

We Built It and They Won't Come:
Undergraduate Absenteeism - Why it Happens and Strategies for Improvement

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Poor attendance by undergraduate students is not a new phenomenon. A seminal study by Romer (1993) described absenteeism in US universities as “rampant: usually about one third of students are not at class” (p. 167). Internationally there is concern about levels of student absenteeism (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 227) and non-attendance appears to be a growing trend (Massingham & Herrington, 2006, p. 81). This literature review focuses on why students choose not to attend class and strategies for faculty and administration to help combat the trend. A one-page summary of the findings and recommendations is included (see Appendix).

There is no significant quantitative data regarding university attendance. As Lopez-Bonilla and Lopez-Bonilla (2015) comment, “absenteeism is a visible problem with significant social and academic impact yet has received scarce empirical research attention” (p. 186). With no scale for absenteeism measurement, “this phenomenon is tackled from a theoretical or purely descriptive perspective” (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015, p. 193). This research gap is contrasted by significant attendance data for K-12 education and workplaces.

Attendance research is plentiful with a wide range of opinions, starting with the reason attendance matters. Most literature shows attendance impacts student performance (Chenneville & Jordan, 2008; Latif & Miles, 2013; Marburger, 2006). However, Massingham and Herrington (2006) point out there is a strong association between attendance and performance “but not a statistically sound causal relationship” (p. 88). Alexander and Hicks (2016) add “it is possible students who attend class are more motivated and hence perform better. Future research should therefore assess the impact of mediating factors such as motivation, personality and cognitive ability on the attendance-performance relationship” (p. 30).

Debate revolves around the role of educator when it comes to student attendance (Hotaling, 2016). Arguers believe it is the student’s decision to attend class (Pettigrew, 2012).

Rodgers (2002) states, “attendance does not ensure learning takes place. Physical presence and intellectual involvement are quite different phenomena” (p. 265). Some worry about infantilising students and removing responsibility for engagement (Barlow & Fleischer 2011; Macfarlane, 2013). Other contentious issues about poor attendance include mandatory policies and tying attendance to assessment (Crede, Roch, & Kieszczynka, 2010; Dobkin, Gil, & Marion, 2010).

Assuming there are “clear benefits for students through attendance” (Massingham & Herrington, 2006, p.82) and a proven relationship with academic success (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 227), five stakeholders are affected by low student attendance (see Table 1).

Table 1

Five Stakeholders Affected by Low Undergraduate Student Attendance

STUDENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poor attendance can lead to inadequate learning for those missing, plus disruption to students who are present (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 228). - A false sense of security can exist for students using only background material and failing to engage otherwise (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 228). - Students benefit from interactions with teachers and classmates (Latif & Miles, 2013, p. 470).
FACULTY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low attendance can result in demotivated faculty, creating a vicious cycle of poor class dynamic (Sleigh & Ritzer, 2001). - Absences can create a “dead, tiresome, unpleasant classroom environment that makes students feel uncomfortable and the professor irritable” (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 228).
ADMIN.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Information and strategies are needed to manage changing/conflicting attitudes of faculty and students toward attendance policies and practice. - Poor attendance “may affect faculty morale” (Kelly, 2012, p. 18) which in turn becomes an issue of administration.
INSTITUTE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To function effectively, institutions must understand student’s changing needs to provide necessary measures for improved attendance (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015, p.194). - Absence can lead to withdrawal (Nemejc & Smekalova, 2018; Kelly, 2012).
SOCIETY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “When tertiary education is subsidised, the cost of poor student performance in university falls not only on the individual student but also on society in general.” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 255). Society therefore has an interest in promoting student performance.

Why do Undergraduates Choose Not to Attend Class?

There are common themes for student absenteeism with little change over time (literature studied dates within twenty years). The themes are broad: “absence can be due to a wide range of factors related to student’s will or not” (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015, p. 186). Nemejc and Smekalova (2018) surveyed students, creating a word cloud from the findings (Figure 1). The larger the text, the more often the reason was cited in the survey.



Figure 1. Examples of reasons for frequent absence from lectures by first year students. (Used with permission).

For the purpose of this paper, literature themes regarding factors affecting attendance are divided into three parts: outside faculty control, within faculty control, and those shared by both.

Attendance Factors Outside Faculty Control

Logistics affect student attendance, things like timing of classes (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015; Massingham & Herrington, 2006; Nemejc & Smekalova, 2018), class size “large halls give an increased feeling of anonymity and inability to contribute” (Oldfield, Rodwell, Curry, & Marks, 2019, p. 445), and location/weather (neither within control of institutions, however, access to affordable transit and infrastructure upgrades minimize barriers).

Student-specific issues, whether lifestyle related (extrinsic) or attitudinal (intrinsic) affect attendance rates. “Students work at night and come to university to sleep” (Massingham & Herrington, 2006, p. 83). Perhaps this is an exaggeration, but employment is often noted in research as an issue (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015; Kelly, 2012; Nemejc & Smekalova, 2018). Student maturity and attitude plays a significant role as well. Barlow and Fleischer (2011) write that “students have difficulty taking responsibility for their own learning” (p. 234) and their data reveal adjusting to independent life can be overwhelming. Student responses when asked why they did not attend included “lack of confidence, being disorganized, lacking motivation, lacking interest, not prioritising study, and ‘just being lazy’” (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 230).

Attendance Factors Within Faculty Control

“Teaching method and competence is [sic] the most important factor behind student absenteeism” (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015, p. 193). Massingham and Herrington (2006) agree that the main factors influencing students are the teaching process, classroom communication, and technique (i.e., motivating versus boring; authentic versus theoretical), and personality of the teacher (p. 96). Kelly (2012) also concurs that poor “lecture quality is one of the most frequently cited reasons for non-attendance” (p. 19).

Along with teaching styles, individual student relationships with faculty make an impact. According to Oldfield et al. (2019) “the need for belonging is a fundamental motivation, to form a secure interpersonal attachment” (p. 444). Massingham and Herrington (2006) agree: “learning is a social construct and the relationship between teacher and student appears to be a significant factor in student involvement” (p. 96).

Attendance Factors within Faculty and Institution Shared Control

The impact of technology and content delivery on student attendance is hotly debated. Massingham and Herrington (2006) ask, “if students can access slides and audio on-line, why should they come to lectures?” (p. 87). Barlow and Fleischer (2011) write, “some students make a strategic decision not to attend sessions, particularly when material is available in other ways” (p. 232), whereas Groen, Quigley, and Herry’s (2016) study of lecture-taped technology showed “no difference in class attendance for courses using lecture capture” (p. 15).

Course content also impacts attendance: “if students feel they will derive important learning...they will not miss taught sessions” (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 232). However, if students feel they “can pass the subject without attending”, “lectures are a waste of time”, “the lectures were boring” (Massingham & Herrington, 2006, p. 96), “I already have the knowledge” (Nemejc & Smekalova, 2018, p. 12) or they can “learn the material better by studying in other ways” (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015, p. 187), they will likely not attend.

Strategies to Improve Undergraduate Attendance

Improving attendance requires effort, planning, and time (Al-Shammari, 2016, p. 1). Reasons for absence are often complex (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 451) and it will take a concerted effort to find solutions. As Lopez-Bonilla and Lopez-Bonilla (2015) write, “a major challenge of today’s educators is to create a positive learning environment in the hopes of increased student involvement, reduced absenteeism and improved student achievement” (p. 185). Six actions are recommended below to help faculty and administration improve student attendance.

Improve Teacher Training

Studies show the majority of students will attend lectures only if they perceive ‘value’ in them and “value perceptions are based largely on the teaching process and the lecturer’s competence” (Massingham & Herrington, 2006, p. 84). This suggests the need for ongoing

teacher training which promotes innovation and “institutional valuation of the teaching activity through the dedication of more time and effort” (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015, p. 193). Two places to focus are on student-teacher interactions: “the scarce frequent relationships between teachers and students should be combated through greater coexistence” (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2015, p. 193) and lecture quality “needs to be made interesting and perhaps other modes of teaching and learning appropriate in the twenty-first century such as activity-based learning conducted on a larger scale” (Kelly, 2012, p. 35).

More Interactive and Group Work

Students need to be motivated to attend class. One solution may be “incorporating more interactive elements into subjects, as well as more effective use of digital material” (Alexander & Hicks, 2016, p. 31). Also, students report being more likely to attend if groupwork is involved (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 232). Most articles concur that “teaching and learning strategies that involve students actively in class are likely to be more successful in enhancing student experience” (Kelly, 2012, p. 19). Although larger classrooms can be seen as obstacles to interactive group work, Oldfield et al. (2019) conclude that “methods adopted from smaller settings, for example, group discussion and problem-based learning, could work well in larger lectures” (p. 445).

Rewards or Incentives for Attendance

Views of incentivizing students to attend class vary as does the interpretation of rewards. Massingham and Herrington (2006) suggest that “if we want students to attend and be rewarded by that attendance, we need to think more carefully about assessment. The outcome of the learning task becomes the assessment and not some far away facsimile” (p. 98). Al-Shammari (2016) advises providing students with choices, offering unexpected rewards, and focusing on

emphasizing the challenging and interesting aspects of tasks to entice students (p. 2). And Latif and Miles (2013) write, “to encourage class attendance, instructors might provide incentives to students such as assigning a certain percentage of grades for class attendance” (p. 476).

Clear Attendance Policies

There is significant evidence that an enforced mandatory attendance policy increases attendance, however, the idea is hotly debated. As Macfarlane (2013) warns “institutions need to think through the wider implications of such measures and the effect they can have on the culture of learning” (p. 371). One aspect that is generally agreed upon, however, is clarity around attendance policies with staff support for consistent implementation. Barlow and Fleischer (2011) recommend clear policies to help students understand the framework within which they are operating, “their obligations in terms of preparation and participation; and the efforts they will be required to make in order to establish themselves academically and socially” (p. 235).

Share with Students the Importance of Attendance

It is important to impress on students the proven link between attendance and academic success through repeated emphasis, “I try to include a discussion on the importance of attendance to lectures at the start of each module, link it with some recent research findings, and stress how it can improve student performance and confidence” (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 230). As Chenneville and Jordan (2008) found, “students may be unaware of the negative impact that missing class has on academic performance in college. It may be that undergraduate students lack the experience to understand fully the impact that missing class has on one’s grades” (p. 33).

Create a Culture of Belonging, Community, and Involvement

Oldfield et al. (2019) suggest that across a range of contexts, “belonging is a key aspect of attendance, student retention, and academic success” (p. 444). The authors go on to suggest

“universities must pay attention to the way in which they engage students and motivate them to take full advantage of all that they offer, while at the same time cultivating a sense of belonging” (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 450). This type of engagement takes support through peers, faculty, and the institution in order to help students adjust to independent life and adapt to higher study, “students often do not know how to access support...so universities need to promote their support systems more forcefully” (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 450).

Recommendations for Future Research

Barlow and Fleischer (2011) acknowledge “attendance does not ensure learning, but we know there is a proven relationship between attendance and success” (p. 228). With this in mind, future research is needed to gain understanding of the determining factors behind academic absenteeism. Three societal trends are recommended as areas of focus for further research, as outlined below.

Changing Demographics

Often non-traditional students disengage, have poorer attendance, and subsequently leave programs. With this population group on the rise, research is recommended to better understand these students. “It is important to look beyond the stereotype of a ‘typical’ university student and include a more diverse group in any subsequent research” (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 445).

Educational Consumerism

Many believe marketization of higher education has “turned students into customers and academics into service providers...students seek to ‘have a degree’ rather than ‘be learners’” (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 443). Barlow and Fleischer (2011) believe students are “consumer and entertainment orientated...expecting immediate gratification with minimum contribution” (p. 235). Research is needed to understand if this higher education paradigm shift affects attendance.

Technology

Campus attendance is affected by technology. Massingham and Herrington (2006) ask: “As teachers, should we simply accept that we are being replaced by technology and our customers no longer need us?” (p. 97). With the advent of new technologies, there is a perception that lectures may no longer be relevant. As Kelly (2012) notes, “it is necessary to examine the major drivers of attendance and if they have changed” (p. 19).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature tells us there are myriad reasons students choose not to attend class and a number of stakeholders affected by that choice. In the short-term, faculty who wish to improve student attendance need to be supported with information and concrete strategies to positively impact their classroom environment - not only for the students but for themselves as well. Ideas and recommendations are available to help engage students in a way that brings value to the learning process, thereby naturally drawing students into the classroom. In the longer term, debates will continue around the complex issue of student attendance and its importance to learning, in particular, the role of campus life within the broader spectrum of societal change – everything from technology, to student demographics, to educational consumerism.

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Appendix

Why do Students Choose Not to Attend and What Can we do About It?

Cause for undergraduate absenteeism involves all stakeholders:

Students – lifestyle - competing factors like work, family (Massingham & Herrington, 2006, p.83), maturity and attitude to learning (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 234)

Faculty – quality of communication style and methods (Lopez-Bonilla & Lopez-Bonilla, 2105, p. 193), one-on-one engagement with students (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 444)

Institution – timetabling, location (Nemejc & Smekalova, 2018), class size (Oldfield, Rodwell, Curry, & Marks, 2019, p. 445)

Combination of Faculty and Institution – relevance and interest of course content (Massingham & Herrington, 2006, p. 96), usage of increased technology in the learning process and delivery (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 232)

Six strategies for faculty to combat absentee behaviour in undergraduates:

1. Engage in ongoing teacher training to improve and update methods of communication (Kelly, 2012, p. 35).
2. Introduce more interactive and group work to your practice (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 445).
3. Consider providing rewards or incentives for attendance, these can vary from ongoing assessment, unexpected rewards, and recognition for participation (Al-Shammari, 2016, p. 2).
4. Communicate (repeatedly in various formats) and adhere to, clear attendance policies (Barlow & Fleischer, 2011, p. 235).
5. Share with students the importance of attendance impressing the proven link between attendance and academic success (Barlow & Fleisher, 2011, p. 230).
6. Create a culture of belonging, community and involvement. A feeling of belonging is a key aspect of attendance, students need to feel part of a community and involved in the learning process. Create a sense of belonging by establishing relationships, conversations, learning names and creating activities of involvement and inclusion (Oldfield et al., 2019, p. 450).

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