

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF COLLEGE ATTENDANCE REGULATIONS

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Dissatisfaction with existing attendance regulations in colleges is common. Changes are often prompted by expediency and result in temporary patchwork. When a complete revision of policy is contemplated, there is a need for a broad understanding of the educational implications of the prevailing systems designed to control class attendance in colleges. . . .

Previous studies indicate there are four systems of attendance regulations currently in operation in American colleges. They have been defined as the No-Cut System, the Cut Allowance System, the Unlimited Cut System and the Multiple System.

The No-Cut System requires that students attend all their classes. Any absence must be justified to the proper authorities. Violations of the regulations would result in some form of disciplinary action.

The Cut Allowance System grants a student the privilege of not attending a certain number of classes per semester. An explanation of these absences is not required unless the total figure eventually exceeds the amount permitted by the rules. Most colleges which utilize this system sometimes make exceptions for students on the Probation or Dean's Lists, but grant the same absence privileges for most students. A few institutions make differentiations in their absence policy on the basis of a student's scholastic average.

The Unlimited Cut System makes each student responsible for his own attendance in class. Although the statement is made or implied that regular attendance in class is important, coercion by the administration or faculty is not considered proper. It is hoped that the intrinsic value to be derived from attendance in class will provide a student sufficient motivation to be present.

The Multiple System allows the individual instructor or his department to decide the number of class absences permitted each student. Since instructors may employ very diverse practices ranging from no cuts to unlimited ones, "multiple" has semantic accuracy. Instructors may handle the disciplining of violators of their own regulations themselves. However, they are often encouraged to refer students whose absences are deemed excessive to the college dean or guidance counselor.

There are many different methods of dealing with students who violate attendance regulations. The most common penalty for excessive absences is loss of credit for the course. Other ways of treating infractions of the rules include lowering a student's grade, taking away quality points which he has earned, increasing the number of semester hours or quality points required for his graduation, placing him on probation, levying a financial fine against him, taking away his absence privileges in all his courses, giving him extra assignments or requiring him to obtain private tutoring in lieu of the classes he missed.

A college concerned with formulating attendance regulations in terms of its educational objectives might wish to weigh the different systems in terms of these criteria:

1. Effect on class attendance
2. Effect on scholarship
3. Effect on instruction
4. Effect on the physical and mental health of students
5. Effect on morale and inter-personal relations
6. The development of responsible citizenship in a democracy
7. Effect on character development
8. The responsibility of the institution to outside individuals and groups
9. Administrative practicality and efficiency

1. Effect on Class Attendance: Many students will attend classes regularly regardless of the attendance system existing in the college. The system which allows the fewest absences and is most strictly enforced will ordinarily be most successful in controlling class absences. Students will usually miss approximately as many classes as they are permitted within the limits of the regulations. Absenteeism on days directly prior to and following holidays is very high in most colleges unless deliberately discouraged by strong penalties. There is not always a positive relationship between the severity of a penalty for violating attendance regulations and the extent of absenteeism in a college, since the more severe the penalty, the less willingness usually exists on the part of the administrator or instructor to impose it.

2. Effect on Scholarship: Scholarship is here interpreted in the broad sense. All the students, not merely a select few, are to be given the maximum opportunity to improve their knowledge and skills.

Although there have been several studies devoted to this question, a true causal relationship between class attendance and a student's measured scholastic achievement has not been found. However, the effect of class attendance on scholarship cannot be accurately measured. A student may gain knowledge, skills and attitudes for which there are inadequate testing instruments. The stimulation of a good class discussion, the opening up of new interests by the professor, the interchange of ideas with other students and the value of working with classmates on committees are matters which are not usually covered by examination and yet have a direct bearing on the scholarship of students. There may be many times when a student can obtain a more worthwhile educational experience outside the class room, such as on field trips and other special events. Objection, however, is raised to the oft-repeated argument that a student would benefit more by studying for an examination in another subject than by attending a particular class. This often means that the student wants to memorize quickly some material which should previously have been learned more thoroughly, and which will be almost completely forgotten in another week.

The penalty of exclusion from class prevents a student from receiving the benefits of further instruction. Its serious effect on an individual's morale interferes with the student's accomplishment in other courses. At the opposite extreme, the very absence of a penalty other than that inherent in the situation, can be detrimental to a student's scholarly development as it may delude him into assuming that if his mark is not affected by an absence, he may not have missed a valuable learning experience. He is often influenced thereby to miss more class periods.

3. Effect on Instruction: Irregular class attendance makes it difficult for an instructor to plan his classes to the best interests of his students. If he wants to meet the special needs of certain students on a particular date, he may find his plans frustrated by these students' not appearing in class; or again, he may wish to hold a demonstration which would be most effective if all students participated, and again find many of them not present. Sometimes it is necessary to repeat material for those who were absent or adequate learning in future sessions will not take place. This, of course, is unfair to those students whose attendance has been regular. Student tardiness is another disruptive element to instruction. There is a marked trend in colleges today to emphasize learning as a group experience in which students have an obligation to contribute to the class. In such situations, regular and prompt attendance is necessary.

In the Unlimited Cut System an instructor can judge to some extent the value students attach to his teaching by the comparative amount of absenteeism from his classes. To secure good attendance, he must make his lessons interesting and worth while. Some instructors feel, however, that the system forces them to overemphasize subject matter which is dramatic and sensational, but lacks real scholarly value.

4. Effect on Physical and Mental Health: When students need to justify their absences, the Health Office is in a favorable position to check on their physical well being. Thus students become better acquainted with the college's health facilities and the medical staff has the opportunity not only to detect health defects but to teach hygiene by personal, informal conferences.

Since irregular attendance in class is so frequently symptomatic of emotional difficulties, there is advantage to a system which centralizes control in the Office of Student Personnel. An attendance counselor, properly trained in the psychology of personal adjustment and counseling techniques, is in a favorable position to investigate the causes of a student's absences and offer help when needed. According to Neidlinger, when the Multiple System is used, instructors rarely even inquire about the causes of a student's absence, much less attempt to understand if the absence represents a serious problem which needs skilled treatment. Colleges using the Unlimited Cut System in particular miss many opportunities to help students because instructors fail either to note excessive absences or to report them to the Office of Student Personnel.

Penalties forcing students to attend classes can adversely affect the mental hygiene program of a college. These external pressures develop feelings of anxiety and hostility in the student. Discipline, which is primarily educative and not punitive, should be tailored to meet the needs of the particular individual concerned. This calls for a provision for some flexibility in the enforcement of attendance regulations.

5. Effect on Character Development: Advocates of regulations designed to control class absences often maintain that this is a proper way to inculcate regular work habits and develop a sense of responsibility toward oneself and others. The assumption exists that a student who learns to attend classes regularly and punctually in college will continue this behavior in other situations. There is no experimental evidence to this effect, but it is educationally sound for an instructor to teach students the largest applications of their experiences, thereby helping them to develop attitudes and characteristics which will be beneficial to their future welfare.

If students are afforded too much control by the faculty or administration, they will not learn to take responsibility for themselves. They may not be ready for complete freedom and if given this too early in their college career, they may do irreparable damage to themselves. Many students entering college need supervision, but controls should be relaxed in accord with their ability and willingness to take responsibility for themselves.

The influence of the different attendance systems on the ethical and moral values of the students deserves careful consideration. Students in most colleges find they can circumvent the rules with ease and this often becomes a socially approved game. The laxity of the faculty and sometimes even the attendance counselors or deans in following the regulations faithfully provides a poor example in law enforcement. Falsification of excuses occurs so frequently that instructors and attendance counselors are suspicious of even bona fide explanations. The resultant atmosphere of distrust between some students and their instructors or the attendance counselor is a poor breeding ground for the development of ethical values. Nevertheless, removing all regulations would not solve the problem as people must learn to conform to rules even if they find them distasteful.

The penalties for excessive absences will be injurious to character development if they are too severe, are not enforced uniformly, and do not consider student needs.

6. Effect on Morale and Inter-Personal Relations: Considerable feelings of hostility often develop among the faculty, students and members of the Office of Student Personnel as the result of the administration of the No-Cut and Cut-Allowance Systems. Students resent particularly penalties which are severe and interfere with their academic progress. More satisfaction with the regulations seems to exist in those colleges which utilize the Multiple System although students are sometimes annoyed and critical of instructors who require attendance and these faculty members resent the comparison with their more lenient colleagues. While the Unlimited Cut System is the least prevalent in colleges, it creates less discontent among all the groups than the other systems, according to Reveley's study. However, many instructors express concern with the amount of absenteeism which it permits and often wish they had some method to enforce more regular class attendance.

7. The Development of Responsible Citizenship in a Democracy: Studies indicate that a citizenship training program should include these aims: the improvement of scholarship; the development of self-discipline; the strengthening of a respect for law and order; the will to contribute to the group and to consider the rights of others; the inculcation of regular work habits; the achievement of ethical ideals and the moral strength to live by them; the maintenance of physical and mental health; the advancement of morale and friendly inter-personal relations. The manner in which the different systems for controlling class attendance and their accompanying penalties affect these aims has already been discussed.

8. The Responsibility of the Institution to Outside Individuals and Groups: A private collegiate institution owes its existence to the support of many individuals and groups including the students' parents, the Veterans Administration, Selective Service Boards, the alumni and the Board of Trustees. In return it is charged with these responsibilities which are related to attendance

regulations: (1) to give the student the best opportunity to obtain a worthwhile education and (2) to account for the whereabouts of all its students.

In order to carry out the first requirement, colleges have the moral responsibility to encourage regular class attendance. This does not mean that a college must adopt a rigid system of attendance control or place any set limit on class absences, but it must prevent students from abusing their freedom.

The second obligation requires instructors to take attendance with some degree of regularity and to report students whose absences are excessive to a central office. This procedure can theoretically be accomplished under any of the attendance systems, but it is most likely to obtain in the No-Cut and Cut-Allowance Systems.

9. Administrative Practicality and Efficiency: [Discussion of the No-Cut and Unlimited-Cut Systems has been deleted, because they do not seem to be real alternatives for Inter American University at the present time.]

Advantages of the Cut-Allowance System in Terms of Administrative Practicality and Efficiency

1) Uniformity: The responsibility for the administration of this system usually rests with one person. The rules are the same for all students and are carried out in accordance with one philosophy.

2) Opportunity to account for all students: Attendance slips or exclusion forms are sent to a central office and are examined by an administrator or guidance counselor who is responsible for the student's welfare. This centralization makes it less possible for students to disappear from the institution without the college's knowledge.

3) Availability of student records: The attendance counselor has access to a student's permanent record and personnel folder. He has available information as to whether a student has previously violated the rules or requires any special consideration. He is able to see a student's violation of a regulation as part of a total behavior pattern, not an isolated experience.

4) Counseling opportunities: Ideally the attendance counselor should be trained in student personnel work. He would then be in a good position to determine if excessive absences indicate serious maladjustment and to take appropriate action.

Disadvantages of the Cut-Allowance System in Terms of the Criterion

1) The system, to operate efficiently, is too time-consuming and expensive.

2) Faculty co-operation is difficult to obtain. If this is not achieved, the system will inevitably fail.

3) A workable system of penalties presents a difficult problem. If the penalties are light, students may weigh their contemplated actions against the penalty and choose to suffer the consequences rather than follow the regulations of the college. If the penalties are too severe, attendance counselors and instructors may decide not to enforce them because of their dire effect on the students.

Advantages of the Multiple System in Terms of Administrative Practicality and Efficiency

This system relieves the instructors and central office of considerable bookkeeping and detail work. Since to instructors is delegated the chief responsibility for its control, reports to a central office are unnecessary except for those relatively few cases which require special attention. Instructors are required to spend no more time than is necessary to administer the particular system of their own choice and are at liberty to revise the regulations or drop them entirely.

Disadvantages of the Multiple System in Terms of the Criterion

- 1) The system lacks uniformity. Variations in the attendance regulations and their administration produce different standards of conduct and different methods of determining violations. Some confusion is inevitable.
- 2) The central office is unable to obtain an accurate check on class attendance. Instructors keep their own records, if any, and rarely report students for excessive absences.
- 3) Instructors are less likely to have material sufficient for making a sound judgment regarding a student's violation of attendance regulations. They usually do not have available the resources of the Student Personnel Office and rarely take the time to learn the reasons for a student's absence.
- 4) The system does not make full use of the college's counseling facilities. Instructors frequently fail to recognize the extent of maladjustment which underlies the absences of some students and neglect to notify the Guidance Office.

THE PROCESS OF CHANGING THE REGULATIONS

A college which is continually mindful of achieving its educational objectives will be as much concerned with the procedure for changing attendance regulations as with the regulations themselves. The question arises as to whether revisions in the present policy should be made entirely by the faculty and administration or should be evolved with student participation. The implications of allowing students a voice in formulating regulations will be considered in terms of those criteria previously mentioned which are applicable.

1. Effect on Class Attendance: Students, if they share in the making of policy, will want to see it work and will take steps themselves to see that class attendance does not suffer.

2. Effect on Scholarship: Students learn best from direct experience. If they participate in a democratic procedure, they will understand it better than reading about Democracy in the abstract in a textbook. Critical thinking, effectiveness in written and spoken expression and other skills basic to scholarship can be improved in this manner.

3. Effect on Mental Health: Students who are displeased and frustrated by attendance regulations will have a constructive outlet for their tension if permitted by the college authorities to express themselves and make suggestions for improvement. Respectful attention to their viewpoint, even if it is not acceptable, is a form of group therapy.

4. Effect on Character Development: Students working with administrators and faculty members on problems related to the common good have an excellent opportunity for learning ethical values through discussion of concrete situations. Mature individuals can set for others an example of the practice of a sound philosophy and by their consideration for others at joint student-faculty committee meetings teach traits of character in a meaningful way. Students who are given the opportunity to share in these activities should, with proper guidance, show growth in self-responsibility.

5. Effect on Morale and Inter-Personal Relations: The ideas of all groups must be considered in order to maintain morale on a high level. When people of different backgrounds and attitudes work together on common problems, mutual friendliness and respect usually follow.

6. The Development of Responsible Citizenship in a Democracy: Students must be trained to become responsible citizens by participation in their own affairs. They cannot be suddenly entrusted with policy making if they lack previous experience. They must be prepared for it. The responsibility for developing this readiness lies with the administration and the faculty.

CONCLUSION

A recommendation for a particular system of attendance control has been purposely avoided. There is no perfect scheme for controlling class absences. Each college must periodically determine its own policy by weighing the implications of each change in the system and the system as a whole against its own clearly defined educational policy. Each college should re-examine its educational philosophy and all phases of its program. For maximum effectiveness, the services of experts in evaluation proceedings as well as the help of the entire faculty, student body and even outside interested groups such as parents and citizens from the community, should be enlisted.

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