

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Student Attendance, Case by Case



Chronicle photo Illustration by Ted Benson

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PREMIUM

Two years ago, I entered my first college classroom as an instructor. I was determined to teach my new students the way I'd been taught: with rigorous expectations, including a strict attendance policy. My first-semester syllabus for classes that met twice a week allowed for two

absences total—excused or unexcused. After that, the student's final grade was lowered by half a letter for each additional absence. Miss six classes and you fail. No exceptions. At the time, that policy seemed more than fair.

Then my students began missing classes. Some missed their allotted two within the first month alone. I warned them, and warned them again, in an even sterner tone. Soon enough they started sharing their reasons for skipping class. A few had lame excuses, but many had legitimate obligations that made it difficult for them to attend. Often these involved having to work extra hours: to pay the mortgage, support families, raise children. These were people already working full-time and juggling heavy course loads, mind you. It was a far leap from my own undergraduate years as a full-time student whose main concerns were studying and partying.

There were other difficulties, too, ones that tugged at my sympathies. One student was an Iraq war veteran struggling with physical and psychological issues. He came to my office pale and baggy-eyed, begging me for extra work to make up for his absences. Another student got pregnant with twins. And then, three-quarters of the way through the semester, she miscarried. One young woman's boyfriend was killed, and she needed to testify in court. The list went on as the semesters progressed, my office becoming a

veritable maelstrom of human struggles.

I started informally polling my fellow instructors about their attendance policies. Some were similar to mine, though when I pressed them about penalties for missing more than the allowed number of classes, they often used the phrase "case-by-case basis"—which sounded like the mantra of ineffective pushovers. Some teachers had no attendance policy to speak of. "As long as the work gets turned in, that's all that matters" was a common refrain. If that's true, I thought, then what purpose do I serve? What value do students derive from the classroom experience?

Part of my job is to help students decode complex and nuanced pieces of literature. My lectures are not online. They are not available via Twitter. That information is disseminated only in class. Honestly, though, I lecture very little. I'm far more interested in class discussion and student participation. I feel my main role is not as an expert but rather as a facilitator of ideas. Each student in that room contributes to our pool of ideas. The students feed off me and off each other, and I off them. It is a symbiotic relationship that functions most organically in person, in real time.

In almost every class, I put my students into groups. They talk, formulate arguments, and debate one another. After all, they already know how to respond to me as the authority figure, an exercise in which a handful of them essentially attempt to read my mind, while others zone out or remain too intimidated to speak at all. I'm much more interested in getting them talking to one another. I'm mostly there to ask relevant questions, in the hope that they leave armed not with a set of irrefutable truths but as proficient interrogators of texts and ideas.

In class discussions, students hone their ability not only to identify an idea but also to express it compellingly, coherently, and calmly—even and especially in the face of other, often opposing, arguments. That is crucial for students as educated individuals and as participants in a democracy. In the classroom, while debating whether Hedda Gabler is a victim or victimizer, say, students are simultaneously learning fundamental rhetorical skills applicable to their lives as citizens. Studies have also linked active participation with successful learning, critical thinking, and degree completion.

Intellectually, I'm convinced of the need for students to be present for most classes. Emotionally, though, the water is murkier. Most of my students have sacrificed a lot to attend college. They are often the first in their families to pursue a degree, and they travel considerable distances each day (mine is an urban, commuter campus) between work and family and jobs to achieve their goal.

And their lives are complicated. A sick child does not care about her mom's rhetorical skills. An overdue mortgage has nothing to do with Henrik Ibsen. When I took an adjunct position teaching literature and composition, I fully intended to live by a clock-in/clock-out mentality. Teach my courses, grade my papers, go home, and get to my creative writing. I was naïve. Students come to office hours. They come outside office hours. They e-mail. They call. I've heard that some of them even text their professors, and their professors text back.

In other words, students are fellow human beings, and you have empathy for them when they struggle, the same way they do for you.

So what does this mean for my attendance policy? My standards have remained high, and most students rise to meet them. Yes, I currently allow three absences instead of two. But I won't budge past that number. They are in college. They should be in college. I now begin each semester with a short spiel on the value of attendance and participation. It ends with some tough love. "Here's what you should know about me," I say. "I require you to be present in this classroom. If you are a person who cannot commit to regular attendance, then please do us both a favor and seek out an instructor who will be a better fit."

After two years, my shift is not so much in policy as it is in perspective. If a student faces a crisis during the semester, I ask him or her to come up with a plan for how to make up the lost classroom time. Instead of doggedly sticking to my high-minded philosophies about what students must do, I put the responsibility in their hands. They take the lead, and together we solidify a plan of action.

Still, once in a blue moon, I make an all-out exception for a student. It turns out that "case-by-case basis" is not the mantra of pushovers but rather of those who teach in the

real world, with students whose lives are often full of more drama and complications than a well-crafted play.

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