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Title: A Comparison of Faculty and Student Perceptions of Acceptable Reasons for Class Absence

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A Comparison of Faculty and Student Perceptions of Acceptable Reasons for Class Absence

Poster Presentation Proposal

Researchers have found that students with higher grades and overall grade point averages (GPAs) also have higher rates of class attendance. Recognizing the relevance of attendance to academic success, faculty and university administrators alike address class attendance in almost every syllabus, college and university catalogs, and freshman orientation. College professors have initiated their own approaches in an effort to increase class attendance. Some faculty offer bonus grade points as incentives. Others include attendance as a part of the overall course grade. In a recent effort to increase class attendance and hopefully raise GPAs, one university hired an “educational enforcer” whose job description is to “intimidate” lower GPA students who miss class into improved class attendance and performance.

Occasionally circumstances interfere with a student’s class attendance and faculty must then evaluate the validity of the absence. University administrators set policies for absences that are excused and detail required documentation to substantiate the validity of the absence. Accepting excuses beyond those deemed acceptable by administration, however, is then left to the discretion of faculty creating a plethora of differing perceptions by faculty and students in assessing the appropriateness of the absence.

This study focuses on identifying and comparing faculty and student perceptions of class absence. Students (n=226), ranging in age from 18 to 44 years, were recruited from undergraduate psychology courses in an urban, historically Black university in the mid-South. The majority of participants classified themselves as Juniors and represented a variety of majors including Nursing, Criminal Justice, and Psychology. The

participants' mean grade point average was 2.88 (SD =.3507). Faculty (n=36) were recruited across departments within the School of Education. Faculty ranged in rank from adjunct professor to full professor representing degrees from masters to doctoral with a mean teaching experience of 16.033 (SD=12.01) years.

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire with questions geared for either the student or faculty group. All participants completed an 86-item survey based upon a survey constructed by Sleigh, Ritzer, and Casey (2002) and modified by researchers to include additional items. [A complete description of this process can be found in the study.] Each of the items was rated as either an acceptable or not acceptable reason for missing class. The survey also addressed the importance of various reasons for attending class, the relationship of attendance and final grade, and the importance of explaining one's absence to the faculty. Students were asked to rank six reasons for class attendance (1=most important to 6=least important). Using a Likert-like scale (strongly agree=1, agree=2, neutral=3, disagree=4, and strongly disagree=5), participants rated how the final grade relates to class attendance. Finally participants rated the importance of explaining one's absence to the faculty member by using a 5-point Likert-like scale ranging from 1=very important to 5=very unimportant.

Reasons for absence were categorized by the researchers into the following areas: illness, family issues, work conflicts, commitments to other classes, issues with friends, and transportation/car problems. Faculty and student participants indicated that a more serious illness (e.g., flu, surgery) was a statistically acceptable reason for class absence. In contrast, less serious physical problems (e.g., headache, fatigue, allergies) were rated not acceptable. Statistical agreement was found as to the acceptableness of more serious

family issues (e.g., funerals, child being ill) by faculty and students while indicating that family scheduling problems were not acceptable.

Greater disparity in rating reasons for absence was found in the areas of work conflict and other class conflicts. Acceptable rating of work conflicts (e.g., unexpectedly called into work and having worked the night before) was higher for students than for faculty. Being held up at a meeting was rated significantly less acceptable by faculty than students [$t=2.708$ (109), $p<.01$]. As might be expected, faculty found absence from class to be unacceptable when the student was completing work for another class. Of the six reasons making up the “Commitments to other classes” category, there were significant differences in the ratings of four items:

appointment with another professor	$t=3.005(107), p<.01$
studying for a test in another class	$t=2.092(107), p<.01$
writing a paper for another class	$t=2.504(107), p<.01$
make-up exam for another class	$t=3.138(107), p<.01$

Of the nine items comprising the transportation/car problem category, there was agreement by both faculty and students on the acceptability of only three of the items: an accident/detour, cancelled/delayed flight, and car was vandalized. Seven other items (e.g., ride was late, couldn't find parking) were rated as unacceptable reasons for missing class by faculty.

The final category related to friends. Developmentally, the importance of friends to the college student would suggest that students would rate the acceptability of the items in this category higher than faculty. Surprisingly, faculty and students rated all

items in a very similar manner indicating that students are more able to discern if a reason within this category is acceptable or unacceptable for missing class.

Students ranked the amount of class material expected to be on the exam as the most important reason for attending class. In contrast, faculty rankings of the six items were neutral. Analysis of the relationship of final grade and attendance resulted in a student mean of 2.6400 (SD=1.342) and a faculty mean of 2.3714 (SD=.8075) both approximately half-way between “neutral” and “agree.” This outcome suggests that faculty and students have some belief in the relationship between attendance and final grade. Students indicated an understanding of the importance of communicating with one’s faculty member after being absent. The mean of student ratings was 1.80 (SD=.8699) on a five point scale with 1=very important, 2=important, 3=neutral, 4=unimportant, and 5=very unimportant. Students assigned a slightly higher level of importance to communicating excuses than faculty (M=2.0857, SD=1.1725).

It would seem that despite administration’s attempts to impose policies to define excused and unexcused absences both faculty and students alike view classroom absences as a complex issue. Faculty members appear to struggle more with students prioritizing of commitments to other classes more than outside conflicts. This suggests that the examination of the relationship of time management to the appropriateness of excuses merits future investigation.