

Impact of attendance policies on course attendance among college students

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to investigate whether having a graded attendance policy would have an effect on course attendance among college students, and (b) to examine beliefs about education and attendance policies among college students. Results support the utility of graded attendance policies for increasing class attendance despite mixed findings with regard to educational values and beliefs about the implementation of such policies.

Keywords: attendance, policies, college, students, learning

I. Introduction.

Previous studies have documented the relation between class attendance and grades. In a study conducted by Clump, Bauer, and Whiteleather (2003), results revealed a significant relation between attendance and both immediate test scores and overall class test scores using a sample of 423 undergraduate students enrolled in two sections of a general psychology course. In this study, students present on days pop quizzes were administered were compared to students who were not present. In the majority of cases, being present on quiz day resulted in a significant increase in subsequent unit test scores as well as overall class test scores. Similarly, Launius (1997), using a sample of 378 students in four sections of an introductory psychology course, found a significant positive correlation between attendance and exam performance, outside activities and, in at least one section, the final exam score. Van Blerkom (1992) also reported a correlation between attendance and course grades among 17 sections of undergraduate psychology courses. Jones (1984) reported a negative correlation between absences and grades, providing support for a causal model of the cyclical relationship between grades and attendance whereby absences correlated with low grades, and low grades correlated with absences. These findings are not specific to the field of psychology, however. Other fields also have documented the association between class attendance and grade performance as well. For example, Brocato (1989) used a sample of undergraduate Principles of Macroeconomics and Intermediate Macroeconomic students to provide support for the strength of the relation between class attendance and grades.

Despite the documented importance of attending class, students do miss class often and for a variety of reasons. In one study, the reasons cited most frequently by students for missing class were boredom, illness, and interference with other course work or social life (Van Blerkom, 1992). Unavoidable circumstances such as family emergencies or transportation problems also account for student absences, although students cite boredom or general lack of interest in attending class as reasons much more frequently (Launius, 1997). Nevertheless, researchers have found that instructors can increase student attendance by providing appropriate incentives. While

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incentives may be irrelevant for decreasing absences related to emergency situations, providing students with a tangible motivation to attend class may increase attendance for students who otherwise miss class due to boredom or general lack of interest.

Interested in the use of incentives and the relationship between attendance and grades, one researcher compared the results of five regular semester tests across six sections of an undergraduate statistics course (Hancock, 1994). In this study, the instructor encouraged regular attendance across all sections, but required attendance for only three of the sections, meaning that attendance accounted for a portion of the students' grades. The latter three sections served as the experimental group. Results revealed that attendance and grades were significantly higher for the experimental group compared to the control group, where the instructor did not require attendance or take class roll. In a similar study, Hansen (1990) investigated the impact of a positive reinforcement program for controlling absenteeism among business administration college students over a four-year period. Results revealed that class attendance was higher when instructors offered a grade point bonus reward policy compared to those who did not offer such a policy.

Despite the documented relation between class attendance and grades, not all instructors include a graded attendance policy in their syllabus. Some instructors argue that college students are adults and, therefore, should be responsible for coming to class on their own accord. Others argue that grading attendance is antithetical to instilling responsibility and intrinsic motivation in college students and, worse, robs young adults of their free will to choose whether to attend classes in which they are enrolling and for which they are paying voluntarily. These arguments notwithstanding, Launius (1997) surveyed 257 undergraduate psychology students, finding that 70% thought instructors should provide credit for class attendance. Furthermore, of the students surveyed, 84% claimed their attendance would increase if they earned attendance points.

Surveying students about absenteeism can provide educators with information that can be extremely useful for educational planning. Sleight, Ritzer, and Casey (2002) examined student and faculty perceptions about missing class, highlighting the importance of understanding the instructor-student interactions surrounding student absences. Although these researchers did not assess the utility of graded attendance policies, they gathered important information about the differences between faculty and students with regard to what they perceived as important and what factors motivate students to attend class. According to results, faculty found fewer reasons for missing class acceptable than did students. Students cited the amount of material to be covered on the exam as the most important factor in determining class attendance whereas faculty predicted interest in the material would be.

A review of the literature demonstrates that much of the research in the area of attendance to date has focused primarily on the relation between attendance and grades, with much less of a focus on what educators need to do to increase attendance. Little research exists that provides empirical support for the utility of graded attendance policies, independent of grade performance, especially in the field of psychology. In addition, research that examines beliefs about education and attendance policies among college students, factors that may underlie attendance habits, is lacking. The purpose of this research was twofold: (a) to investigate whether having a stated attendance policy would increase course attendance among college students and (b) to examine educational values and beliefs about attendance policies among college students. Research addressing both of these domains is limited. This research is intended to build upon the existing literature.

II. Method.

A. Participants.

Participants were 155 undergraduates from eight college psychology courses at a public university located in the Southeast (139 women, 39 men; 34 freshmen, 24 sophomores, 36 juniors, 57 seniors, 1 graduate student, 3 missing data). The mean age of participants was 23. The courses included Behavior Modification, Tests & Measurement, and two sections each of Introduction to Psychology, Personality, and Child Psychology. Four courses took place in the fall semester, and four courses took place in the spring semester. Researchers randomly assigned courses to either the experimental or control conditions with one exception; courses with two sections were counterbalanced so that one section received the experimental condition and one received the control condition. This procedure reduced the effects of the confounding variables surrounding the content of the course. The composition for each course, including information about which classes took place during each semester (fall and spring), which classes included a graded attendance policy, the total number of participants from each course, and the class standing of participants appears in Table 1. All classes met once a week with the exception of the Behavior Modification course, which met twice a week. To control for this difference in the analysis, researchers prorated absences during data entry for the Behavior Modification course so that each class missed counted as $\frac{1}{2}$ an absence. Thus, two absences in a course that met twice a week equaled one absence in a course that met once a week given that the amount of material covered during the course for the week was the same.

Table 1. Composition of Courses.

Course	Policy	Number of Participants					
		Total	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Other/Missing
Intro to Psych (F)	No	33	17	10	1	2	3
Behavior Modification (F)	Yes	15	0	0	2	13	0
Personality (F)	No	7	0	0	4	3	0
Personality (F)	Yes	33	0	1	14	17	1
Child Psychology (S)	No	13	5	2	3	3	0
Child Psychology (S)	Yes	7	1	1	3	2	0
Tests & Measurements (S)	No	16	0	0	2	14	0
Intro to Psych (S)	Yes	31	11	10	7	3	0
TOTAL		155	34	24	36	57	4

F=Fall

S=Spring

B. Procedure.

Researchers divided classes into two groups for the purpose of this study. The experimental group included courses with a graded attendance policy, and the control group

included courses without a graded attendance policy. During each semester (fall and spring), researchers divided courses so that half of the courses fell in the experimental group and half in the control group. For the experimental group, researchers outlined the attendance policy, referred to as a “participation grade”, in the syllabus and explained this policy on the first day of class. The policy outlined the expectation that students would attend and participate in class and that they would earn credit toward the participation grade for each full class attended. Attendance (i.e., “participation”) accounted for 10% of the total course grade for this group. Researchers did not discuss attendance or participation with the control group. Researchers recorded individual attendance during each class period for both groups by passing around an attendance sheet at random times (e.g., beginning of class, after break, end of class). The control group received no explanation about why researchers were collecting attendance. At the end of each semester, researchers surveyed participants in both groups on their values regarding the importance of a college education and beliefs about attendance. Items included statements such as “Students who attend class regularly receive higher grades.” Researchers asked participants to respond to statements using a Likert-scale, from 1 (*Strongly Agree*) to 5 (*Strongly Disagree*).

III. Results.

A *t* test comparing the groups for variations in attendance revealed a significant difference, $t(130.399) = -3.56, p = 0.001$. The mean number of class sessions missed for students enrolled in the experimental group was 1.16 compared to 2.04 for the control group. Measures of effect size using Cohen’s *d* revealed a moderate association ($d = 0.56$) between graded attendance policies and attendance. Further analyses using *t* tests revealed no differences in attendance between men and women overall or within groups, nor did attendance differ between upper and lower classmen ($p > 0.01$).

Results from the survey revealed that 98% of participants agreed that having a college education is important, and 72% agreed they need a college education to be successful. Additionally, 77% agreed that students who attend class regularly will receive higher grades and that regular class attendance is necessary in order to be successful in college. The majority of respondents (53%) agreed that students who miss class will receive lower grades. However, a notable 22% of respondents disagreed with this statement, whereas 25% were undecided. In addition, 55% agreed it is important to attend every class in a given semester. Researchers also examined the number of absences believed to adversely affect student grades. The majority of respondents (81%) believed that missing one class would not have an adverse effect on their grades. Thirty-one percent agreed that missing two or three classes would not have an adverse effect on their grade, and an additional 21% were undecided. Only 9% believed that missing four or more classes would not adversely affect their grade.

When questioned about whether students believed missing a class is disrespectful to the instructor, responses varied (41% agreed, 24% were undecided, 35% disagreed). With regard to students’ preference for classes with or without attendance policies, only 35% of participants agreed they prefer classes with attendance policies, whereas 44% disagreed and 21% were undecided. When questioned about whether instructors should implement attendance policies in their courses, only 20% said they should. However, 71% said they were less likely to miss class in courses for which there is an attendance policy. In comparison, for courses without an attendance policy, 42% agreed they were more likely to miss class, 49% disagreed, and 9% were undecided.

IV. Discussion.

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the utility of graded attendance policies in undergraduate college courses. Specifically, does having a graded attendance policy increase attendance among college students? Results from this study indicated that graded attendance policies increased class attendance, which supports findings reported by Hancock (1994) and Hansen (1990). Given that Hancock (1994) studied students enrolled in statistic courses and Hansen (1990) studied business administration students, this study's focus on students enrolled in psychology courses lends support for the idea that the relationship between attendance and incentives generalizes across courses and majors.

In this study, on average, students enrolled in courses for which there was an attendance policy missed one class per semester compared to students enrolled in courses without a stated attendance policy who missed two classes per semester. These results are particularly interesting in light of findings from the survey designed to assess the educational values and beliefs of college students, the secondary purpose of this study. Results from the survey provide valuable data not gleaned in previous studies assessing the relationship between attendance and incentives (Clump, Bauer, and Whiteleather, 2003; Hancock, 1994; Hansen, 1990). Results suggest that whereas students recognized the relationship between attendance and higher grades, they did not believe instructors should have graded attendance policies. This finding reflects student knowledge of the importance of attendance while simultaneously illustrating their desire for choice and autonomy in educational decision-making. Despite students' responses to these results, this study suggests that having a graded attendance policy may serve as a motivator for increasing class attendance. Without an incentive, students may lack the intrinsic motivation to attend class on a regular basis. This possibility may be especially true of undergraduate populations who are typically younger and may view education as a means to an end as opposed to appreciating the inherent value of an education. It may be that older students attend classes more regularly and possess a higher degree of motivation although current findings did not support this hypothesis. Rather, results revealed no difference in attendance between upper and lower classmen. However, there may be a difference between undergraduate and graduate populations. For example, for purposes of comparison, students enrolled in a graduate psychology course during the same time period as this study had perfect attendance. Also, whereas although the majority of students acknowledge that they are less likely to miss class in courses for which there is an attendance policy, fewer students acknowledge they are more likely to miss class in courses where there is no attendance policy. In the absence of the graded attendance policy, there seems to be a difference between what students say they will do (i.e., attend class) and what they actually do (i.e., miss class). These findings suggest that students may discount the impact of graded attendance policies on their behavior despite evidence to the contrary.

The majority of respondents believe that missing one class will not adversely affect their grades, and many students do not believe or are unsure about whether missing two or even three classes will have an adverse effect on their grade. These findings suggest students may be unaware of the negative impact that missing class has on academic performance in college. It may be that undergraduate students lack the experience to understand fully the impact that missing class has on one's grades.

The majority of students agreed that "regular class attendance" is necessary for success in college, but definitions of regular class attendance vary greatly between and among individual

students and instructors. The large discrepancy in beliefs about what defines regular class attendance and at what point failure to attend class will adversely affect one's grade provides further support for the need for uniform graded attendance policies. In addition, results showed one third of participants reported they did not think it is disrespectful towards instructors to miss a class, as some instructors may perceive failure to attend class as disrespectful. Graded attendance policies, whether received positively or negatively by students, may provide the incentive needed to improve undergraduate college attendance. As instructors, it is necessary to provide structure and set proper expectations for achieving high grades. Regular class attendance may be a part of the necessary expectations set by instructors.

This study had several limitations. First, in order to track attendance in all courses for the purpose of this study, students in both the experimental and control groups signed a roll sheet. This procedure may have attenuated results given that students in the control group may have believed that, by being required to sign a roll sheet each class period, attendance was part of their grade, despite the absence of an actual attendance policy. As a result, students in the control group may have been absent less than would have been the case had their attendance been tracked in some other way. Shimoff and Catania (2001) studied this phenomenon. Their study examined the effects of recording attendance, which resulted in increased attendance and academic performance even without incentives. Support for the strength of these findings is provided by the fact that there was a significant difference between groups even in light of this phenomenon.

Another limitation has to do with environmental factors. During the fall semester of this study, several hurricanes hit the state in which the university is located. As a result, the university closed the campus for several days, and many students lost electricity and faced hurricane damage. The implications of the hurricanes may have been twofold. Initially, the hurricanes may have resulted in a higher rate of absenteeism due to mandatory evacuations, hurricane preparations, and the aftermath of the hurricanes. Subsequently, attendance may have inflated due to the fact that instructors had to condense the class semester and cover more material during each class session.

Several factors exist that may limit the generalizability of this study. First, this study was conducted at a university historically considered a commuter campus, which may have affected attendance rates. However, this likely did not have an effect on the findings in terms of the differences in attendance between the experimental and control groups. Second, men were underrepresented in this study and, although results revealed no gender differences with regard to attendance habits, the generalizability of findings may be suspect. Finally, like much of the research reviewed in this area, students enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses comprised the sample. Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether similar effects would be seen in courses outside the field of psychology or even outside the College of Arts and Sciences.

Future research should examine the factors underlying the discrepancy between students' intentions with regard to attendance and their behavior. In addition, researchers could study what incentives work best for increasing college attendance (e.g., percentage of grade, quiz points, ability to drop final, extra credit). Future studies also might examine the differences between "attendance" and "participation" as these terms, while related, represent distinct constructs. Finally, the psychological community would benefit from further examination of the differences in intrinsic motivation between undergraduate and graduate students in an effort to understand the factors that attribute to valuing one's education.

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