

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

Time to Make Your Mandatory-Attendance Policy Optional?



By Joe Gerald and Benjamin Brady | JANUARY 13, 2019

Pretty much all faculty members agree that attending class is critical for students to learn. Where we differ is on what, if anything, we should do to get students in their seats.

Many instructors think a mandatory-attendance policy is the way to go, arguing that it holds students accountable and prepares them for future employment. Others favor a laissez-faire approach that treats students as self-regulating adults by forgoing attendance checks that can disrupt the classroom experience.

While both positions have merit, they create a false dichotomy — that instructors should either mandate attendance or have no policy at all. Such reasoning implies that faculty members cannot simultaneously respect students' autonomy *and* structure course policies to compel attendance.

Students seem to share that dichotomous view. Multiple surveys have shown that undergraduates tend to dislike a mandatory-attendance policy but admit they would miss class more frequently without one. Similarly, most students think that regularly attending class improves their grades but also believe that it is ultimately their decision whether or not to attend.

As instructors of a large, required, upper-division course for public-health majors, we think we've found a middle ground that is supported by recent theories of human behavior:

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- In their 2003 essay, "Libertarian Paternalism Is Not an Oxymoron," Cass R. Sunstein and Richard H. Thaler outlined a framework for how to structure policies to encourage, but not force, people to make better choices.
- In his 2011 book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Daniel Kahneman said people are guided by two processes in making decisions: an emotive, reactionary one that favors immediate gratification, the

consequences be damned (fast), and a rational, deliberative one that is willing to make immediate sacrifices in return for long-term rewards (slow).

- In their 2014 book, *Think Like a Freak*, Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner offered concrete suggestions on how to reward desired behaviors like classroom attendance. For example, instructors should not be offended when students invariably attempt to "game the system," but rather acknowledge their ingenuity, close identified loopholes, and move on.

Before applying those principles in our classroom, we used extra credit to incentivize, but not mandate, attendance. However, simply providing extra credit wasn't enough to yield consistent attendance. In hindsight, our policy was missing a crucial piece: an upfront commitment from students that could not easily be broken.

Growing tired of lecturing to a half-filled auditorium, we tried a different approach: Give students a choice of policies.

We asked them to pick one of two attendance policies — the old "optional" one, which offered extra-credit incentives to encourage attendance, or a new "mandatory" one that would reward consistent attendance but penalize frequent absences.

On the first day of class, we shared data substantiating a link between attendance and course performance. Then we explained the behavioral principles that informed our new policy and encouraged students to select it. We cautioned them that their choice,

once made, could not be undone.

By approaching students early in the semester, we hoped to engage their slow, deliberative thought process, allowing them to view regular attendance as a sacrifice worth making to achieve a good grade. Students who selected the new policy would be well positioned to defeat their fast, emotional thought process on those days when doing literally anything other than attending class would seem worth it in the moment.

By deducting course points for frequent absences, the new mandatory policy provided a stronger incentive than the old one, which only rewarded attendance but didn't include penalties for skipping. Students who selected the new policy and who missed fewer than three class meetings would earn a 15-point reward, and those who missed more than seven would suffer a 10-point penalty. Meanwhile, students who selected the old policy could earn up to a 10-point reward but could never be penalized for missing class. Overall, the incentives were small relative to the 500 points they could earn in the entire course.

Given a choice, students overwhelmingly selected the mandatory attendance policy. In fact, in the five semesters since we adopted this approach, 85 percent of our students have chosen the mandatory policy — revealing their desire to hold themselves accountable for attending class regularly.

The new policy has had an immediate and drastic impact: no more half-filled auditoriums. Under the old policy, class attendance averaged 51 percent. Since we began offering students a choice, attendance has averaged 88 percent. Not surprisingly, that increase was driven by 92-percent attendance among the large number of students who had chosen the mandatory policy. It seems to have had a spillover effect, though, since attendance has also improved — to 71 percent, on average — among students who had picked the old policy.

Why has our new policy been so successful? We suspect it's because we obtained an upfront commitment from students — one that is difficult for them to break because they have chosen it knowing the potential penalty.

Despite the markedly improved attendance, we did not observe any major differences in

how students performed in the course — with one important caveat. Students who picked the optional policy were nearly three times as likely to earn a grade of D or F as those who chose the mandatory one. That is consistent with the findings of a 2010 study that concluded that the greatest benefits of mandatory attendance accrue to at-risk students.

Students' response has been overwhelmingly positive. In our class surveys, 95 percent have said they were satisfied with their choice, 86 percent liked having a choice, and only 5 percent recommended we return to the optional policy for everyone.

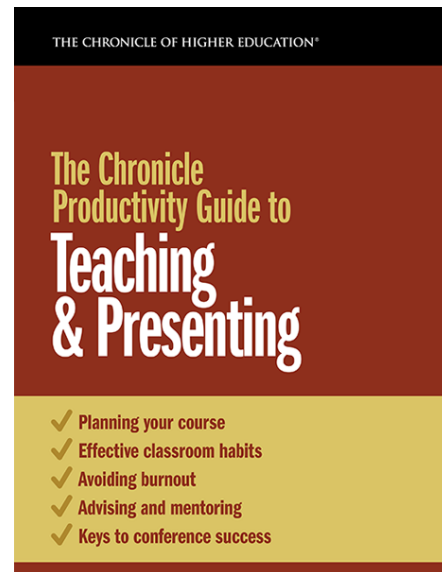
Most students believe the mandatory policy had a positive influence on them.

"I went to class more than I would have," wrote one student, "and I feel like going to class helped me decipher more of the important aspects [the instructor] wanted to focus on."

Nevertheless, a few outliers still expressed negative views, as exemplified by the student who wrote, "Professors that insist on having attendance policies are disrespecting the students by forcing them to attend their class. If the class is interesting and well taught, there should be no need."

The process hasn't been without a few snags. Our initial rollout of the policy was a bit clumsy and caused problems for ourselves and our students. We originally required students to sign in with their teaching assistant at the beginning of class but quickly

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recognized that many students were gaming the system by signing in — and then leaving.

So we added a sign-out requirement at the end of class. But that caused students to queue after dismissal.

Now we ask students to sign in with their TA, and we use a seating chart to mark attendance at dismissal. That process seems to work well, as it obliges students to interact regularly with their TAs, allows students to exit class unimpeded, and makes it difficult for anyone to game the system.

Nontraditional students — particularly older ones with children or work commitments — appreciate having an attendance choice that allows them to manage conflicts that invariably arise in their busy lives without the risk of academic penalty. For example, students who know they are at risk of future, unplanned absences for work or personal reasons can select the optional policy without fear of being penalized if they can't attend class.

Nevertheless, our attendance ritual still disrupts class and adds a burden to an already harried teaching team. In that regard, we have not been able to resolve all of the concerns raised by those who view taking a daily roll as unnecessarily burdensome. For us, the trade-off seems worth it, and we would encourage other instructors to consider our approach.

When given a choice, most students will choose to impose on themselves a system that rewards consistent attendance and penalizes absenteeism. Making mandatory attendance optional is a mechanism that allows instructors to treat their students "like adults" and to encourage, but not force, them to make decisions that they themselves believe are in their own best interest.

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