

A COMPARISON OF PROFESSOR AND STUDENT VIEWPOINTS REGARDING ATTENDANCE AND EXCUSED ABSENCES

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ABSTRACT

The manner in which professors administer attendance and excused absence policies and how students want the policies administered may differ. Although professors and students agree that makeup work policies should be designed to treat all students fairly, the way in which professors administer makeup policies may not afford equal treatment to all students. This study assesses and compares both student and faculty viewpoints regarding absenteeism and excused absences. More specifically, the study assesses and compares student and faculty awareness of existing university policies on excused absences, desire to have certain components concerning attendance integrated into course policy statements, perceptions of the need for and structure of course makeup policies, and perceptions as to the manner in which excused absence policies are and should be administered. Depending on the level of missed activity—assignment, quiz, or exam—college students' perceptions regarding acceptable circumstances for absenteeism are investigated and compared to professors' views and policies regarding those circumstances. Further, the extent to which academic policies are fair to both traditional and non-traditional students is examined. The findings of this research indicate that while some consistencies exist between student and faculty opinions, inconsistencies also exist. These inconsistencies may require greater focus by faculty and administration to minimize the undesirable outcomes such as discrimination against employed students or students with children that may occur as a result of faculty attendance and makeup policies. Based on the findings, implications and suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

"Hello, Dr. Smith, I missed class today. I had a dental appointment, did I miss anything important?" "Professor Jones, I have to go to my second cousin's sister's wedding next week and we have an exam, can I make that up?" "Dr. Doe, my child is running a fever and I will miss class today, can I retake any unannounced quizzes?" These and other excuses have been heard by most faculty members who have been employed even a short time in academia. Which ones do you allow? Which excuses are acceptable to your colleagues or to the university? Do you care if students come to class?

Attitudes among faculty, administrators, and students pertaining to class attendance policies run a wide gamut. On the one extreme are those who feel that students "pay for the classes, and thus can use their discretion regarding attendance," and on the other, those who feel that class attendance is "a mandatory requirement." Similarly, excuses and allowances for make-up work also range from "none are acceptable" to "all are acceptable."

Thus, it seems that issues pertaining to attendance can be quite troublesome. In general, one might contend that faculty desire student attendance for at least five reasons. First, attendance relates to learning. Materials discussed in class provide opportunities for students to gain the knowledge that will enable them to experience subsequent success. Second, one can argue that classroom attendance promotes student satisfaction. As students learn and get involved, they often discover that the classroom experience is more valuable and satisfying. Third, regular attendance reduces professorial time by reducing the amount of "re-explained material," excuse verification, and make-up assignment development and grading. Fourth, regular student attendance facilitates a positive class experience by building professorial and student camaraderie. Fifth, professors may believe that zero tolerance absenteeism policies serve as a learning and behavior modification tool to deter similar behaviors post college graduation. When examining the structure of faculty policies regarding absenteeism and what constitutes acceptable excused absences and just causes for altering

deadlines and other academic activities, faculty clearly have personal and professional “vested interests” in evaluating attendance and attendance policies.

On the other hand, student perceptions of absenteeism may differ greatly from those of professors and administrators. What professors may view as an unacceptable justification on the part of the student may seem to the student a legitimate excuse for delaying a test, a quiz, or an assignment. Determining where students and faculty stand on what are acceptable reasons for absences may be valuable to both administration and faculty as they attempt to provide the optimum environment for student learning while simultaneously creating a “satisfying” and “fair” environment for both their traditional and non-traditional student populations.

The purpose of this research is to assess and compare both student and faculty viewpoints regarding absenteeism. Depending on the level of missed activity – assignment, quiz, or exam – college students’ perceptions regarding acceptable circumstances for absenteeism are investigated and compared to professors’ views and policies regarding those circumstances. More specifically, the study assesses and compares student and faculty awareness of existing university policies on excused absences, desire to have certain components concerning attendance integrated into course policy statements, perceptions of the need for and structure of course makeup policies, and perceptions as to the manner in which excused absence policies are and should be administered. Further, the extent to which academic policies are fair to both traditional and non-traditional students is examined.

RELATED LITERATURE

Most professors have experienced moments of perceived abandonment when looking out over a half-empty classroom. In fact, studies validate these feelings as the data shows classroom levels of absenteeism range from 33 percent to 61 percent (Romer 1993; Paisley and Paisley 2004). Although studies examining university attendance are limited, the findings are fairly consistent. As one might expect, the results show an inverse relationship between student absenteeism and student performance (Clump, Bauer, and Whiteleather 2003; Durden and Ellis 1995; Marburger 2001; Paisley and Paisley 2004; Park and Kerr 1990; Romer 1993). Given the link between student absenteeism and course performance, the reported high levels of absenteeism are particularly alarming.

Other studies have examined why students miss class. Reasons cited have included, financial hardship, employment, illness, working on other coursework, personal reasons (including hangovers), lack of motivation, and family emergencies (Paisley and Paisley 2004). From an institutional perspective, attendance levels have been found to vary depending on class structure, university type, time of day the class is offered, and course require-

ments. Specifically, differences were noted among lectures versus labs (Paisley and Paisley 2004) with lectures resulting in higher attendance levels. Private colleges were shown to report higher attendances versus public universities, while classes held before 10:00 A.M. and after 3:00 P.M. had significantly higher levels of absenteeism. Non-core versus core courses also showed higher levels of absenteeism (Marburger 2001).

In addition, researchers have also linked absenteeism to procrastination. In other words, students also miss class to avoid completion of tasks (Roig and Caso 2005). Consequently, when students are not prepared to take quizzes, exams, or if they have failed to complete assignments, they may choose to miss class. In this case, the student will simply fail to complete the required course task or might request a task extension or modification. In a study by Carron, Krauss-Whitbourne, and Halgin (1992) they found that 68 percent of college students have used false excuses to justify their absences and to delay taking tests or completing assignments. Similarly, Roig and Caso (2005), found 72 percent of the undergraduate students reported having used fraudulent excuses. Surprisingly, or maybe not, 90 percent of these students said that their fraudulent excuses were accepted and that they were allowed additional time or consideration in completing the missed task. Consequently, there exists the overwhelming dilemma faced by every college professor – how to determine what constitutes a legitimate excuse for missing an exam, not completing a paper or assignment, missing a quiz, etc.

This task is further compounded by the fact that some student excuses for missing class are clearly legitimate. With the ever changing demographic profile of today’s college student, examining and establishing academic policies that provide fair treatment to faculty as well as to both traditional and non-traditional students is critical. Consequently this paper provides an exploratory investigation extending the literature on absenteeism and examines professors’ course policies and practices identifying (1) what student excuses should be accepted (if any), (2) what work should be allowed to be made-up (modified or not), (3) how similar (dissimilar) are professors’ absenteeism policies, and (4) how professor policies compare to student perceptions regarding absenteeism. The next section identifies specific research questions designed to assess and compare faculty and student perceptions regarding absenteeism and procrastination.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After a review of the existing research literature, four research questions were developed. The first question concerns faculty and student awareness of existing university policies on excused absences. If professors are very aware of university policies on excused absences, they may be more likely to use the university policies in

formulating their own class attendance policies. If students have a high level of awareness of university policies concerning absences, and faculty fail to incorporate the salient points of the university policies into their class syllabi, students may have a basis to contest faculty decisions. Student grievances may lead to litigation, which may have an adverse effect on the faculty member and the university. Thus, the first research question concerns the level of faculty and student awareness of the university-level excused absence policy.

The second research question concerns which of five specific components professors integrate into their course attendance policies and which of the five components students feel should be integrated into course attendance policies. The five components include: (1) an attendance policy which states the differentiation between excused and unexcused absences, (2) provisions for making up missed assignments, (3) the maximum number of allowable absences, (4) the ability (or not) to drop an assignment score from the grade calculation, and (5) a recap of the university attendance policy.

Faculty and student perceptions of the need for a makeup policy incorporated into class syllabi and the makeup policy structure are the subject of the third research question. More specifically, question three addresses faculty and student perceptions of the need for the makeup policy to treat all students fairly, to mirror the rigor and level of the course taught (lower- or upper-level undergraduate or graduate), and to be consistent with the type of educational institution (community college, state university, commuter college, or residence college).

Both professors and students may desire excused absence policies that treat all students equally. However, the manner in which professors actually administer their excused absence policy and the manner in which students want professors to administer an excused absence policy may not afford all students equal treatment. Thus, question four assesses faculty and student perceptions of the manner in which excused absence policies are and should be applied.

METHODOLOGY

During the first phase of the study, the research sample was determined. Professors and students at a large, Midwestern universities were selected for the survey. Professors from all ranks and all academic divisions of the university were included in the sample. Similarly, the students surveyed were from all grades and all academic divisions. The use of faculty and students from all academic divisions within the same university facilitated comparisons of a standard policy while maintaining the consistency of the sample. Thus, the findings are generalizable without being confounded by differences derived from unique university policies.

In the second phase of the study, two survey instru-

ments were developed, i.e., one for faculty and one for students. The faculty and student questionnaires contained a common body of 62 questions concerning various aspects of a professor's makeup policy and student excuses for missed class work. First, respondents were asked to indicate their awareness of the university policy on excused absences using a three-point Likert scale (1 = not aware, 3 = very aware). The attendance policy was modeled after those used by other universities and is contained in the Appendix. The second part of the survey instrument involved an evaluation of which of five components faculty include or students feel that faculty should include in a class attendance policy. The five components were: (1) a recap of the university attendance policy, (2) maximum number of allowable absences, (3) ability to drop a test score or other scores, (4) differentiation between excused or unexcused absences, and (5) provisions for makeup assignments or exams.

Forty-eight (48) questions comprised the third section of the survey. The questions concerned 16 different student excuses for missing three different types of class work (assignment, quiz, or exam). For each type of class work, professors were asked to indicate whether they would accept, accept with proof, accept with penalty, or reject the student excuse. Similarly for each type of class work, students were asked to indicate whether professors should accept, accept with proof, accept with penalty, or reject the student excuse.

The fourth segment of the survey instrument contained an additional 12 questions. The questions asked participants to rate on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) their agreement with statements concerning the necessity and structure of a makeup policy. The final section of the questionnaire concerned faculty and student demographics. The faculty questionnaire contained six demographic questions concerning college, years of teaching experience, gender, age, grade level taught, and rank. Four demographic questions concerning college, grade level, gender, and age were included in the student version of the questionnaire.

The final phase of the research involved analysis and comparison of the faculty and student data. For each of the Likert scale questions, means were calculated. For all other survey questions, response percentages were calculated. The faculty and student survey instruments are contained in the Appendix.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For professors, 217 individuals from each of the six academic divisions (Arts and Letters, Business Administration, Education, Health and Human Services, Humanities and Public Affairs, and Natural and Applied Sciences) and each of four professorial ranks (lecturer/instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, and full pro-

fessor) were included in the sample. Within the sample, each college and professorial rank were approximately evenly represented. In terms of gender, both male and female professors were equally represented in the survey sample. Faculty ranged in age from less than 35 years to over 65 years with the highest concentration of faculty in the 46–55 year age bracket. A majority of the respondents had been teaching more than eight years. Additionally, most of the faculty primarily taught either upper-level (junior/senior) courses or all levels (freshman/sophomore, junior/senior, and graduate) equally.

For students, 88 individuals from each of the six academic divisions and each of four grade levels (sophomore, junior, senior, and graduate) were included in the sample. A majority of the students were from Business Administration and at the junior level. Both male and female students were equally represented in the research sample. Students ranged in age from 18 to over 25 years of age with most of the students between 18 and 21 years of age.

The first research question concerned the level of faculty and student awareness of the university excused-absence policy. Respondents rated their level of awareness on a Likert scale of 1 = not aware to 3 = very aware. With a mean rating of 2.3, professors indicated that they were only somewhat aware of the university policy on excused absences. The relatively low level of awareness of university policy might mean that course syllabi may not be in agreement with university policy and that course syllabi may not adequately address excused absences and makeup work. Similarly with a mean rating of 2.0, students were even less aware than the professors of the

university excused absence policies. If students are only somewhat aware of excused absence policies, they may not know what behaviors constitute a violation of the policies. Therefore when a professor makes a decision concerning how to handle a class absence, the low level of awareness of university protocol on the part of both faculty and student may lead to faculty/student disagreements and student grievances.

Question two concerned which of five specific components faculty incorporate in course attendance policies and which of the five components students feel faculty should integrate into the policy statements. The five components included: (1) the definition of excused and unexcused absences, (2) provisions for making up missed assignments, (3) the maximum number of absences allowed, (4) the ability (or not) to drop an assignment score from the grade calculation, and (5) a recap of the university attendance policy. Table 1 contains the response percentages for both professor and students.

As indicated by the percentages in Table 1, a majority of the professors include provisions for makeup assignments or exams in their class attendance policy and an equal number of students feel that these provisions should be included in the policy. However, while relatively few professors indicated that they include statements covering the maximum number of allowable absences or the ability to drop a test score or other scores, a high percentage of students felt that these components were essential. Both professors and students had lower percentages for the components of including a recap of the university attendance policy or a statement as to the differentiation between what constitutes an “excused” or “unexcused”

TABLE 1
COMPONENTS INCLUDED IN CLASS ATTENDANCE POLICY

Component	Response (%)	
	Professor Includes in Course Attendance Policy (n = 217)	Student Wants Included in Course Attendance Policy (n = 88)
Provisions for makeup assignments or exams.	70.5	70.4
Recap of university attendance policy.	37.3	59.1
Differentiation between excused or unexcused absences.	36.9	54.5
Maximum number of allowable absences.	27.6	78.4
Ability to drop a test score or other scores.	21.7	77.3

absence. The lack of specificity for components, such as defining what constitutes an excused or unexcused absence or the maximum number of allowable absences, may lead to students contesting faculty decisions regarding absences. Without explicit policy statements, it would be difficult for faculty to prove or students to know that a violation of the class attendance policy has occurred.

Faculty and student perceptions of the need for a makeup policy incorporated into class syllabi and the makeup policy structure were the focus of the third

research question. Respondents were asked about the need for the makeup policy to treat all students fairly, to mirror the rigor and level of the course taught (lower- or upper-level undergraduate or graduate), and to be consistent with the type of educational institution (community college, state university, commuter college, or residence college). Table 2 contains the faculty and student means.

As illustrated by the means in Table 2, professors and students agree that makeup policies should treat all students fairly and that it makes a difference in allowing

TABLE 2
MAKEUP POLICIES

Makeup Policy	Mean	
	Professor (n = 217)	Student (n = 88)
Makeup work policies should be set up to treat all students fairly.	4.4	4.2
It should make a difference whether the instructor will allow makeup work if the student tells the instructor about the missed work ahead of time.	4.2	4.3
A classroom policy which allows missed work to be made up creates more work for the instructor.	4.0	3.1
It is important to allow makeup work on a case-by-case basis.	3.9	3.9
It is very important for instructors to explicitly list in the syllabus which work can be made up and which cannot.	3.9	4.2
The strictness of the course makeup policy is a reflection of the leniency of the professor.	3.3	3.6
The strictness of the course makeup policy is a reflection of the leniency of the university.	3.1	3.0
Makeup work policies should differ for undergraduate- and graduate-level courses.	3.1	3.0
A lenient makeup work policy is more appropriate for a community college than a state university.	3.0	1.8
A lenient makeup work policy is more appropriate for a commuter college than a residence college.	2.9	1.6
The strictness of the course makeup policy is a reflection on the rigor of the class.	2.9	3.3
Makeup work policies should differ for lower- and upper-level undergraduate courses.	2.6	2.9
1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strongly agree		

makeup work if the professor is given prior notice of the missed work. However, the issue of fairness was more important to professors than students. Perhaps professors realize that nondiscriminatory policies must be in place in order to avoid the problems created when students contest makeup work. Due to the nature of the job, professors also agree that allowing missed work to be made up creates more work for them, whereas students neither agree nor disagree with the statement.

Students, more strongly than professors, agreed that it is very important for the syllabus to contain explicit language concerning which work can be made up and which cannot. While professors may prefer more flexibility in determining the status of makeup work, it is difficult to enforce a policy that does not contain specifics. Further, students strongly disagreed that lenient makeup work policies were more appropriate for a community college than a state university or for a commuter college rather than a residence college. For the two statements, professors' feelings were not as strong as those of the students. While professors disagreed, students neither agreed nor disagreed that the course makeup policy is a reflection of the rigor of the class. Further, professors more strongly disagreed that policies should differ between lower- and upper-level undergraduate courses.

Two areas of concern are the lack of strong agreement about allowing makeup work on a case-by-case basis and lack of strong agreement that the course syllabus should explicitly list which work can be made up. Professors appear to want to handle makeup work in an informal fashion rather than by formal policy, whereas students appear to desire more structure. Although professors indicate the desire to afford all students fair treatment, the lack of formal policy may lead to discriminatory behavior toward some students.

The manner in which professors administer excused absence policies in comparison to student perceptions of how absence policies should be administered was the topic of question four. Professor and student responses were examined by level of missed activity as well as by excuse for missed classwork, and the results are presented in Table 3. For each level of missed activity (assignment, quiz, or exam), professors were most likely to accept the excuses of military drill or active duty or death in the family. However according to the students, death in the family, deaths of a close friend, and family emergency were the excuses that professors should most likely accept regardless of the missed class work. Given the age of the students, many have not experienced and may not be familiar with the issue of military service. Similarly due to the students' ages, they may have experienced and be more sensitive to the issues of death of a close friend or a family emergency such as the illness of a parent or grandparent.

Regardless of the level of missed activity, the three excuses that professors were most likely to reject were

overslept, a heavy course load on that day, and vacation. Correspondingly, overslept and heavy course load were the excuses that students felt professors should most likely reject. Since many students must work to pay for their education, it is interesting to note the high likelihood for professors to reject the excuses of part- or full-time job (45.5 to 62.5%). In comparison only 34.1 to 50.6 percent of the students felt that the employment excuses should be rejected. Students appeared to indicate that professors should be more lenient when considering the excuses of part- or full-time job. Considering the cost of a college education and the increase in the number of older, non-traditional students, professors may need to be more flexible with employed students and more sensitive to their economic issues.

The increase in the number of older, non-traditional students may mean that more students have children. Even though professors ranked the excuses of child care emergency and sick child near the top of accepted excuses for all three types of missed class work, approximately 20 percent indicated that they would reject the two excuses if students missed a quiz. Further when missing an assignment, approximately 10 percent of professors would reject the child care emergency and sick child excuses. Conversely, regardless of the missed activity, less than 5 percent of students felt that professors should reject the excuses involving children. The discrepancy in faculty and student views of the acceptability of child care emergency excuses may be due to the fact that such excuses may be difficult to prove or document. Faculty may be unwilling to accept undocumented excuses whereas students may be more empathetic because they personally have experienced or may know other students who have experienced a child care emergency. Due to the unexpected nature of childcare and sick child emergencies, professors must take into account that students cannot provide prior notice of such absences. Therefore, professors must recognize that disregarding the importance of childcare may discriminate against students with families and in particular female students with children.

Professors tended to be more lenient with students participating in university athletics. Regardless of the missed activity, participation in a university athletic event ranked high on the list of excuses accepted by professors. Although over 15 percent of professors indicated that they would reject the excuse for missing an assignment or quiz, athletic participation ranked much higher as an accepted excuse than did part- or full-time employment. Similarly, professors indicated that participation in a university athletic event was a more acceptable excuse for missing a quiz than having a sick child. Furthermore, for assignments, quizzes, and exams, professors indicated that they were more likely to assign a penalty for childcare emergency or sick child than participation in a university athletic event.

On the other hand, students responded that professors

TABLE 3
EXCUSE ACCEPTANCE BY LEVEL OF MISSED ACTIVITY RANKED
BY PROFESSOR ACCEPTANCE

Response (%)								
Missed Activity/Excuse	Professor (n = 217)				Student (n = 88)			
	Accept	Accept with Proof	Accept with Penalty	Reject	Accept	Accept with Proof	Accept with Penalty	Reject
Assignment:								
Military drill or active duty	51.2	39.0	5.2	4.7	45.5	43.2	4.5	6.8
Death in family	50.2	35.8	8.4	5.6	66.7	31.0	2.3	0.0
Childcare emergency	41.9	26.0	20.9	11.2	48.9	32.9	14.8	3.4
Sick child	41.6	30.4	18.2	9.8	47.1	34.5	13.8	4.6
Family emergency	41.3	32.4	16.9	9.4	54.6	37.5	6.8	1.1
Death of close friend	41.1	33.6	14.5	10.8	63.6	29.6	5.7	1.1
Participation in University athletic event	37.1	39.0	8.4	15.5	29.6	59.1	4.5	6.8
Personally sick	32.6	41.9	16.3	9.3	38.6	48.9	11.4	1.1
Car trouble	30.4	28.0	20.1	21.5	36.4	26.1	31.8	5.7
Interview	26.6	29.4	15.9	28.0	17.0	45.5	19.3	18.2
Event required for another Class	18.7	30.8	19.2	31.3	13.6	58.0	10.2	18.2
Full-time job	11.7	13.1	26.6	48.6	13.6	25.0	26.1	35.2
Part-time job	11.3	11.3	24.1	53.3	9.3	16.3	24.4	50.0
Overslept	7.9	0.9	26.1	65.1	5.7	0.0	26.1	68.2
Heavy course load on that Day	5.1	3.3	23.4	68.2	5.7	7.9	28.4	58.0
Vacation	4.7	1.9	21.6	71.8	4.5	18.2	27.3	50.0
Quiz:								
Military drill or active duty	51.2	40.2	3.3	5.3	46.6	47.7	2.3	3.4
Death in family	46.9	33.2	6.2	13.7	66.7	31.0	1.1	1.1
Childcare emergency	38.9	25.1	14.2	21.8	47.7	33.0	17.0	2.3
Participation in University athletic event	38.1	38.6	6.7	16.7	29.6	59.1	4.5	6.8
Death of close friend	37.6	31.4	10.0	21.0	63.6	30.7	4.6	1.1
Family emergency	37.3	30.1	11.5	21.1	54.5	36.4	5.7	3.4
Sick child	36.7	31.9	11.9	19.5	43.7	39.1	12.6	4.6
Personally sick	28.4	40.3	10.0	21.3	37.5	52.3	6.8	3.4
Interview	26.1	31.8	9.9	32.2	15.9	48.9	18.2	17.0
Car trouble	24.5	27.4	15.6	32.5	35.2	28.4	29.6	6.8
Event required for another Class	17.1	34.1	11.4	37.4	13.6	59.1	10.2	17.1
Full-time job	14.8	12.4	13.8	59.0	17.0	25.0	23.9	34.1
Part-time job	12.0	13.0	12.5	62.5	10.3	23.0	16.1	50.6
Overslept	7.1	0.5	12.3	80.2	6.8	0.0	19.3	73.9
Vacation	3.8	1.9	10.4	84.0	3.4	19.3	26.1	51.1
Heavy course load on that Day	3.8	2.8	14.7	78.7	3.4	4.5	29.6	62.5

TABLE 3 (CONTINUED)								
Response (%)								
Missed activity/Excuse	Professor (n = 217)				Student (n = 88)			
	Accept	Accept with Proof	Accept with Penalty	Reject	Accept	Accept with Proof	Accept with Penalty	Reject
Exam:								
Death in family	50.5	40.6	7.1	1.9	64.4	32.2	3.4	0.0
Military drill or active duty	50.2	44.1	4.7	1.0	43.2	48.9	3.4	4.5
Childcare emergency	46.2	31.6	17.5	4.7	46.6	31.8	20.5	1.1
Family emergency	43.8	40.0	13.3	2.9	52.3	38.6	9.1	0.0
Sick child	43.4	38.2	14.1	4.3	42.5	41.4	12.6	3.5
Death of close friend	42.6	40.3	11.4	5.7	61.4	32.9	5.7	0.0
Participation in University athletic event	40.3	45.0	8.1	6.6	30.7	60.2	4.6	4.5
Personally sick	35.8	50.5	9.9	3.8	33.0	53.4	12.5	1.1
Car trouble	28.9	39.8	18.0	13.3	36.4	30.7	31.8	1.1
Interview	27.5	40.8	13.7	18.0	14.8	46.6	19.3	19.3
Event required for another Class	20.7	39.2	13.7	26.4	13.6	58.0	11.4	17.0
Part-time job	16.2	21.4	15.2	47.1	12.8	19.8	24.4	43.0
Full-time job	16.0	23.0	15.5	45.5	15.9	26.1	22.7	35.2
Overslept	10.9	2.8	25.1	61.1	5.7	0.0	31.8	62.5
Vacation	7.6	6.6	16.6	69.2	3.4	22.7	28.4	45.5
Heavy course load on that Day	5.2	7.6	17.9	69.3	2.3	12.5	25.0	60.2

should be much less accepting of athletics as an excuse for missing any type of class work. Regardless of the missed work, students felt that professors should be more willing to accept childcare and sick child emergencies than university athletics as an excuse. However, students indicated that professors should be more willing to accept the excuse of university athletic participation than the excuses of part- or full-time employment.

Normally, athletes are compensated for their participation by the university, and thus athletic participation could be considered student employment. Professors indicate an approximate 15 percent rejection rate for class work missed by student athletes. In contrast, professors indicate a much higher rejection rate (45.5 to 62.5%) for class work missed by students with part- and full-time employment. Similarly, professors indicate that they are more likely to assess penalties for missed work to students with child-related issues than to students who participate in university athletics. Student opinions concur with the professorial findings that students with child care emergencies or sick children should be assessed penalties for missed class work more so than student athletes. It appears that both professors and students felt that the consider-

ation granted to university athletes should not be extended to students with families.

Perhaps the apparent discriminatory treatment of university athletes versus employed students or students with families involves the nature of the excuses for missed class work. Makeup policies that require prior notification may be well suited to student athletes with planned athletic schedules. However, prior notification policies may not be appropriate for students with emergency child-related issues or students with outside employment who may be sent out of town on a last-minute business trip (for example). Although professors and students agree that makeup work policies should be designed to treat all students fairly, the manner in which professors administer makeup policies and how students want the policies administered may not afford equal treatment to all students.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Students and faculty are sometimes in conflict regarding the value of student attendance. Even faculty opinions differ on attendance policies, with some faculty

having strict attendance standards and limited flexibility regarding “excused absences” and “makeup” work to some faculty who offer extreme leniency for similar circumstances. Given the range of faculty opinions, the findings of this research comparing student and faculty perceptions of absenteeism, excuses, and makeup work are not too surprising. In fact, one might argue that the extremes of faculty policies pertaining to absenteeism might exacerbate the student-faculty debate. However, regardless of the range of opinions, it seems obvious that issues associated with absenteeism, excuses, and makeup work can have deleterious results for the university, the faculty, and the students. Consequently, a comparison of faculty and student attitudes regarding these issues may provide valuable insights to both faculty and administrators as they attempt to cope with these issues.

The findings of this research indicate that while some consistencies exist between student and faculty opinions, inconsistencies also exist. These inconsistencies may require greater focus by faculty and administration to minimize the undesirable outcomes that can occur as a result of faculty attendance and makeup policies. For example, one of the findings indicates that both faculty and students are only moderately aware of the university’s absenteeism policy. It seems that greater communication is needed by the university’s administrators to insure that faculty are aware of the university’s policies. Greater faculty awareness may lead to greater student awareness, as faculty share information regarding university policies. Such an outcome would satisfy one of the student/faculty disagreements pertaining to the students’ desires for a recap of the university’s attendance policies.

While increasing awareness of the university’s attendance policies seems possible with improved communications efforts by administrators and faculty members, some issues seem to be more challenging to resolve. For example, the findings indicate that students want greater specificity regarding the definition of an excused absence, the maximum number of absences allowed, and provisions for “dropped” assignments. It may be challenging for faculty to meet these desires. Why? While the answers to this question are beyond the scope of this research, one could assume that greater specificity with regard to these issues could be perceived as potentially leading to negative consequences for faculty. For example, many faculty members may believe that students should attend “all” classes, complete “all” assignments (punctually), and that “all” activities should count (no drops). However, being reasonable, they may accept certain excuses on a case-by-case basis. While one might challenge the fairness of such a policy, most faculty members may feel that they can recognize “valid” from “invalid” excuses and make adjustments as necessary.

Explicitly defining standards may result in a loss of flexibility for the faculty member, and this corresponding loss of flexibility could have negative effects on students.

As faculty members set very exacting and demanding standards with limited flexibility, the students may discover that the “easygoing” faculty they experienced earlier have become “by-the-books” teachers who allow no deviations from established codes. Further, faculty may not wish to explicitly define standards, because students may respond in a manner that is not in the student’s best interest. The maximum number of “excused” absences may become the standard, as students use their “free days” (just as a slacker at work might use all of his/her sick days). Additionally, the ability to “drop” assignments might lead to lower levels of learning as students decide “not to learn” segments for an upcoming exam. Finally, faculty members know that absent students and make-up assignments create more work for the faculty member. In fact, most faculty members have been asked to repeat segments of materials discussed in class for an absent student. Even a simple make-up exam separates the student from the rest of the class, often calls for a different exam, different grading process, and a different recording process. Thus, from the faculty member’s perspective, absenteeism may have a multiplier effect on negative outcomes for both the student and the faculty member.

It seems that both groups reject the notion that strictness in terms of attendance policies is reflective of professorial leniency or course rigor. Correspondingly, neither group feels that policies should differ based on the type of educational institution (university vs. community college; residence vs. commuter) or the level of the course. The findings may lead to the conclusion that attendance policies are largely independent of extraneous factors and should not be used to interpret the institution’s quality or the professor’s rigor.

However, it may be noted that while certain variations exist with regard to the definition of an acceptable excuse, in general, both groups agree on the “most” versus “least” acceptable excuses. Thus, while students are more lenient in general with regard to the definition of an acceptable excuse, it seems that the rankings of “acceptability” are largely parallel. Perhaps the degree to which certain excuses are acceptable is based on the degree to which the students’ challenges are preplanned, controllable, and verifiable. For example, the fact that many faculty members will not accept the “sick child” excuse may be based on the fact that it is extremely challenging to “prove” that one has a “sick child.” Conversely, the military service excuse (in addition to being patriotic) is largely uncontrollable, unplanned, and verifiable. Similarly, one’s family member’s death is uncontrollable, unplanned, and verifiable (as well as one that generates sympathy). Other differences may be explained by the degree to which students feel personal empathy regarding a fellow student’s excuse. Perhaps the students have worked in groups with other students who have had challenges attributable to death, family emergencies, car trouble, etc. On the other hand, the lack of empathy may

also explain the reason why faculty are more likely to accept excuses pertaining to university athletic events, interviews, military exercises, and events required in other classes.

These factors may help explain the differences that exist between the acceptability of work-related excuses and athletic-related excuses. One might have the attitude that when a student enrolls in a class that he/she knows the work schedule and how it relates to the class schedule. Thus, the faculty member may feel that one's work schedule is controllable and planned, and excuses are not deemed necessary. However, the student-athlete's schedule is uncontrollable, unplanned, and verifiable to the professor. In addition, the student-athlete is representing the university in a university-sanctioned activity. The fact that students are "less accepting" of the athlete's excuse may be partially attributed to the fact that most students are not athletes, but most are employed. Thus, in their self-interest, the employment excuse is more acceptable.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study represents an initial evaluation of faculty and student attitudes regarding what may be described as potentially contentious and damaging issues: attendance and make-up policies in the classroom. However, certain limitations should be recognized. The primary limitation concerns the sample. As stated in the study, the sample was drawn from one large Midwestern public university. Thus, the study's conclusions are limited in the degree to which they may be generalized. Additionally, the study asks both professors and students for the opinions regard-

ing absenteeism and make-up policies. This does not necessarily reflect actions that have actually been taken with regard to absenteeism and make-up assignments.

To address these limitations research might first be expanded to include other types and locations of universities. For example, universities in other geographic regions may have different attitudes entirely on absenteeism and make-up work that reflects the region's subculture. Additionally, smaller or larger public universities may differ in their attitudes toward these subjects. Similarly, private institutions may provide different attitudes with regard to student absenteeism and make-up policies. Another avenue for future research might address questions to students regarding excuses that have worked with faculty in various circumstances. Students may also provide information regarding the validity of the excuses that they have provided and the degree to which both valid and invalid excuses have been effective. These responses could then be compared with faculty responses to assess the degree to which the faculty is being accurate in their proclamations regarding acceptable and unacceptable excuses.

Nevertheless, regardless of the limitations and avenues taken in future research, this study provides information that may be valuable to academicians and administrators alike as they attempt to assess their future actions regarding student absenteeism and make-up policies. Thus, while faculty and administrators both seek fairness and want the best for the students and the university, it should be recognized that different attitudes exist. This recognition may lead to some level of conciliation and development of policies that are workable for all parties in the equation.

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APPENDIX

UNIVERSITY ATTENDANCE POLICY

Because class attendance and course grade are demonstrably and positively related, the University expects students to attend *all* class sessions of courses in which they are enrolled. Each instructor has the *responsibility* to determine specific attendance policies for each course taught, including the role that attendance plays in calculation of final grades and the extent to which work missed due to non-attendance can be made up. On the *first day of class*, each instructor will make available to each student a written statement of the specific attendance policy for that class. The University encourages instructors not to make attendance a disproportionately weighted component of

the final grade. The University expects instructors to be reasonable in accommodating students whose absence from class resulted from: (1) participation in University-sanctioned activities and programs; (2) personal illness; or (3) family and/or other compelling circumstances. Instructors have the right to request documentation verifying the basis of any absences resulting from the above factors. Any student who believes that his or her final grade for a course has been reduced unfairly because of attendance factors has the right to appeal that grade under the process outlined below.
