

Reflection on Flexibility in Course Attendance Policies

The pandemic necessitated agile approaches to learning and teaching. Looking back, what alternative pathways to student engagement and learning did I find effective when meeting in-person was not possible? Looking ahead, can I continue to offer some flexibility with attendance while still ensuring that my students are able to accomplish the learning goals?

This four-step guide has been designed to foster further reflection on undergraduate attendance policies. It recognizes and affirms unique disciplinary approaches and the academic freedom to set appropriate parameters. It encourages instructors to consider attendance in relation to the learning objectives, to focus on the value of being present, and to utilize the syllabus as a roadmap for student success by providing transparency about expectations.

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Step 1: Review Attendance Policies with Learning Objectives in Mind

What is it that I want my students to be able to do, know and/or value by the end of course? In what ways might my attendance policies support or hinder those learning objectives? Use the following prompts to reflect on your beliefs about why attendance is important.

I believe that requiring students to attend class in-person...

- Promotes professional socialization; my students will be better prepared for the workforce
- Boosts classroom interaction; my students bring unique perspectives that enhance the learning experiences of other students

- Provides access to materials; my students cannot replicate the experience on their own
- Is essential for understanding the subject matter; my students will miss key information
- Improves performance on assessments; my students will be more academically successful

What evidence is there to support my beliefs? Studies have shown a positive, albeit weak, correlation between in-person attendance and grades (see for example, Gump [2010](#); Credé et al., [2010](#); Kassarnig et al., [2017](#)). For nontraditional and for underperforming students, consistent class attendance increases opportunities to access technology, mentorship, and cultural capital (Harackiewicz, et al., [2016](#)). Interestingly, when Gerald and Brady ([2019](#)) empowered students to set policy, most imposed a system that penalized absenteeism and rewarded consistent attendance. Of course, “Simply because students who get better grades are also more likely to be students who come to class does not mean that making students come to class will result in better grades” (Golding, [2011](#), p. 42). Attendance may be less predictive of academic performance than other explanatory variables like motivation (St. Claire, [1999](#)), active learning (Freeman et al., [2014](#)), and engagement (Buechele, [2020](#)).

It is important to note that the studies above were conducted pre-pandemic before massive scale training in multi-modal educational technology, including lecture capture and synchronous engagement through Zoom. Instructors can continue to leverage technology to mitigate the potentially negative impact on learning when in-person attendance is not possible. For example, asynchronous interaction on a [discussion board](#) can provide continuity for absent students and it allows students who are in-class more time to reflect and craft their responses, which promotes deeper thinking and more thoughtful synthesis of ideas and perspectives.

I believe that attendance policies should be flexible because...

- Fewer students will come to class sick, which minimizes future absences and contributes to improved public health conditions
- Students should be entrusted with the responsibility for their own education and be treated as adults who can make their own decisions about time management
- Requiring unmotivated students to attend increases disruptions and discourtesies
- If students can achieve the learning goals without attending, they should not be penalized
- A high-quality recording of my lecture can be an adequate substitute for the student who needs to miss class and can be shared with all students in the class to enhance

student understanding, accommodate diverse learning styles, provide flexible access, serve as a valuable revision tool, and ensure consistent and comprehensive coverage of course material. See Northwestern's [Policy on Recording Classes](#) and [Recording Recommendations](#).

Do I really want a student who has demonstrated a high level of proficiency on the assessments to receive a much lower grade due to a few missed classes (Harrington & Thomas, [2018](#), p. 73)? Factoring attendance into the course grade may “[contaminate](#)” student assessment, making it a less accurate measure of student achievement. Moore ([2005](#)) found that penalties did not improve rates of attendance but did have a negative impact on passing rates in his course.

Step 2: Focus on the Value of Being Present

Can I replace the “stick” of required attendance with “carrots”? What aspects of my teaching and course design will motivate students to be enthusiastic about coming to class?

- I come to class prepared, which signals my investment in student success; I set high expectations that stem from a mindset of excellence, and hold students accountable as a way to improve performance (Martin, [2019](#))?
- I engage students, stress the importance of their contributions, and ensure alignment between information presented and knowledge assessed (St. Clair, [1999](#)).
- I set aside class time for students to ask questions and to work collaboratively.
- I utilize [Classroom Assessment Techniques \(CATs\)](#) to gauge students’ ability to apply their learning and to identify gaps in understanding.
- I convey my passion for teaching and my mission to ignite students’ curiosity and interest in the subject matter of my discipline; I encourage students to take intellectual risks and provide support as they pursue their educational goals (see also Palmer, [2018](#)).

Step 3: Provide Transparency about the Important Attendance Policy Details

Ultimately, decisions about absences, missed assignments, and the impact on grades falls under your purview as the instructor. Specificity reduces the workload of having to mediate case-by-case. Students can more easily avoid missteps with clarity of expectations. We encourage you to use the following checklist to assess the transparency of your attendance policies. Have I done all that I can to reveal and help my students [navigate the hidden curriculum](#)?

- Stated the number of classes that can be missed without penalty and whether there is a certain number of absences that will result in a lowered or failing grade (Note: In the case of extended absences, instructors should reach out to the [Key Advisor contact](#) for the student's school, who may be aware of other issues the student is facing and who can coordinate outreach from the student's advisor and next steps with [Student Assistance and Support Service](#))
- Defined what constitutes an excused absence, such as religious observance ([Provost's Statement](#)), an illness, injury, bereavement, family emergency, or other compelling circumstances beyond the control of the student
- Specified any documentation requirements if needed (Note: The NU Health Service does not write "[excuse notes](#)" but will verify that a student has been seen for a medical problem with a signed release of information)
- Outlined communication expectations including timing for students if they miss class. In place of words like "promptly" substitute specifics like "Please email me within 48 hours to discuss potential solutions to any missed classes or work. If that is not possible..."
- Explained whether and how students with an excused absence can makeup missed experiences or assessments or provided a rationale if/when it is not possible or alternatively, placed the responsibility on the student to devise a plan for catching up
- Established length of any due date extensions or timeframes for completing missed work
- Discussed common attendance practices with colleagues and the potential value of setting some attendance parameters that are broad enough to safeguard faculty autonomy
- Ensured consistency with established [policies](#) at the academic unit, school, or university level; inquired about modifying standardized language to better represent my voice
- Included the [required syllabus statements](#) from the Office of the Registrar
- Considered the Tone; Am I leading with punitive contractual language about rule violations that may trigger student anxiety and damage rapport? How can I make my syllabus more [learner-centered](#) by pulling back the curtain on the rationale behind my policies?

As Cheney ([2016](#)) explains, "It doesn't require being a genius teacher, it just requires remembering that students are human beings, and that we ought to be compassionate toward each other and treat each other as we, ourselves, would like to be treated. It really is as simple as starting from there. Don't be scary on your syllabus or in your classroom. Don't be cruel."

Step 4: Mine Sample Syllabus Statements for Language that Resonates with You

Benefits: The following is a list of reasons that I hope will encourage you to make a commitment to attending our class. I will present ideas worth coming for in every session. Our discussions will be thought-provoking, richly interactive, and will enhance your sense of belonging to our learning community. Material will be introduced in lectures that cannot be found anywhere in your readings. Equally important, what we do in class will help you process material. There will be occasional in-class bonus quizzes that are opportunities to earn extra points on the exam. I will go over the instructions for upcoming projects, answer any questions that you have, and point out common mistakes to avoid. With certain projects it is a requirement that you share your findings in class. Attendance is also a vital component of your participation grade, and in my experience students who earn high grades have attended class on a consistent basis.

Well-Being: Please know that you are not alone. I recognize that stressful life events, such as death in the family, may impact your ability to attend class. Mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression are also common, and can interfere with a student's ability to concentrate, to actively engage, and to complete assignments. I strongly encourage you to reach out for support from NU's Counseling and Psychological Services on the [Evanston](#) and [Chicago](#) campuses, which offers a range of services, including phone or virtual appointments, referrals, crisis support, and ongoing psychiatric services and medication management. (Followed by NU's Support for Wellness and Mental Health [Statement](#)).

If you have difficulties in obtaining winter weather gear, food security, if you are in need Undocumented/DACA Support, NU's [Student Enrichment Services](#) can help you access campus resources. If your ability to attend class is ever impeded in anyway, I hope that you will feel comfortable reaching out to me so that I can help ensure that you continue to make progress towards achieving your academic goals.

Accommodations: Please know that as an inclusive educator, I honor your place in our learning community. I am committed to partnering to remove barriers student engagement and learning and to being proactive in creating a positive and accessible learning environment that supports the academic success of all students. If your established accommodations

with [AccessibleNU](#) include flexible attendance policies, we can discuss appropriate adjustments, such as the number of allowable absences and alternative ways for you to engage so that you can maximize the educational benefits of the course (Followed by the [Accessibility Statement](#)).

Ways to Stay Engaged: If you cannot attend, you can stay engaged (and receive partial participation points) if you send your thoughts on the reading in advance, which I will share with the members of our class, and if you complete the collaborative learning activities on your own. After class, check on Canvas about what you missed, including important announcements, review the material, including any lecture recordings, which will be important for successfully completing your projects. I invite students to exchange contact information on the first day, so that you can connect with your fellow students for more information about what we covered.

Extended Absences: Don't Just Disappear. While it is not necessary for you to notify me or to provide official documentation for the occasional absence, I do need to be kept apprised of any extended absences. If you are suffering from a prolonged illness, a personal or family crisis, or if other circumstances are causing you to fall behind, I urge you to email me as soon as you can to discuss the possibility of an extension so that you can do your best work. I also encourage you to reach out to your academic advisor who can connect you with resources for students facing complex issues, crises and other barriers that impede academic success.

Recommended Reading

- Center for Urban Education. (2017). Syllabus review guide for equity minded practice.
- Gannon, Kevin. (2018) How to Create a Syllabus. The Chronicle of Higher Education.
- Emily, M. (2020). Why Attendance Policies Hurt Disabled and Chronically Ill Students. The Mighty.
- Harrington, C., & Thomas, M. (2018). Designing a motivational syllabus: Creating a learning path for student engagement. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

How to Cite this Guide

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We are here for you. As you engage in ongoing reflection about ways to enhance teaching and deepen student learning, The Searle Center offers thought partnership and support. Check our [calendar of events](#) or [schedule a consultation](#).