Teaching and Learning through Student Absences
Updated 07/23/20

Culture & Context Regarding Absences

- As we approach the fall semester, we remain committed to serving our students even as we realistically accept that the COVID pandemic will cause some of our students to become ill. We can expect higher number of absences for more protracted periods of time (both online and on campus).

- We need to support our students' academic success while also encouraging them to take care of their health and uphold their social responsibility by not transmitting the virus. Working collaboratively with students to progress in the course is in their best interest and ultimately ours.

- Our students are conscientious about their work, yet we do not want them to come to class if they are sick. If they know that faculty will work with them through excused absences, they will be more likely to quarantine to avoid transmission and to take care of their own health.

- Faculty are subject matter experts and we take pride that our faculty subscribe to excellence in teaching. Given the challenges with the coming year, a focus on pedagogy will require even more intentional focus. Without intentional pedagogical choices, the subject matter may not transfer to students.

- We are teaching adults who are responsible for their learning. Faculty are responsible for teaching.

- For the protection of faculty and other students, we want to facilitate a classroom culture that discourages students to attend when not feeling well. Rigid attendance policies frustrate this culture by compelling students to attend F2F classes when not feeling well.

- Flexibility on attendance does not compromise learning, rigor, and quality.

- Faculty are encouraged to focus on competency for learning outcomes, not attendance. What constitutes completion of the course?

- Students who need to be absent from F2F may be able to keep up with remote learning.

- Other than university policy 2.1.30 Excused Student Absences Due to Communicable Disease, faculty retain academic freedom for management of their course and are the best to determine how to respond to student absences and issues.

Teaching Tips with Attendance Policies

- Consider presenting an attendance policy in the syllabus that highlights the expectation that the student is: 1) responsible for all learning content and experiences and 2) obligated to communicate to the instructor regarding absences.
- Attendance policies with a defined number of acceptable misses may be problematic in that they penalize students for missing class if they don't feel well, thereby potentially increasing the spread of the virus, by unintentionally encouraging them to come to class when ill.
- Faculty should establish expectations for students to communicate their absence to faculty **prior to the absence or as quickly as they can**. When students don't communicate their credibility decreases, hence faculty are less likely to work with them to make up missed work.
- GTAs should consult with their supervising faculty member on how to handle student absences.
- Faculty are encouraged to set clear expectations for student performance and document student's performance. If a student does not pass, this protects the academic freedom regarding any pressure to "pass the student".
- Faculty cannot ask students about heath related information regarding an absence, but they can expect students to be responsible for achieving competency in the course learning objectives.

Syllabi language examples for attendance

Option 1

As stated in the Undergraduate Catalog, you are responsible for attending class and completing all academic work. Make arrangements with me in advance if you will be missing class due to participation in a Sanctioned University Activity, fulfillment of a religious obligation, exercise of a bereavement leave, or another university-recognized excused absence.

Option 2

If you must miss class due to an extended illness (3 or more consecutive class days) or bereavement, the Student Health Services and the Dean of Students Office can help.

Option 3

As responsible adults investing in their future, Illinois State University students are encouraged to take control of their own education, especially when life and health challenges interfere with the planned process. When students need to miss class, they must be swift and proactive in working with their instructors to take advantage of learning opportunities, develop mastery of course materials, meet the learning objectives as outlined in the course, and prepare themselves for more advanced learning.

Option 4

To be socially responsible, I urge you not to attend class if you feel your safety and the safety of your classmates and faculty may be compromised by your attendance. When you need to miss class, you must be swift and proactive in working with your instructors to take advantage of learning opportunities, develop mastery of course materials, meet the learning objectives as outlined in the course and prepare for more advanced learning.

Option 5

As stated in the Undergraduate Catalog, you are responsible for attending class and completing all academic work. You are also responsible for communicating any absences. If you have missed class or know that you will miss a future class, fill out this form (insert link here).

NOTE: Faculty have access to both Qualtrics and Microsoft Forms. When you create your student absence form ask for the following information:

1) Dates missed or will miss

2) Assignments, quizzes, exams, etc. missed

3) Are they missing lecture/lab/performance/clinical, etc.

Require answers to all questions so that only a completed form can be submitted.

Adjust the settings so that you receive an email when a student submits the form.

You may want to include a link to the form on your ReggieNet site.

Tips for making up work

- When a student has an absence, the faculty can ask students to propose how they will make up the missed work (putting onus on the student to be responsible for making an agreement with faculty).
- Faculty can advise students to form "study groups" or peer pods of student colleagues at the beginning of semester and if they have an absence, it is their responsibility to look to a colleague to get missed work. Instructors might also intentionally develop this at first the meeting by creating a group experiential assignment to do in class (ice-breaker) to facilitate peer pod formation. Some shy, transfer, unsure, etc. students may be reticent to form their own study groups especially in an online class.
- Faculty can pose a question to the class or use as a study group or peer pod assignment to generate ideas of how absences can be handled and how work can be made up. Sometimes students have creative ideas that faculty might not think of.
- Hy-Flex courses with synchronous or asynchronous recording of F2F class allows students who have brief illnesses or who are quarantining, but still well, to continue

making progress.

- For lab courses, have a data set that students can analyze online or watch a video of the missed lab and write a lab report.

Response and referral

- If students are not showing up to class, faculty can refer this behavior to the Redbird Cares Team who will follow up and address student issues https://studentaffairs.illinoisstate.edu/who/safety/rct.php.

- Faculty are naturally caring, but faculty are not responsible for students' physical or mental health needs. Referrals can be made to the Student Counseling Center https://counseling.illinoisstate.edu/, Student Health Center https://healthservices.illinoisstate.edu/, or Dean of Students Office https://deanofstudents.illinoisstate.edu/.

- Faculty can consider the option of an incomplete for students if it is reasonable that a time extension past the close of the semester would encourage successful completion of the course rather than withdrawal or re-enrollment in the course. If the student absence was earlier than the last 3 weeks of the course, the faculty can consult with their chair/director who can consult with the Registrar for an exception to the policy.

- If there is no way for a student to complete the course successfully, the option of withdrawal can be considered.

- Faculty should refer the student to their academic advisor to explore the implications of withdrawals and incompletes on their overall plan of study.

General tips on participation

- Faculty may want to be sensitive to requiring web cameras for Zoom classes due to sensitivity of privacy for home environments.

- Gauging participation in remote learning environments when cameras are not on during live online classes can include:
    - posting in the chat
    - small mini-assignments that students must respond to during class
    - break out rooms in Zoom that require small group discussion
    - calling on students for input throughout the Zoom class meeting
    - using polls during live Zoom classes

- Gauging participation for asynchronous classes can include:
    - assessments that measure receipt of content
    - having students post a response to material on a ReggieNet forum or other discussion board

- For F2F classes that might be highly experiential, consider wearing gloves and

using hand sanitizer an alternative to frequent wipe-downs of material or instruments.

Options for missed classes

- Expect students to receive review of missed class material from "study partners" or obtain review from material on ReggieNet.

Options for missed assignments

- Consider if there are valid pedagogical reasons for a definite due date.
- If not, think about assignments as demonstrations of competency toward achievement of learning goals rather than compliance with an arbitrary deadline (remember these are adult learners responsible for their learning).
- Consider if major assignments can be broken down into increments with titrated due dates rather than putting a high-stakes grade on one assignment with a firm deadline.
- Encourage faculty to have "goal deadlines" for assignments in the syllabus as to ideally when the work should be completed to titrate load of the semester, but allow the students to turn work in flexibly throughout the semester. (When assignments scaffold and build on each other this might not be possible, but with some courses, it allows the students to decide when they can get the work done).

Options for missed exams

- Consider whether objective exams are necessary to demonstrate competency of learning objectives or if there are there other ways for competency demonstration. (this concerns testing in remote situations where we are unable to monitor for sharing of work)
- When you construct the test, think ahead that there will be absences and have one or two "back-up" versions that might reorder questions or slightly change options such as a few questions, order of multiple-choice response options, etc.
- Consider that if you grade on a curve, whether this provides a small disincentive for a classmate to give test information to someone taking it later.
- Consider if there are other proxy experiences to making up an exam such as doing a subjective open-end response exam instead of an objective exam or completing a writing assignment that can demonstrate competency for the material.

Options for missed experiential learning

- Consider if a GA can provide the make-up experience with the student.
- Consider if there is an alternative experience to fulfill the competency.
- Consider if the student can view an asynchronous recording of the experience.