

Why I Don't Take Attendance

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Several years ago, I read an essay, "[Notes From a Career in Teaching](#)," written by Murray Sperber, a retired professor of English and American studies. He shared this advice: Teach according to your personality. Vary your teaching methods. Don't take attendance.

Take a hard line on late and incomplete work. Give students lots of options for major assignments and exams. Get out of the way.

I found many of his suggestions valuable, but one in particular stuck with me: Don't take attendance.

Before reading Sperber's essay, I'd always taken roll in traditional face-to-face classrooms. I did so when it was easy — in classes of 10 students or fewer. I did so when it was difficult — in classes of 150 students or more. I've called names, created seating charts, and passed around sign-in sheets. (Word of warning: That last one is almost always ineffectual since some students will inevitably "sign in" their absent friends.)

After taking roll, I would transfer all those check marks to the grade roster. That was never a huge chore for small classes, but it often was for larger ones, especially without the help of teaching or graduate assistants.

Taking attendance always seemed more laborious than necessary, and in some cases, it wasted valuable class time. But back then, I never really thought not to do it. My mind-set was always: "Instructors are supposed to take roll; it's how we get students to come to class, to participate, and to submit their assignments on time." Looking back, those are arguably silly reasons for keeping track of who is in my classroom and who is not.

So what does Sperber offer us as reasons for not taking attendance? They boil down to three themes.

- Reason No. 1: Developing adults. In his essay, Sperber reminds readers "that universities are not high schools and that college students are adults." To that end, if students wanted to attend his class on Beat Generation writers, for example, then it was their choice. He wouldn't (and probably couldn't) force them to come. Sperber's students learned his approach early on since his syllabi featured the following blurb: "If you

choose to use the time of the class meeting to do something else, that is your decision. ... You are responsible, however, for understanding the material done in class during your absence, and I will grade your work in the course under the assumption that you have mastered that material. However, if you miss class because of illness, I will help you make up the work."

- Reason No. 2: Curbing disruption. Sperber enacted his no-attendance policy to reduce in-class disruption. In his experience, students who had no desire to be there — e.g., those who constantly "shuffled papers, popped gum, and snored loudly" — drastically "changed the ambiance in the classroom," and not for the better. Consequently, Sperber decided he "much preferred to teach a smaller number of volunteers than a large army of conscripts."
- Reason No. 3: Assessing oneself. Finally, Sperber argued that not requiring attendance allows students "to vote with their feet on [his] teaching." In other words, if certain class periods or courses in general were sparsely populated, that was a sign he needed to rethink: (a) "the section of the course where students did not come" or (b) "the whole course." Conversely, if students "showed up in large numbers," Sperber wrote, "I knew that I was doing a good job."

As most college instructors can attest — and formal studies confirm — student attendance is strongly associated with academic achievement. That is, students who regularly attend class typically earn higher grades than those who do not. But what's the effect on grades when students are bound by mandatory-attendance policies? Notably, very little.

A [2010 study](#) from the University at Albany found that mandatory-attendance systems have a relatively little positive effect on average grades. Similarly, a [professor at the University of Minnesota](#) discovered that simply stressing the importance of attendance to his biology students — as opposed to mandating it — "raised average grades by 9 percent when compared to a similar class in which attendance was not stressed, and reduced the failure rate by 70 percent." Finally, [in a 1999 essay](#), a psychologist argued that students "lose their feeling of control" when professors make attendance compulsory. "If students believe it is valuable to attend class and have a choice in attending," she wrote, "then it follows that students will be likely to decide to attend class, provided the class context lives up to being valuable."

Clearly academics have been debating their attendance policies for decades, and that debate continues to this day.

Just as quickly as you'll find evidence to support dropping your attendance policy, you'll find other evidence urging you to keep it. For instance, Daniel R. Marburger, in [a 2010 article](#), found that "an enforced mandatory attendance policy significantly reduces absenteeism and improves exam performance." Similarly, [three economics professors concluded](#) that a mandatory-attendance policy "has the potential to boost learning, at least by moderately underperforming students."

Naturally, other questions circle the debate over attendance policies:

- Do the classifications of students or level of courses you teach necessitate such policies?
- Are you an adjunct following an institutionally mandated attendance policy, or a tenured professor with a considerable amount of freedom?
- How many at-risk students do you teach?
- How many of your students are on financial aid or scholarships — i.e., programs that sometimes carry their own attendance requirements?

In short, there's plenty to consider before modifying your attendance policy. (Note: I am considering this subject in conjunction with traditional face-to-face classrooms, curricula that demand little in-class group work, and departments with discretionary attendance policies. Online-only courses, or ones that require repeated peer-review and group work may find this policy shift more challenging.)

So far, following Sperber's advice has worked for me. I no longer take roll, yet most of my students regularly come to class and participate, and not just on days when we have quizzes. Moreover, most of them — as best as I can gauge — have no qualms about my lack of attendance policy. In fact, when we cover that section of the syllabus on the first day of class, the majority nods in agreement as Sperber's words about "college students being adults" roll out of my mouth.

At that point, I also discuss the short, in-class assignments I will be giving. These five-minute quizzes, I tell them, are not to keep tabs on their presence, but to ensure they are understanding and keeping up with the material, to gauge their critical approach to media literacy, and to guide subsequent class discussions. Also significant: These weekly assignments always allow me to complete any academic-progress surveys or performance reviews that the institution requires for every student.

Do I have students who hardly attend class or who only come on quiz days? Sure. Then again, that's the nature of college life and would be the case whether I was taking roll or not.