

Compulsory Attendance Policies: An Interesting Finding

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1/3/2017

Previous research and firsthand experience for most of us verify that attendance in class improves performance. Many of our students would still like to believe otherwise, but the positive relationship between attendance and performance reported in the research is robust and long-standing.

In a good example of research that goes beyond replicating what is well established, a group of business faculty members explored the attendance-performance connection in a more nuanced way. They studied the effects of a compulsory attendance policy on absenteeism and grades, as others have, but they looked specifically at the relationship for high- and low-achieving students.

The study was conducted in two business courses—a managerial communication course and a management information systems course. Across multiple sections of each of these courses, students were in classes with either a simple attendance policy that stated “Just as in business, you are expected to be present and on time every day,” or a compulsory policy that stipulated a course grade penalty for every three class sessions missed, up to a maximum two-letter grade reduction (A to C, for example).

Attendance had the same positive effect on grade performance as reported in other research. In those courses with the compulsory attendance policy, students were absent less often than in the section with the simple policy. To put it more simply: a policy with penalties works.

The results suggest that the policy’s direct effect on class grades depended upon the student’s prior academic performance.

However, other findings in this research show that the relationship is not as straightforward as it appears. “Although absenteeism was related to class grades and attendance policy was related to absenteeism, the present results suggest that the policy’s direct effect on class grades depended upon the student’s prior academic performance.” (p. 438) When researchers looked at the final grades of three student cohorts—high, medium, and low achievers—an “interesting and unexpected picture emerges: a compulsory policy does have a positive impact on grades, but only for the high achievers.” (p. 438) “Putting it differently ... all student cohorts—low, medium, and high achievers—when encouraged with a compulsory attendance policy came to class more often, but only the high achievers ended up getting better grades.” (p. 438) And as they point out, that’s a finding that deserves further study. One would expect improved performance across cohorts. Why was it not seen in this research?

Perhaps the answer lies in what’s motivating students to come to class when attendance is required. They are there because they have to be, not because they want to be. They want to avoid the grade penalty, but they are not seeing the relationship between class attendance and better performance. So, they’re in class, but they may not be focused on the content, not listening attentively, and not engaged with the material. Being physically in class without being there mentally isn’t likely to improve their understanding of the material, and so performance on exams doesn’t benefit and neither do course grades.

We regularly require students to do things for the right reasons. We know that being in class equates with more learning and better performance, so we require students to be in class. But if they don’t see what’s happening in class as expediting learning and improving their grades on exams and assignments, compulsory attendance policies don’t accomplish their primary goal. Perhaps we should be devoting more effort to showing students why being mentally present in class has benefits. It should be obvious, but results like these show that it isn’t. Would other policies or instructional approaches more effectively demonstrate the value of time spent with the teachers and others in a classroom experience?

Reference: Snyder, J. L., Lee-Partridge, J. E., Jarmoszko, A. T., Petkova, O., and D’Onofrio, M. J. (2014). What is the

influence of a compulsory attendance policy on absenteeism and performance? *Journal of Education for Business*, 89 (8), 433-440.

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