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Attendance mandatory, learning optional

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If you're a student, you've experienced some of the ridiculous policies that characterize many undergraduate classes.

Among these schemes is mandatory attendance. For some, a limited absence policy is a motivator that keeps students coming to class. For others, it is a nuisance that interferes with life's occasional curve ball. Mandatory attendance policies are simply Band-Aids for deeper academic wounds. They are quick fixes that challenge the prerogative of the student and undermine the grading structure, and ought to be reevaluated immediately.

In the absence of a university-wide standard, attendance policies are left to the discretion of individual instructors. Sometimes, instructors defer to a department-wide standard absence policy. Often, these policies include attendance as a part of the "class participation" grade. Sometimes, points are deducted from (or simply not added to) the final grade for each absence. These policies are likely made with the good intention of improving the learning environment. The result, however, is counterproductive to the use of grades as measures of academic performance.

The "participation grade" is based on wishful thinking that a student who attends class also participates: Instructors will likely agree that, often times, there are students who are physically present but mentally absent. These students benefit simply by having their name checked off during roll call. Yes, a more liberal student absence policy might reduce attendance, and a class with limited student attendance might be difficult to teach. Attendance itself, however, is a poor measure of student participation and involvement. If the goal of the attendance-based "participation grade" is to encourage participation, the policy has failed. There is no such thing as passive participation.

The UA general catalog states, "The university believes that students themselves are primarily responsible for attendance." This is common sense. Furthermore, absent students are primarily liable for what they miss. Many instructors have strict policies that prohibit or penalize late work; absent students lose. Absentees miss course material that may not be presented anywhere but lecture, and are consequently less prepared for assignments and exams; they lose again. So be it. The penalty for absence is built in to students' grades because they have missed material crucial to the execution of graded assignments. And if they learn the missed material before the exam? Bravo, they have worked for it. The current "double jeopardy" effect of missing class is punitive, and has no place in a reputable university.

Attendance-driven grading yields grades that cannot be compared between students or between universities. A student with excellent comprehension but poor attendance in a given class may have a similar grade as a student who attends the same class regularly, but does not grasp the material. The comparison of grades between students becomes a comparison between the ability to meet administrative requirements, not a comparison of academic performance. Furthermore, students in a program that computes grades using absences cannot fairly compare their own grade point average to the university-wide standard scale of four. Differences in absence-related grading policies within this university and between other universities means GPAs are made up of fundamentally different measures of performance. This defeats the purpose of a normalized GPA, and stands to comparatively benefit students unworthy of good grades while hurting competent students.

The absence policy does not make classes easier to teach, fairer or more educational, but rather, the policy contributes to making a class just a time and room number on a student's schedule. Attendance becomes the end, not the means, of education. If the classes are informative and interactive enough, students will go to class because they must in order to succeed. If students frequently ditch and subsequently fail, let them, and show no mercy. If students miss class regularly but still succeed, then perhaps the class is not challenging enough. I hope that all departments with mandatory attendance policies recognize the irrelevance of these policies to our university's educational goals and have the courage to solve the problem rather than the symptoms.

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