Attending to Attendance: Body, Mind, and Spirit

Regardless of one’s position on class attendance, it is a simple fact of university life that attending class ought to be essential to a student’s learning experience. Courses ought to be structured so that regular class attendance contributes to the students' grasp of the material. The fact that courses are taught implies that the substance of the course is much more than mere references to text. This, however, says little of whether an instructor ought to have an attendance policy as part of his or her course. While attendance policies and the general strictness of those is subject to the instructor’s discretion, below are some pointers which can help you make an informed decision as to whether you need an explicit attendance policy as part of your course.

1) Attendance policies should be backed with good reason. Attendance policies are beneficial only inasmuch as they support the learning process. Ask yourself, ‘Why is it important that the students regularly attend class, and why should it adversely affect the students who choose not to do so?’ Once you have answered these questions, you will have a general idea as to how you should proceed.

2) Enforceability. If you have a large class, attendance policies could be difficult to enforce, and taking attendance should not substantially interfere with instruction. Calling roll for a class of three hundred students may not only be extremely difficult to do, but would take up a great deal of time that should be spent on the course material.

3) Explicit or implicit attendance policy. Explicit attendance policies include actively taking roll, having a sign-in sheet, or some procedure that actually checks for a physical student presence, but remember, a student who sleeps through class may be physically in attendance but absent intellectually. Implicit attendance policies are built into the course requirements. In class quizzes that cannot be made up, papers with an in class due date, discussion sections, and class participation grades are a few examples of course requirements that have attendance built into the semester's

Q: What is the appropriate way to accommodate students with physical or learning disabilities?

A: Not all disabilities are apparent. First, at the beginning of the course, make a general announcement indicating that you need to be aware of any students who by virtue of their disability need special attention or arrangements. Students should have a letter from their disability coordinator stating precisely what measures need to be taken, such as longer test time, seating up front, tape recording lectures, and so on. If students do not have a letter, direct them to their college coordinator so that they may secure the proper documentation. If you have any questions as an instructor, call the Office of Student Rights Compliance.

Q: I am afraid that by allowing make-up exams, students may have an unfair advantage as some may get information from students who have already taken the exam. What can I do?

A: Typically, the unfair advantage may result when the same
requirements. With implicit
attendance policies, the
structure of the class itself
eliminates the need to physi-
cally check attendance, but
also lets the students know
that they must be in class to
meet the requirements of the
course.

4) Good excuses and bad
excuses. Inevitably, students
will miss class, and often they
do so for valid reasons. Many
absences are quickly recog-
nizable as valid or invalid.
There are, however, question-
able absences on which the
TA may need outside verifica-
tion before making a final
decision. This can be done by
requesting that the student
with the questionable absence
go to their college dean
regarding the excuse. The
dean will make a decision on
the validity of said absence
and notify you via letter of that
decision. Then you can make a decision
based on the dean’s recom-
mandation, while still retain-
ing your prerogative in decid-
ing whether or not to recog-
nize the absence as valid.

5) Put attendance policies
in writing. Regardless of
your final decision about your
policy, all policies should be
distributed in writing to the
students on the first day of
class. The easiest way to
accomplish this is to put your
policy (either explicit or
implicit in the form of grade
requirements and due dates)
on the class syllabus and then
review the syllabus with your
students, allowing them to
ask questions. This way there
can be no misconception about
what is expected regarding
regular attendance. Often,
attendance policies are seen
as paternalistic holdovers
from high school. However, if
the policy is based in sound,
educational reasoning and is
also clearly articulated to the
students, it allows the stu-
dents then to make their own
informed decisions and makes
it known that you care about
their attendance.

Attendance policies (explicit
and implicit) constructed with
a great deal of thought and
care can ensure that students
are aware that regular atten-
dance is necessary for stu-
dents to fully benefit from
your course.

If you change your exams
each semester, you en-
sure that your tests will
not be included in files for
future students.

Do you have a
question for the
TA Forum?
Contact the TA
Project Helpline at
932-1182 or go
online
at http://taproject.
rutgers.edu/asktap.
html

Get Online!
TapOffice:
http://taproject. rutgers. edu
Graduate School - New
Brunswick
http://gsnb.rutgers. edu
Office Hours and TA Availability

Part of teaching a course is being available to your students outside the confines of the classroom. Often, the period of an instructor’s office hours is the time when students can get clarification on the material, ask questions about assignments, or get feedback from the instructor. Above all, office hours should not be viewed by the TA as an unwelcomed part of course instruction.

TAs should make themselves available at least two hours a week, but should also allow for appointments from students who cannot come to the regularly scheduled office hours. Electronic mail can alleviate some of the scheduling conflicts, and TAs should not be frightened about giving out their email addresses. Email allows the TA ample time to consider a student’s question or request. Both students and TAs should use Email responsibly, allowing ample time for the party at the other end to respond.

When the due date for midterm or final exams and papers approaches, office hours can easily become overbooked. Make sure that all of your students receive equal opportunity for assistance, and for your own sake, limit the amount of time any one student can occupy. Before major exams, consider having group office hours. This takes up less of your time, and provides a session where students can get their questions answered either directly from you, or indirectly from other students providing answers or asking questions. Also, make sure that your students understand that a major crisis need not be the sole reason to come to your office hours. Encourage your students to visit your office hours if they have questions about the course, need help on an assignment, or want to make sure that they understand the material.

Many students, especially first year students, may find visiting your office hours intimidating, and if you merely state your office hours on the syllabus and leave it at that, nothing is done to alleviate the students’ fears. By making yourself available and letting your students know that you are interested in their concerns and progress, you are creating a comfortable atmosphere of approachability. However, some students may still feel reluctant. These students can be encouraged to visit your office hours by placing a note at the bottom of an assignment requesting that they come see you, or by speaking with them briefly after class and encouraging them to visit.

Although ultimately it is a student’s responsibility to ask questions or ask for help, some just need a little encouragement. If it is understood from the beginning of the semester that you are available and willing to help, students will feel more comfortable coming to your office hours.

The Pedagogical Insight Corner for the Curiously Minded TA

Have more than thou showest;  
Speak less than thou knowest.  
William Shakespeare ‘King Lear,’  
Act I, Scene iv

My words fly up, my thoughts remain below:  
Words without thoughts never to heaven go.  
William Shakespeare 'Hamlet', Act 3 scene 3

Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside of a dog it’s too dark to read.  
Groucho Marx

Get In Touch!  
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TA Helpline: 932-11TA
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TA Teaching Assistant Project Office of the Dean Graduate School-New Brunswick 25 Bishop Place New Brunswick, N.J. 08901-1181 (732) 932-7747

TAP Calendar

12/5 Dissertation and Thesis Workshop 10:00 a.m.¹
Spring 2002 Introduction to College Teaching²

1. Please call (732) 932-7034, or email Barbara Sirman at sirman@rci.rutgers.edu, if you plan to attend a workshop.
2. Wednesdays, 4:30-6:30 p.m. Course Number: 16:186:855:01 (71222). Please contact Amber Carpenter for details and special permission numbers. (acarpent@rci.rutgers.edu) or 932-7449.

Interested in Peer Observation of your classes? http://taproject.rutgers.edu/pop/pop.html