

**The Joint Provost / Academic Senate Committee on Teaching and  
Academic Programs  
Final Report and Recommendations  
May, 2020**

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### **Introduction and Background of the Charge**

The Committee on Teaching and Academic Programs was charged this year with making recommendations to the Provost and the Academic Senate on an attendance policy for the university. The absence of a universal policy toward attendance or even clear understanding of expectations across different schools and types of classes, has led to the adoption of inconsistent approaches. This presents challenges to students and faculty alike, with detrimental impacts on learning and teaching.

Over the course of the spring semester, the committee met several times to discuss different possible approaches to student absences across the university. We reviewed excused absence policies across different parts of USC as well as at peer institutions and peer-reviewed literature on this topic with a view to learning from good practices and ensuring that USC build on it to create a cutting edge, evidence-informed institutional approach to attendance. The recommendations below result from this research and discussion.

The aim is that the recommendations in this report are centered around the needs of our students in all their diversity and that they foster an environment committed to furthering the university's mission, promoting quality instruction and contributing to student wellbeing. They will contribute to an atmosphere of mutual respect among all USC constituents within which the university can deliver a rounded educational experience that includes but goes beyond the academic program.

Real challenges were encountered in trying to create a universally applicable policy for excused absences across the university, which are further explored below. The recommendations below are limited to on-

campus classes (i.e. online classes were not explicitly considered) and to undergraduate and Masters level classes.

Despite this limitation in scope, different types of classes allow for different levels of absence: while the academic integrity of some classes might be maintained with students missing multiple sessions, the success of ensemble music classes or medical rotations, for example, might be threatened by the same level of absence. These recommendations seek to set out parameters for informed and explicit decision-making about excused absences, with some guidance provided at the university level and other decisions left to individual faculty based on their course design. Transparency in the setting of attendance criteria and communication of expectations are at the heart of the recommendations.

For these recommendations to have institutional impact, any policy that is adopted will have to be widely communicated to all instructors through multiple channels.

If there is an overriding principle to our recommendations, it is this: **Attendance policies should represent a healthy compromise between the importance of educational integrity in our classes and respect for student needs.** Each instructor, department, and school should think carefully about the point at which absences will fundamentally undermine the educational value of the class, and also how to best accommodate inevitable student absences.

#### **Our Recommendations:**

- 1. Students Should Plan to Attend Every Class Session.**
- 2. Schools, Departments, and Instructors Should Clearly Define “Educational Integrity” and Absence Limits for Each Class.**
- 3. Absences Should be Treated as “Reasonable and Explained” Rather than “Excused.”**
- 4. Consideration for Religious Holidays.**
- 5. Consideration for Student-Athletes.**

#### **Recommendation #1: Students Should Plan to Attend Every Class Session.**

USC’s mission statement declares that “Our first priority as faculty and staff is the education of our students, from freshmen to postdoctorals, through a broad array of academic, professional, extracurricular and athletic programs of the first rank.”<sup>1</sup> In order to facilitate these goals, the Committee voted unanimously to support the principle that: *Students should plan to attend all instructional sessions for their courses and are encouraged to review their syllabi for expectations of attendance in each course.* This is the baseline assumption of our recommendations on attendance, and it is the basic policy of every peer institution we researched. By default, attendance at every class session should be the expectation of all students and instructors.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://about.usc.edu/policies/mission-statement/>

## **Recommendation #2: Faculty Should Clearly Define the “Educational Integrity” and Absence Limits for of Each Class and Should Explain How Missing Class Will Affect Students’ Learning Experience and Grades**

Each instructor, department, or school needs to define what “educational integrity” means in the context of attendance. When determining how attendance might be fundamental to a specific course, faculty may wish to consider the following factors:

- Do student contributions constitute a significant component of the learning process?
- Is there classroom interaction between the instructor and students, and among students?
- Does the fundamental nature of the course rely upon student participation as an essential method for learning?
- To what degree does a student’s failure to attend constitute a significant loss to the educational experience of other students in the class?
- What does the course description and syllabus say?
- What is the method by which the final course grade is calculated?
- What are classroom practices and policies regarding attendance?
- How is attendance related to the learning outcomes of the course?
- Are there any alternative methods that the student can acquire/demonstrate mastery of the skill that would meet the same learning outcomes of the course when not considering attendance as a factor?
- Are there other faculty teaching the same course/content? If yes, is the attendance policy the same in all sections of the course?

Answers to these questions should inform every instructor’s policy on attendance, which should be indicated clearly and plainly in each syllabus. The point is that faculty have a responsibility *to be clear about the educational integrity of their classes*, and also to *make sure that this information is conveyed to students*, preferably via a syllabus attached to the Schedule of Classes. Some students—such as Student-Athletes—might have other obligations (such as sporting events) that would prevent them from taking classes that have strict attendance policies.

We recognize that what is reasonable in one class may not be reasonable in another. In some cases, attendance is fundamental to course objectives; for example, students may be required to interact with others in the class, to demonstrate the ability to think and argue critically, or to participate in group projects. In other instances, faculty may determine that students can master course content despite some or many absences. Rarely, such as in some graduate courses, faculty may decide that students do not need to attend classes at all, and that course content can (for example) be distributed entirely asynchronously. The timing of a student’s absence may be crucial, as well. In some courses, the timing of the absences matters as much, if not more, than a number of absences. For example, the unique requirements of a performance class may mean that a student who is ill during a week of lectures is able to continue in the class with minimal impact, but a student in the same class who is absent during presentations and critiques may not be able to adequately meet course requirements and may need to withdraw from the course. These consequences are permissible, so long as attendance expectations are spelled out in the course syllabus, those expectations are uniformly applied to all students, and the reasons for the expectations are closely tied to the pedagogic needs of the course.

We also recognize that there has long been a mythology circulating at the university that students' may not be graded on attendance. This simply is not true: there is no written, official policy anywhere that forbids faculty from doing this. That said, CET and other campus stakeholders strongly recommend that grading be based primarily on **participation** rather than attendance per se, though, of course, students generally cannot participate if they are not in attendance.

The main point here is that, in every case, class attendance policies should be uniformly and fairly made based on *the pedagogic goals of the class itself*.

### **Recommendation #3: Treat Absences as “Reasonable and Explained” Rather than “Excused”**

It is time to stop requiring doctor's notes and other documentation as “proof” that a student's absence was legitimate. This practice is in fact inappropriate and should immediately be discontinued by all faculty. Instead, we recommend that each instructor define a set number of maximum allowable absences, and that these absences not count against a student's grade so long as the student gives a **reasonable explanation**.

Our rationale for this recommendation is as follows:

- *An “excuse” letter is not a legitimate way to determine whether a student's absence should be “excused.”* Most mild illnesses are appropriately managed through self-care measures, and seeing a doctor is generally unnecessary. Student Health, the health care provider for most USC students, does not write letters for illnesses of this type, in part because doing so leads to inappropriate health care utilization, but also because a doctor typically is doing nothing more than restating the student's description of symptoms: not verifying whether the illness is legitimate or not. Furthermore, Dr. Sarah Van Orman, Chief Health Officer of USC Student Health, has personally requested that our university adopt this policy.
- As noted, demanding doctors' notes puts undue burden on our health resources. Students should not go to health care providers due to the common cold or other mild illness, nor should they attend class if they are sick. Insisting upon notes in such cases is unreasonable.
- Insisting on documentation puts pressure on students to attend class even though they are sick. Living through the coronavirus pandemic ought to be a lesson to everyone that we should not put pressure on people to work or attend class if they are sick. No one wants to catch COVID, or the flu, or the common cold for that matter. Space should be granted to allow students to stay home if they are sick, thus helping to prevent the spread of illness.
- Instead of focusing on whether a student's absence due to illness is “excused” or “unexcused,” faculty should focus instead on how the absence impacts a student's ability to meet the faculty members' overall expectations as they relate to course requirements (see Recommendation #2, above). Faculty are encouraged to assume that students are generally operating in good faith and being truthful. Faculty should also adopt course attendance policies that allow for the reality that within a given class, some students will experience illness and injury that lead to absences.
- Finally, demanding documentation violates students' privacy. All too often, healthcare notes reveal details about students' conditions, which runs into conflict with HIPAA laws.

In short, faculty should set clear limits on absences in their syllabi and should not penalize students who give **reasonable explanations** for missing class. “Reasonable explanations” can include, but are not limited to: illness, both physical and mental; death of a loved one; personal emergency; sporting events (for Student-Athletes) or other university-sponsored activities; religious holidays, and so on. Students should let faculty know about any reasonable absences as a matter of professional courtesy, and also as a means of staying up to date with the class.

Our recommendation to the administration is as follows:

- Faculty should not be expected to form judgments about whether a pattern of absences suggests a significant health issue that requires special consideration in terms of course work or that indeed suggests a need for medical care.
- Academic units with direction from the University should formulate detailed guidance for faculty on how to respond when a pattern of absences raises concerns about a student’s wellbeing. The guidance should include specific protocols regarding the kinds of student behavior which should set off alarms and what actions should be taken under a variety of circumstances. Faculty should be provided with a designated point of contact with whom they can raise concerns and seek out information and advice.
- This guidance, with particular emphasis on the fact that faculty should not request or accept doctor’s notes as an explanation for class absences, along with updated and specific point of contact information should be made available to all instructors at the beginning of each semester and in the onboarding process for new faculty.

#### **Recommendation #4: Consideration for Religious Holidays**

USC policy on absences grants students excused absences from class to observe religious holy days. The Deans of Religious Life recommend that faculty make efforts to not schedule exams or presentations on holy days; however, this is only a recommendation, not a policy. Schools and faculty have autonomy to decide how they respond to student requests for religious accommodations. Inconsistencies about how these accommodations are treated often create additional stress for students in their attempt to balance both their religious and education responsibilities.

The committee recommends a school-wide policy to include language for religious accommodations on syllabi across all schools. An example of this language used in the Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work is as follows:

“University of Southern California policy permits students to be excused from class for the observance of religious holy days. This policy also covers scheduled final examinations which conflict with students’ observance of a holy day. Students must make arrangements in advance to complete class work which will be missed, or to reschedule an examination, due to holy days observance.” For more information, please visit the Office of Religious Life for the full policy: <https://orsl.usc.edu/life/calendar/absences/>

Our recommendation to both students and instructors is as follows:

- Students should inform professors of their religious observation **at least 2 weeks before the scheduled holidays**. The rationale for this suggestion is that:
  - a. Undergraduate students juggle multiple responsibilities and should not be penalized for forgetting to mention their religious observances at the beginning of a semester
  - b. Students may not feel comfortable sharing their religious identity to professors at the start of the semester. Providing students with an opportunity to build a relationship with their professor prior to informing them of religious observation dates first may be beneficial.
- All instructors should review the Holy Days Calendar, available on the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life’s website ( <https://orsl.usc.edu/life/calendar/> ), and take note of any holidays that fall on class sessions. Instructors should do everything in their power to accommodate students who miss class for religious holidays. In cases where this isn’t possible (such as when a holiday falls on an “unmissable” class—a lab, for example), instructors must be clear about their policies. In addition, instructors should make an announcement at the beginning of the semester noting if classes fall on religious holy days and asking students to alert them of religious observances, either immediately or at least two weeks before any scheduled holidays that conflict with class sessions.

### **Recommendation #5: Consideration for Student-Athletes and Others Involved in University-Sponsored Events**

Participation in USC athletic contests or other university-sanction events (e.g. artistic performances, debate) should be counted as “reasonable, excused absences” (see Recommendation #3). There may be cases where the educational integrity of a given class will not fit with a student-athlete’s sports schedule. In this case, as we noted in Recommendation #2, faculty need to **be clear about the limits on absences, and to make this information freely available—preferably via a syllabus attached to the schedule of classes**. This allows student-athletes and their advisors to plan accordingly. If a class—WRIT 150, for example: a requirement for graduation—has a 3-week limit on attendance, then student-athletes with a busy sports schedule can arrange to take the class during their sport’s off-season.

As with religious holidays, faculty should make every effort to accommodate absences related to university-sponsored events, though we recognize that there may be cases where these absences will affect learning “beyond the point of no return.” In those cases, instructors need to be clear so that students and their advisors can make informed decisions about which classes to take. Otherwise, when a class will be missed for competition or other approved events, it should be considered excused with proper documentation.

Our recommendation to both students and instructors is as follows:

- Students should inform professors of their schedule of university-sponsored events during the first week of the semester so that this can be examined alongside the syllabus and the extent to which these commitments might interfere with course integrity assessed. This will help the

student make an informed decision about the viability of completing the course during that semester.

- As outlined in Recommendation #2, instructors should be clear on the limits of absences for their class. This should be stated in the syllabus and covered orally during the first class of the semester. If an exam will be missed because it falls on the same date as the University-sanctioned event or travel dates, reasonable options to make up the exam include: offering to give the exam at an earlier date; arranging to have the exam administered by proctor (at the hosting institution) during the trip. It is not permissible for instructors to deny students the opportunity to make up their coursework or exams.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Rapid literature review findings

A review of the literature was completed focused on the history of philosophical and empirical research from around the world in higher education. The rapid review was conducted by searching Google Scholar with keywords “student attendance university”, “student attendance university review”, “university attendance policy best practices”, “improving university class attendance policy best practices” from “anytime”. The most highly cited from the first 30 were examined. References related to K-12 were excluded unless something was transferable to a university setting. The search was repeated with restriction to 2016 and newer and the top 30 or so references were examined. A first set of articles were downloaded from the USC libraries and any “pop-up” recommendations made by the journal or USC search were also considered for relevance. An initial summary of the most generalizable research is provided below:

A review of evidence from the last 30+ years by various authors revealed an overall decline in student attendance at the university. This decline reflects many factors: changes in instruction (needs and possibilities) and students (needs, sociodemographic factors, developmental trends). Several authors noted that returning to a previous status quo of attendance policies does not seem necessary nor ethical due to a number of factors that are detailed below. There is an indisputable relationship between attendance and attainment, but it is not so clearly causal and more than likely is a result of numerous heterogeneous factors that contribute to the overall effect. Authors summarized findings and recommendations related to the most important determinants, which could be investigated at USC population-wide, but also locally (schools and departments) to provide context sensitivity to the types of classes, programs, and students affected. Maintaining differentiation (for attendance and related assessment policies) that is sensitive to the type of student, course, and the program is charted as necessary future empirical work by several authors.

Determinants affecting attendance include: real/perceived quality of instruction, policies and expectations, course scheduling, availability of online materials, and individual factors (e.g., work, caregiving, personality, and other demographic, psychological, and socioeconomic factors). The overall recommendations support encouraging, expecting, and monitoring attendance as opposed to requiring attendance, with sensitivity to maintaining some variation in policy through context-sensitivity (e.g., requiring attendance on problem-based courses). The vastly heterogeneous reasons for non-attendance do

seem to contribute overall to attainment and performance problems due to reduced peer and instructor interaction, as well as creating over-reliance on non-traditional delivery of instruction. This last note is of great relevance to our current and post-pandemic instructional reality. Improving the quality of online and hybrid instruction will likely help us develop better practices for in-person instruction and perhaps point to better practices for complementary and alternative modes of instruction for both personal/ incidental and chronic/global attendance issues.

Highly debated determinants meet common recommendations:

- Research on student perceptions of instructor (e.g., reputation, likeability, difficulty) and course content (e.g., relevance, interest) revealed a wide range of motivations for attendance: fear/desire to not miss out, easier than self-study, pursuit of better grades, more meaningful experience, social pressure, social experience pleasure, topic difficulty, class size. Some research shows that complying with student preferences regarding instruction practices and accountability may not improve the desired behaviors (wants vs. needs misalignment).
  - Align teaching and assessments to increase perceived value of attendance.
  - Improve content quality and social interaction.
  - Resist deviation from evidence-based practices due to student pressure and explain what is behind a policy or a method (elaborate on short-term and long-term benefits).
- Although mandatory attendance was theorized to reduce student autonomy and infantilize students, empirical studies found that students associate monitoring with care (although effect may be short-term due to Hawthorne effect). Mandating attendance was still not recommended as it increased problems with some students and did not improve attendance, with side effects possible such as attempts to “game” the system, and disproportionate distribution of benefits between students.
  - Record and notify students of non-attendance in a transparent and ethical manner. This may help with increasing accountability.
  - Measure whether monitoring and attendance policies increase inequities due to course performance requirements.
- Research on sociodemographic and psychological factors is very sparse: little to no effect was found related to gender, some effect was found related to employment factors and financial security, as well as the perception of responsibility on learning (self vs. instructor), and conscientiousness.
  - Encourage a sense of belonging.
  - Provide clarity and transparency on the costs of attendance and living.
- Research on scheduling reveals too much heterogeneity. Some non-attendance is incidental due to scheduling overlap, gaps being too short or too long, and coincidences of testing days/timeslots.
  - Monitor large-scale non-attendance which is linked to poor scheduling or curriculum design.
  - Provide timetables and schedules as early as possible.

- Research on the availability of online materials is very problematic as it doesn't often differentiate between slides, webcasts, or lecture recordings, which produce different results for different students. It does seem that withholding recorded lectures disadvantages the highest achievers yet encourages the lower attenders to show up. Over-reliance on online materials catches up with students in terms of performance. Students' self-reported associations between non-attendance and availability of online materials may not reflect objective measurements of attendance and performance.
  - Explain to the students the benefits of participation and presence.
  - Monitor material usage and performance.

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#### Appendix 2: Information Needed in Each Course Syllabus

Achievement of learning outcomes and individual competencies is based not only on submitted assignments but also on student engagement in the classroom community. Student participation in the in-class activities and discussions helps with their own construction of knowledge, as well as that of their classmates. Commitment to the learning process includes both attending class regularly and participating in class activities. Attendance is a binary act that does not demonstrate acquisition of knowledge or skill. Students should not be awarded or lose points simply for attending or not attending class. However, small, low-stakes assignments, done in class, that measure learning that can only take place by attending class can serve as a valid proxy for requiring and awarding points for attendance.

Because each course may include different approaches to attendance, it is important that each syllabus clearly articulate to students the instructor's expectations around attendance. We recommend that all course syllabi should clearly and explicitly state the following:

- An explanation of the importance of attendance in the course
- Instructor expectations for student attendance
- The process by which attendance is taken during each class
- Course policy for how excused absences will be addressed
- How or if student attendance will affect their grade (e.g. if a participation grade is based on assignments or other activities done in class).