here [at my job in the school] and I had my son at home, and then I was attending school. So, sitting at home trying to do all that stuff… it was hard. (R1)

In the following descriptions of each absenteeism theme, examples from interviews have been selected to represent the theme, not necessarily to demonstrate the frequency with which the theme appeared across participants.

Perceived lack of course relevance. If a student can overcome personal and life conflicts, then the next factor inhibiting attendance seems to be the student's perceived lack of course relevance. This factor was not discovered during the literature review, but proved significant to students during this study's interviews.

Students reported that they were more likely to attend classes that were connected to their major, career path, and/or were of personal interest. More specifically, when students faced struggles with transportation or illness, they were more likely to overcome those struggles, if the course in question was perceived as highly relevant. A perceived low-relevance course, by comparison, was less likely to bring about perseverance from students.

Note, here, how the perceived relevance of the course contributes to the attendance that Gestalt described above. This means that a course that seems inconsequential or unimportant, even if necessary for a degree, can be just as inhibiting as a life conflict, such as a 90-minute commute.

Respondent one explained the lesson of learning to "take a loss," by which was meant letting a lesser requirement slip by, while focusing on a more pressing goal. This decision was explained as typically occurring about a third of the way into the semester.

A student perceives that a course is irrelevant when it cannot be imagined how it would be helpful in the chosen career or life. During the interviews, two participants mentioned finding themselves in courses without knowing what the courses were about. In one example, a student was registered for a course titled, "Microcomputers for Social Sciences," by an advisor. The course description in the student handbook lists the computer programs the course would cover, but such a description is unhelpful if the student is unfamiliar with those programs. This student sat through several class periods, before it was discovered that the class might be helpful.

This problem was particularly pronounced in general-education courses, which are foundational liberal arts courses in the US-college curriculum that all students must take. Respondent four explains, "General-education courses are boring and worthless." (It is worth mentioning how, if pressed, faculty often admit a dubious relationship between general-education courses and degree programs. One author has seen this in his role as a general education coordinator.)

Another variation in the perceived lack of course relevance was how interviewees reported taking courses that were out of sequence. For example, a student might register for Advanced Research, before taking the prerequisite Basic Research. This happens due to limited course availability, and the decision by advisors to help students fill their schedules now, rather than wait an extra semester or two before the course is available again. The faculty teaching those courses do not always know that students have not completed the prerequisite courses, and the students do not always know that they are taking the courses out of order.

A third variation is that some students perceived the course material as relevant, but the actual class periods were irrelevant. Respondent two described the situation: "So, we go into class, and we talk, and I'm talking among my peers, and they let me know that the teacher is not really teaching, or we don't really have [any] work to do. So that's when I decide, like, no. So, I just decide to take a self-care day, or I just get my work done." Respondent four shares a similar concern,

> My teachers that [sic] don't speak fluent English, but they go too fast, and you already don't speak fluent English, and it's really pointless going back to the PowerPoint. It's pointless. I feel like for me to go to class, if I could get on my computer and read the same PowerPoint, you couldn't read to me. (R4)

Other respondents positively shared the same kind of problem, by acknowledging that course relevance was an important feature of courses that they were most likely to attend. Respondent five explains,

> [I] prefer relatable material: I enjoy, like, hands-on when people who are in our field come and talk to us. So, we, like, understand the process of what has to be done, rather than just because, I mean, like in the book, it's all right. I'm fine with that. But having hearing and seeing someone's personal experience is like more of a motivation to, like, keep going or, oh, I know we're having a speaker come, I'm going to go to class, or just stuff more relatable to us.

Perceived lack of course structure. Sometimes, instructors update a course after the course has started, or they make tiny adjustments to due dates or course expectations that interrupt the plans that students had developed earlier in the semester. Alternatively, the syllabus says a quiz is scheduled for September 15, but no quiz is handed out when September 15 comes along. These inconsistencies, though generally carried out with the best of intentions, communicate to students that they should be prepared for anything, and how is it possible to prepare for that?

Respondent two described a problem where the course activities do not align with the course schedule in the syllabus, by finding a disconnect between course expectations and the actual process. Respondent one noted the same issue, and recommended that instructors "let them [students] know from the beginning what will be expected," and then stick to it.

Respondent nine recognized a problem with inconsistent student participation, such as when instructors make a change, due to attendance numbers on a particular day. “When I went to a 6 p.m. class, and folks were absent or unprepared, I felt that it was a waste of time.”

Finally, some students faced poor structure and organization with circumstances external to the classroom, such as an inconsistent bus schedule. The university relies on city buses to transport students between campuses, which are separated by about six miles (ten kilometres). Attendance can be disastrous when a bus is five minutes early or late. Students must plan to be at the bus stop ten minutes early, yet they may end up ten minutes late for class. Paired with a perceived low-relevance course, the student has an increased likelihood of “taking a loss,” to borrow from respondent one above, so the rest of the day is unaffected.

Discussion

Throughout the interviews and researcher discussion, it seemed as though external factors controlled chronic absenteeism from the classroom. For example, instructors do not easily control life conflicts, advising issues, and bus schedules. The only things that they can do are to increase their flexibility with deadlines and attendance policies. In what follows, the authors share practical suggestions and evidence-based strategies for instructors that will help students more likely to overcome external conflicts and achieve their goals as college students. Though instructors cannot eliminate these obstacles themselves, they can limit how inhibiting those difficulties become.

Understanding life conflicts

It is always alarming to confront, in detail, the conflicts that students face while in college. Serious illness, death of a family member, incarceration, divorce, pregnancy, financial difficulty, accidents, and so on interfere with students’ weekly responsibilities.

The authors recommend that instructors accept a range of barriers—the precise type will vary by school, based on student demographics—and plan how to work with students if these situations occur. Call it a contingency plan. Instructors must communicate how these possible scenarios would be handled at the beginning of the semester, before these events have occurred. This can be as simple as letting students know that, if something terrible happens, the teacher is willing to meet with them to work out a plan, provided that they are willing.

The goal of making explicit any flexibility that an instructor is willing to give is that students will know ahead of time that they have more options than simply giving up on their courses, in the event of an unforeseen incident. “Dr. Whitehead said that late work cannot be made up under any circumstances, but Dr. Medlin said she would be willing to work with students if conflicts arise. Therefore, my time is best spent following up with Dr. Medlin.” To help students perform this triage, instructors make it clear at the beginning of the semester whether allowances can be made.

Note how an instructor makes this flexibility explicit from the outset and how it works with all students' problems and demographics. In other words, the form that the unforeseen situation takes is irrelevant. What is important is that students already know that something can be done if something occurs.

Anticipating life conflicts and making plans to work on individual student problems is an example of taking the students’ perspectives, which is a strategy for supporting student autonomy (Reeve, 2016; Reeve et al., 2022; Whitehead, 2023). By doing so, the instructor

targets those students from the above research who face a life conflict and would otherwise choose not to attend the course any longer. These students would know, in advance, that they may still have other options available to them.

A less extreme way of taking students' perspective with respect to life conflicts would be for the instructor to be willing to listen to and empathize with any life problems that would inevitably occur. If a student reports a death in the family, then, even without making scheduling changes for the student, the instructor can still listen empathically to the student. This lets the student know that these problems are being taken seriously, even if the course schedule cannot be adjusted for the student.

Providing explanatory rationale for general education and other required courses

It may seem redundant to clarify the main objectives of a course, but doing so will be helpful to those students who are unfamiliar with the subject. As a psychology professor (Whitehad), it seems as though the definition of psychology would go without saying. However, incoming students may not know the discipline of psychology from physiology, medicine, or business economics. They know that they have registered, or have been registered, for the course, and allegedly need the course to graduate with the chosen degree. The authors recommend making course objectives clear for general-education requirements. A detailed course description would give students an explanatory rationale for the course, which is an autonomy-supportive teaching strategy.

An example of explanatory rationale might include a few lines about the course subject, how it fits into degree programs, and how it can be helpful in a wide variety of courses. Consider the following example of a hypothetical course description:

> Psychology is the scientific study of human mind and behaviour, including why people make the choices that they do, and how to live a more satisfying life. This course in psychology satisfies part of the general-education requirement for social sciences, which includes history, sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines that apply rigorous methods of analysis to human behaviour. In this course, students will explore how psychology has been applied in counseling, education, business, military studies, marketing, and natural sciences, among many other areas.

An advanced version of providing explanatory rationale might involve asking students to complete an assignment that asks them to connect the discipline to their career path.

Each of these recommendations helps to clarify the relevance of the course, not only for their degree completion, but also to help with their chosen career. Activities designed to help students make this connection provide clear opportunities to internalize the regulation of their learning, which is the goal of autonomy-supportive teaching. A good test of relevance might be having 100% of the students taking a course, who are able to describe the applicability of the course for their major. Because perceived course relevance is so important, spending too much time emphasizing its significance for students would be nearly impossible.

The authors expect this recommendation to be particularly pertinent to schools with lower enrollment standards, in which students have less academic preparation, meaning that students will not have enough prior knowledge coming into their courses. It is also appropriate for schools with higher numbers of first-generation students, and those from families who may not already be familiar with the content coverage of standard course titles.

Structuring courses

One of the most constant classroom problems during the interviews was a lack of course structure. On the extreme end, some students experienced uncertainty about whether a professor would attend class on a given day. More familiar complaints were the absence of correspondence between course activities and learning objectives, along with the failure to follow the course schedule listed in the syllabus. These are extremely unstructured courses, and it is no surprise that they were listed as reasons why students skipped their classes.

When a course is structured, the student knows what to expect and is more confident participating with self-direction. "When providing structure," Cheon et al. (2020) explain, the instructor "communicates clear expectations, clarifies what competent functioning looks like, provides step-by-step guidance for how students can make progress and attain desired outcomes, scaffolds progress and offers help, monitors and adjusts task difficulty as needed, and provides constructive feedback" (p. 2). The course structure was lacking in the perception of many of the respondents.

Instructors organize their courses using syllabi, which provide information about what students can expect. This document includes course requirements, schedules, and instructions for assignments and other activities. For students juggling schoolwork and other life responsibilities, the syllabus schedule is reviewed carefully to coordinate work, family, personal, and school objectives. Even a minor change in the schedule, such as moving an exam to a later date, can upset a single mother's or father's schedule with their job(s) or childcare arrangements. Minor schedule changes can include deleting an exam from the schedule, even when doing so may seem to benefit most students. If one or more students had already rescheduled a family trip, doctor's appointment, or work hours around the need to study for an exam, moving the exam from the schedule will likely take students by surprise, and lead to helplessness. Students cannot arrange to be present on an exam day, when the date could change at the last minute. Calendar issues are important for all students, such as the week of the mid-term, national holidays, and final exams. Course activities can be designed with these important dates in mind, and planned with input from students.

To summarize, instructors must create a course schedule that specifies what will happen and when, and they must stick to the schedule as closely as possible. The authors expect that students of all demographics will have unavoidable conflicts around which class attendance must be planned. These conflicts may include doctor appointments, travel, work agendas, and other life responsibilities that allow for limited flexibility in scheduling. If students have a clear course calendar in advance, they can make arrangements in a way that will limit the impact that their life responsibilities will have on their courses.

Conclusion

The authors learned that students miss class periods for a variety of reasons. Many of these conflicts occur outside of the classroom and cannot be avoided by any amount of instructor proactivity. However, this does not mean that instructors cannot employ strategies that will minimize the impact of these unforeseen circumstances on students as much as possible.

The study's most significant limitation is that the authors have neglected greater systemic and social problems that have been shown to influence chronic absenteeism. These include the problems identified by Khan (2021), in particular. The researchers also do not have any way of indicating the relative weight of each factor that was discussed about student absenteeism. These

shortcomings were a consequence of the qualitative approach taken in the study. Additional quantitative research focused on external factors, and assessing the relative weights of these components of chronic absenteeism would be welcomed by the authors.

A second set of limitations comes with the lack of training in qualitative research that many authors brought into the study. The primary author provided workshops for qualitative training, but these paled in comparison to advanced degrees or graduate certificates in qualitative methodology. Though it made a fine learning opportunity for the authors, it could have resulted in fewer insights in the final manuscript.

The researchers have discussed the strategies that came from the theory of motivation research (i.e., self-determination theory; Ryan & Deci, 2017) and its application in the classroom as autonomy-supportive teaching (Reeve, 2016; Reeve et al., 2022; Whitehead, 2023). Drawing on personal experience, the authors maintain that these strategies, if employed to support students through the above attendance issues, will increase their influence on students. This is because instructors will become more understanding of their students and the sorts of problems they have. Thus, the teachers will develop a greater awareness of students' professional goals and how their courses can help facilitate them. Educators will also develop a greater familiarity with the scheduling conflicts that their students are likely to have, and how to best mitigate against them.

Acknowledgments

A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2023 University System of Georgia Teaching and Learning Conference in Athens, Georgia.

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