

# Embracing Inclusive Approaches to Attendance Policies and Student Absenteeism

A Guide for Faculty

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# Introduction

Chronic absenteeism and navigating the fine line of flexibility and accountability has become more of an everyday challenge for faculty in the ever-changing landscape of higher education. Divergent views exist among faculty regarding the merits of attendance policies for their courses. This guide provides a collection of ideas that may assist you in addressing the concerns around class attendance. While the University of Massachusetts Boston has no university-wide class attendance policy and faculty should not interpret this guidance to interfere with the principal pedagogy of a course, you may find the different ideas around inclusivity to be helpful to you and your students.

As we know, engagement in the classroom is foundational for deep learning. It can be tempting to equate in-person participation and engagement, assuming that students who attend frequently, ask questions and participate verbally in class are mastering the material more effectively than those who aren't (Ciancanelli, 2023). The pandemic necessitated a new approach to attendance policies, and many faculty embraced the opportunity to learn about recording their classes, posting class notes and offering Zoom office hours to give students access to the content when having missed class (Ciancanelli, 2023). It was common to hear gratitude expressed by students for the flexibility that faculty offered.

However, there has been a recent push to move back to stricter policies regarding class attendance. When applying an equity framework with attendance, one recognizes the inequitable burden of mental health struggles, physical illness and disabilities, visible and invisible, and child and elder care responsibilities that can significantly impact the ability of a student to engage with their peers in the learning process in normative ways (Ciancanelli, 2023).

The existing research on class attendance consistently demonstrates an association between students' regular class attendance and academic performance (Crede, Roch & Kieszczyznka, 2010; Supiano, 2022). At the same time our experiences over the last several years tell us compassion and empathy count and that providing students with flexible options to remain

engaged in their classes even when they are not able to attend in person allows students to navigate challenges related to their physical health, mental wellbeing, and personal circumstances. How then can instructors establish expectations that encourage class attendance yet also provide flexibility for students?

Students engaging cognitively and behaviorally with course content increases the likelihood of their success. Providing an incentive for students to attend your class can increase the likelihood of engagement, but only to the extent your class sessions engage them. No matter what policy you set, you should be explicit about your expectations in your syllabus and early communications with your students.

## **Flexible and rigorous? Can they exist together?**

The strongest arguments for required attendance in class, often tied to “participation points,” center on research that has demonstrated a correlation with higher grades (Chenneville & Jordan, 2012). There has been resistance to flexible, yet rigorous, attendance policies, as many faculty feel that it may be easier for some students to earn grades equivalent to mastering key concepts in the course with less perceived engagement (Ciancanelli, 2023).

Kevin Gannon, a historian at Queens University of Charlotte has offered the following definitions: “Intellectual rigor challenges students to explore complex ideas and refine their own thinking. Logistical rigor requires adherence to ‘strict policies about when and how work is produced and evaluated’” (Pryal, 2022). By embracing a model of intellectual rigor in order to keep high expectations, we can re-design our classroom approaches to allow multiple means of demonstrating mastery of course content (Ciancanelli, 2023).

Universal Design for Learning works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners by dismantling participation barriers and centering learner viability in curriculum development. If the logistical rigor of college courses is reduced, the burden of proving excused absences will be lifted from both students and faculty (Ciancanelli, 2023).

Requiring students to provide doctor's notes for absences, or expecting potentially expensive diagnoses for evidence of mental health and learning disabilities, puts an extra burden on all students, particularly low income students. Students who are registered with the Ross Center for Disability Services may have accommodations that involve flexible attendance – these accommodations must be met. It is imperative to consider that inflexible attendance policies impede the ability for all students to earn grades that truly reflect their mastery of the material (Ciancanelli, 2023). Instead, faculty can keep high expectations that students meet the learning goals of the course, while allowing for engagement with those goals beyond class time (Ciancanelli, 2023).

Universal Design for Learning principles encourage faculty to design attendance policies that support students who could be experiencing incidental illness, an “off” day, are having unavoidable childcare conflicts, and who have a diagnosed disability but do not have appropriate documentation for flexible attendance. With this philosophy, the faculty member will be reducing learning barriers for students who cannot afford the diagnosis for their disability as well as those who do not want to reveal their disabilities for fear of the associated stigma. Asking disabled students to advocate for themselves, whether they have the legal paperwork or not, can add an additional burden to their learning process (Bruce & Aylward, 2021). Flexible attendance policies will support all students to more fully engage without losing energy and motivation due to the need for self-advocacy and will also support those who have other issues that may prevent them from being able to attend class (Ciancanelli, 2023).

**For more general information on Universal Design, or for assistance in implementing Universal Design for your course, please contact [Learning Design Services](#).**

Learning Design Services brings together expert instructional designers, education specialists, systems administrators and graduate students who provide a wide range of teaching and learning services to UMass Boston community, including support with:

- Course development and design
- Accessible learning materials
- Open educational resources (OER)
- Academic integrity
- Instructional continuity

# Considerations When Creating a Class Attendance Policy

A general recommendation is designing an attendance policy that both encourages students to attend class to participate in communal learning with high expectations for mastery of the learning goals, while also allowing for remote engagement with the material when needed to adequately manage physical and mental well-being. The following classroom practices are suggested to start building an inclusive approach to classroom attendance (Ciancanelli, 2023).



- Offer an accessibility survey to your students before the term starts which encourages students to communicate about expected absences as well as religious and disability accommodations. An idea from the [University of Denver](#) suggests including a question that asks students to design an assignment that might approximate classroom participation after having missed class.



- Consider offering an allotted number of absences that students can use to manage their well-being and provide class content to review on Blackboard in a timely manner. This strategy may not work for graduate level courses that meet only weekly. In this case, it would be best to offer a class discussion at the beginning of the term to come up with a communal agreement about how to navigate challenging life moments that would prevent a student from attending class. Students will often design a more rigorous policy to address a learning outcome upon missing class than one would expect.



- Develop pairings or small groups at the beginning of the quarter that function to provide peer support in a number of ways, including sharing notes with a partner who may have had to miss a class session.

*Students who are registered with the Ross Center for Disability Services may have accommodations that involve flexible attendance – the accommodations must be met for those students. Please see the website for the Ross Center for further clarification: <https://www.umb.edu/academics/seas/disability-services/faculty/accommodations/>*

*If your attendance policy has flexibility greater than that offered by flexible attendance accommodations, the student will follow your attendance policy.*

# Pros and Cons of Attendance Policies

(from the University of Colorado Boulder-Center for Teaching and Learning)

## Common arguments in favor of attendance policies include:

- Attendance helps students learn the course material.
- Absent students cannot contribute their unique perspectives to class discussion or other group work, negatively affecting other students' learning opportunities.
- Attendance policies promote professionalism.
- Instructors should help all students learn, not just those students responsible enough to come to class without some form of accountability

**In weighing these pros and cons, you might consider how your attendance policy advances and supports the learning objectives that you have identified for your course.**

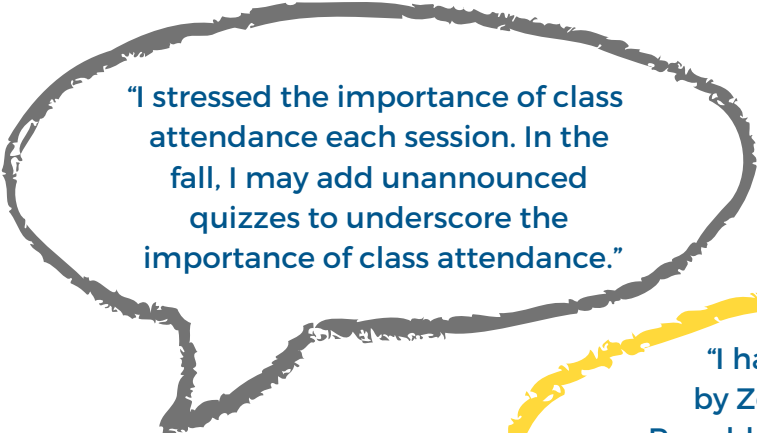
## Common arguments against attendance policies include:

- As adults, students should learn to be responsible for their own education and for managing their time. Attendance policies impede this learning process.
- Students who miss classes will likely perform poorly on other assessments (e.g., exams, papers, etc.). Attendance policies further penalize these students.
- Requiring unmotivated students to attend class results in poorer quality discussions and group activities. Better to let these students skip class.
- The goal is student learning. If students can learn the material well enough (or, perhaps, even better) without coming to class, they should be allowed to do so.



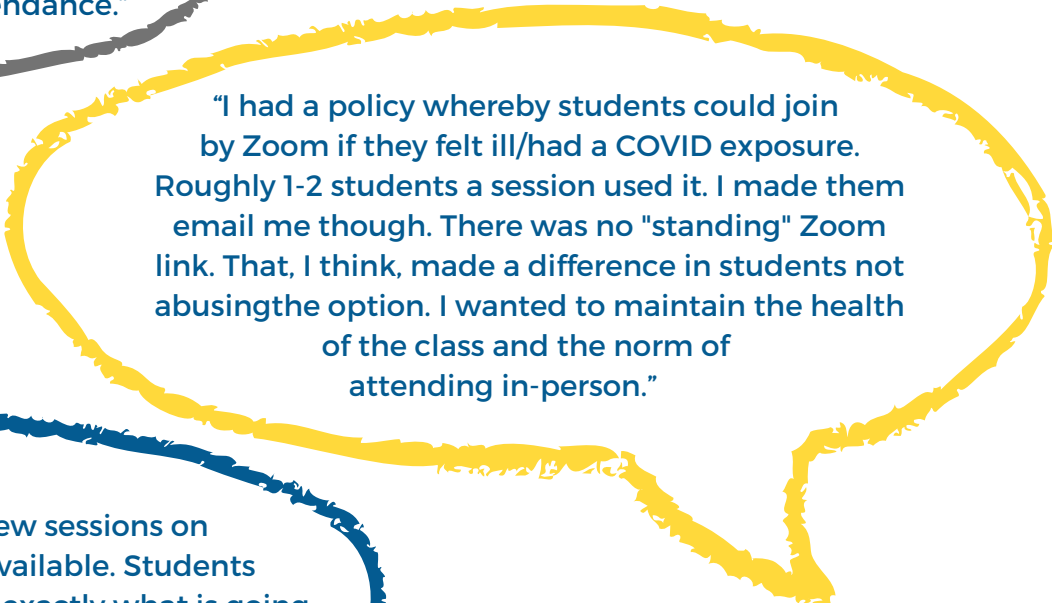
# UMB Faculty Voices

In January 2022, the TEACH Core Team hosted a session, "Student Absences and Effective Techniques to Facilitate Student Learning". Below are some anecdotes that faculty shared during these discussions, .

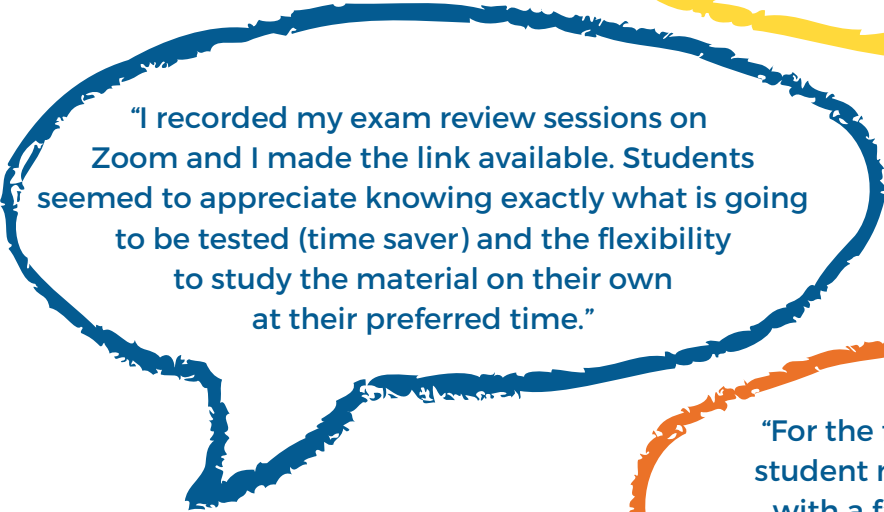


"I stressed the importance of class attendance each session. In the fall, I may add unannounced quizzes to underscore the importance of class attendance."

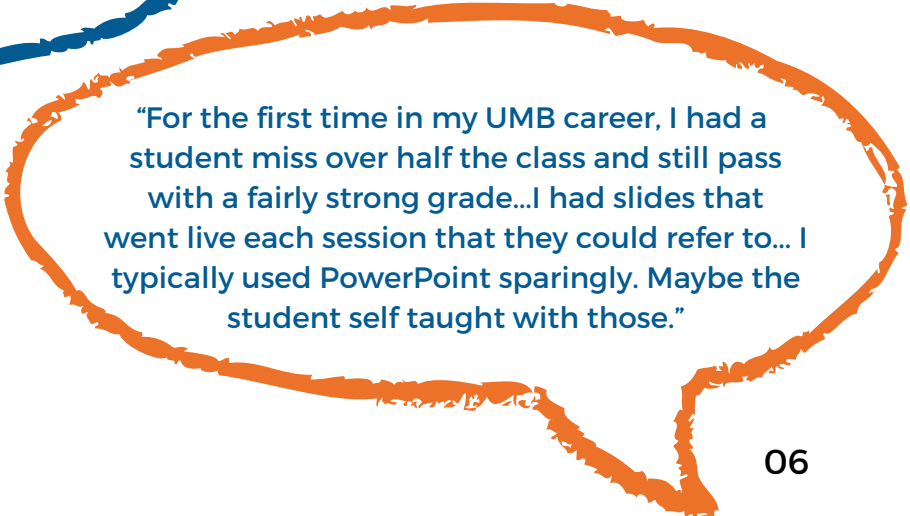
You can view the full Zoom recording of the January 2022 "Student Absences and Effective Techniques to Facilitate Student Learning" session [here](#).



"I had a policy whereby students could join by Zoom if they felt ill/had a COVID exposure. Roughly 1-2 students a session used it. I made them email me though. There was no "standing" Zoom link. That, I think, made a difference in students not abusing the option. I wanted to maintain the health of the class and the norm of attending in-person."



"I recorded my exam review sessions on Zoom and I made the link available. Students seemed to appreciate knowing exactly what is going to be tested (time saver) and the flexibility to study the material on their own at their preferred time."



"For the first time in my UMB career, I had a student miss over half the class and still pass with a fairly strong grade...I had slides that went live each session that they could refer to... I typically used PowerPoint sparingly. Maybe the student self taught with those."



# Strategies and Ideas from Others

Listed below are several ideas and strategies that other faculty and higher education experts have come up with in navigating attendance policies and chronic absenteeism.

## 01 Late Work (from DePaul University)

Like attendance, instructors can set their own policies for late work in the absence of specific criteria set by their college or program. And also like attendance, instructors have a wide range of opinions on late work. For some, deadlines are fixed and only an extreme circumstance such as health emergency, death in the family, etc. will satisfy the requirement for an extended deadline.

Strict deadlines, no matter how well intentioned, can disproportionately impact the most at-risk students. Typically these are students who are working one or more jobs while attending school, raising children, caring for elders, or managing other obligations that limit their time for study and academic work.

Brenda Thomas notes how strict penalties for deadlines can inadvertently penalize strong work submitted late while rewarding mediocre work that is submitted on time. She has adopted a semi-flexible policy where late work can be submitted without penalty for five days, with the opportunity for revising and resubmitting, but beyond that late work is penalized at 5 percent each day it is late and precludes the possibility for revising/resubmitting.

Another option you may want to consider is simply reducing the severity of your late penalty based on the number of days an assignment is submitted after the deadline. For example, if you currently deduct one letter grade for each day an assignment is late, consider these alternatives:

- a deduction of one third of a letter grade per day overdue
- a very small deduction for the first day (e.g., the equivalent of one point out of 100) and a larger deduction (2 or 3 points for each day thereafter)

If you're concerned about potential grading bottlenecks due to many students submitting work long after the original deadline, you may want to set a limit on how long you'll accept late work. For instance, you might deduct a small number of points per day late but only accept work a maximum of five or seven days after the original due date.

## 02 Slip Days (from the [Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning](#))

The Department of Computer Science at Berkeley has popularized the use of Slip Days for many of their assigned student projects. Course syllabi often detail how many slip days are allowed for projects assigned throughout the semester (often up to 5 slip days in total). Slip days are used by students to turn in an assignment after the specified due date. They allow students who either have a minor illness, or other schedule issues (i.e. three other projects or exams due the same day), to turn in the assignment late without penalty.

Note that slip days are often not allowed for assignments where solutions or feedback are given that would provide an advantage to those who choose to use a slip day. Most slip days are counted in distinct 24hr blocks, and one minute late is counted as using another full slip day.

It's always a good idea to be prepared to offer accommodation to students who must miss exams or assignment deadlines due to a more serious illness, such as the flu or an injury from an accident or an assault. Keep in mind that trauma can seriously disrupt a person's ability to focus and concentrate for a period of time. Have a plan for handling requests to make up work that maintains fairness and equity. Recognize that in some instances work or exams may simply need to be excused or an alternative assignment substituted. Consider how you might use educational technologies to allow students to work from home once they are feeling better but are still self-isolating. This can also be useful for students who are concerned about safety issues secondary to an assault or stalking situation.

## 03 Incentive-Based Strategies (from the [UMass Amherst Center for Teaching and Learning](#))

**Offer students bonus points or extra credit for attendance.** Faculty have found success in offering extra credit for answering in-class clicker questions or completing other brief activities, strategies which take attendance and reinforce learning. Some faculty have chosen to offer these extra credit opportunities during selected classes, not announced in advance, while others have offered them in each class but limited the number of points possible to earn.

cont.

**Use a token or ticket system.** Offer all students a certain number of tokens that can be used for a class absence, lateness on an assignment, or a dropped quiz. A token system highlights the importance of class attendance as a learning activity and provides students with flexible choices.

**Take attendance.** The act of taking attendance says that attendance matters. Instructors may choose to grade participation in different ways but taking attendance does signal that the instructor values attendance and knows who is there and who is not. Consider asking students to notify the instructor if they will be absent and following up individually with students who are not maintaining regular attendance.

**Prepare learning contracts for students to sign at the beginning of the semester.** Some instructors use the first class meeting to negotiate class expectations and norms with their students while others establish the expectations prior to the start of classes. In either context asking students to sign a contract communicates the importance of the course expectations.

## 04 Using Exit Tickets to Check in with Students and Foster Learning (from [Professor Hyeyoung Park, College of Nursing, UMass Amherst](#))

The exit ticket is a "permit to leave" that contains a few questions about the course content for that day that students answer before they leave the class each day. Exit tickets allow an instructor to gauge students' understanding of the content, provide opportunities for students to provide feedback about the course and the instructor's teaching, and encourage students to reflect on their learning and synthesize the day's content.

Professor Park uses an online survey form for the exit ticket. After each class, she posts the survey link to Blackboard and students are required to complete it by the end of the day.

Completion of the exit ticket is 15% of their grade. This grade replaces the attendance and class participation grade. Students get full points if they submit at least 15 exit tickets throughout the semester, so they can choose when to respond.

# Other Readings and Resources

## [Time to Make Your Mandatory Attendance Policy Optional?](#)

Chronicle of Higher Education  
(Gerald and Brady, 2019)

## [Judging absences...without judging students' lives.](#)

Inside Higher Ed  
(Reed, 2018)

## [Attendance Options and Considerations](#)

Montclair State University,  
Office for Faculty Excellence

## [Integrating Wellbeing Concepts into Learning Environments](#)

University of California, Irvine

## [Creating Conditions for Well-being in Learning Environments](#)

Simon Fraser University,  
Health Promotion and The Centre for  
Education Excellence

## [The Attendance Conundrum](#)

The Chronicle of Higher Education  
(Supiano, 2022)



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# UMB Faculty Resources

## Office for Faculty Development

The Office for Faculty Development at the University of Massachusetts Boston advances the university mission by supporting faculty excellence in research and scholarship, teaching and learning, and engaged service by providing opportunities for professional development at all stages of faculty careers (tenure- and non-tenure-track, from new faculty to emeritus faculty).

## Center for Innovative Teaching

The Center for Innovative Teaching is a grassroots faculty-led organization committed to collaborative work on pedagogy across all disciplines and colleges.

[cit@umb.edu](mailto:cit@umb.edu)

## Learning Design Services

Learning Design Services partners with faculty, students, staff, and leadership, to design and develop engaging, inclusive learning experiences that employ evidence-based pedagogy and innovative solutions to promote learner success and wellness.

**Healey Library, 3rd Floor**

[learningdesign@umb.edu](mailto:learningdesign@umb.edu)

## Dean of Students Office

The Dean of Students Office is a central resource for students, staff, faculty, and families. We assist our community in navigating academic, personal, and social challenges through support, advocacy, and accountability.

**Campus Center, 2nd Floor, Suite 2100**

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