



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Crafting Fair Attendance Policies: Part One

Emily S. Kahm, *College of Saint Mary, Omaha*

Blog Series: Changing Scholarship

May 13, 2025

Tags: assessment | Changing Scholarship | Attendance Policy | Fair | crafting

There is nothing simple about creating attendance policies. Instructors, rightly, find themselves all over a spectrum of expectations and philosophies, informed by their own experiences as students, their departmental standards, their student population, and their own interest in monitoring learners. I myself have ranged from no attendance policy whatsoever, to point loss for absences, all the way to my current policy, which I'll discuss below. Regardless, I would suggest that teachers think about two major questions when they have the freedom to craft their own attendance standards.

1. What is the likelihood that an invested student will have to miss class at least once or twice during the semester?

This involves analyzing factors like the prevalence of communicable illness (do most of your students live in residence halls where norovirus could sweep through hundreds of them within a month?), the socioeconomic realities (do many students balance school with jobs they need for living expenses? Do they have access to reliable public transit, and if not, how does the need for carpools/rides or the reliability of their personal vehicles factor in?), and family obligations (are many learners parents who would be required to stay home with their sick children?). There's no simple calculus here, but in general, if it's likely that even the most

earnest students will have to miss class sometimes, one's attendance policy might need to be more generous.

2. How have I constructed the course and assessments?

For courses where each day of class depends heavily on comprehending the materials of the previous day, attendance policies may be a way to incentivize that necessary regular attendance. For courses that circle more than build, an occasional absence may not significantly impact a learner's ability to meet the larger course goals, and a looser attendance policy might give students a "release valve" to take care of their larger needs every now and then.

One semester I found myself stuck after my loosey-goosey attendance policy meant that I regularly had half-full classrooms. I knew something had to change, so I reflected.

First, in my context at a small women's college where we focus on first-generation students, single moms, and undocumented students, I knew that missing class was part of life for my learners. Sick kiddos, broken-down cars, and demanding jobs – some of them full-time – meant that perfect attendance would be rare. It also seemed that my students, who have the incredibly high stress levels that come with all those considerations, get sick more often and more severely. I didn't want a policy that added more strain on them.

Second, my courses are designed to be spirals rather than building blocks; we come back to the same major themes frequently throughout the term, each time from a new angle. I don't need my students to fully comprehend a concept before we can move on because I know it will come back around and they might latch on better then. This means I can afford some leniency because a student can still perform very well on assessments even if they miss a day here or there.

All of this meant that my first instinct wasn't too far off – a gentler attendance policy works with my content and for my students. But how could I avoid those half-empty rooms? In the end, I did something radical – I asked my students what they thought I should do. I told them that I wanted to incentivize being in class, because a robust learning community makes the content more interesting and memorable, but that I couldn't countenance a policy that would punish someone for being seriously ill or dealing with a major life event. Within the space of ten minutes, we had come up with a policy that made sense to them and me, and which I currently use. At the start of the term, each student gets a set number of attendance points. If they miss, I take away points... *until* they prove to me that they've caught up on the material. (I record all my classes, so my students watch the video and then show me their notes to get their points back). It's easier for students to just show up than it is to do the makeup work, but no one's grade is ever permanently impacted if they have to miss classes. It might not work for

everyone, but it makes sense for my courses and context.

How have you crafted your attendance policies?

<https://wabash.center/2025/05/crafting-fair-attendance-policies-part-one/>