

Chapter 9

Habits, Good and Bad: Opt for the Good Ones

A student writes in her journal:

“First off, we pay to take the class so I believe students should not have mandatory attendance. This is supposed to be a ‘college,’ not high school. I dropped out of a regular public high school because my attendance was poor.

“I’m the type of person to do things on my time. I was homeschooled so I’m used to teaching myself not listening to a professor tell me nonsense I already know. Another thing I hate about this attendance situation. The majority of Universities, have a large population of students per class/classroom. USF on average has well over 200 people in classes. Tell me how they could take attendance? Professors don’t know students names. They could care less if you were in class.

“If a student can pass the tests, and hand their papers in on time why should it matter if they’re in each class, the full length time each time.

“I know not everyone can afford to miss a lot of class, but community college attendance is absurd in my opinion. People have lives, jobs, family and the random days were you are sick and can’t go to class.”

While my student’s tone may sound disrespectful, she is actually quite pleasant and respectful. In fact, after she received her grade (C), she sent me a very nice email expressing appreciation for the class. I am not the least offended by her honesty, but I do wish she had brought this up in class when we could have discussed it – freely and robustly – as a class. Instead, I came across her thoughts only at the end of the semester while reading her journal. She was mostly passive in the classroom. She spoke when called on but rarely volunteered.

Ignore, for a moment, the bad grammar and faulty syntax. Her grammar and attitude are not what bother me. More troublesome is that she fails to understand the purpose of the college class gathering.

Let’s consider her major points:

1. Because students pay for the class, they shouldn’t be required to attend. By implication, this means the student is the “customer,” who pays a fee and gets a grade.

The problem with this argument is that the student is not actually a “customer,” in the sense that one who pays for a cheeseburger is a customer. The college course is a contract, not a purchase order. The college promises to offer a purposeful course of study taught by a qualified instructor. The student agrees to meet certain requirements. The college is entitled to demand that these requirements be met. Otherwise its degrees are meaningless. If participation in classroom discussions is one of those requirements, then students who are absent are not holding up their end of the bargain. If the professor makes students listen to nonsense they already know, that’s a separate problem, one that needs to be confronted. Either the professor is incompetent or the student doesn’t know what is important. This is why God created academic deans – to settle disputes.

My student left public school because she couldn’t follow its attendance rules. Now she objects to the college rules and thinks the college, not she, should change.

2. “They could care less if you were in class. If students can pass the tests and hand in their papers on time, why should it matter if they’re in each class?” This is a valid question that deserves a respectful answer.

It is true that some first-year courses in large universities have hundreds of students. My student correctly states that lecturers in these mega-classes don't care who attends. These lecturers are often graduate assistants who read from notes prepared by somebody else. An old cartoon shows a tape recorder delivering a lecture to 300 other tape recorders, with not one person in the hall. Freshman composition is not one of those classes. Freshman composition is a course that depends on 15 to 25 alert students engaging in robust discussion.

If a friend can take your tape recorder to a biology lecture where you have no opportunity to question the lecturer, then perhaps it doesn't matter, though attendance patterns reflect on a student's work habits. But seminar-type discussion classes are not one-way events. They are interactive. Students and their professor share responsibility in making these classes work.

3. "People have lives, jobs and family." Yes, they do. But college requires the same commitment as a job. Students complain about being dropped after missing four or five classes. Do they think their boss would wait this long to sack them? This is adulthood, not more high school. If this means anything to you, think about your registration in a course with limited enrollment. Our community college enrollments are exploding. Anyone who occupies a space potentially keeps out someone who would like to be there.

New college students should understand that professors are generally not interested in *why* students are absent. Students will offer excuses and notes from doctors (probation officers, palm readers, caseworkers, grandmothers, etc.). Again, think of the job. An absent employee doesn't contribute to his employer's earnings. An absent student does not contribute to the vitality of a classroom.

Life requires priorities. One of my students blew off a scheduled conference because he had a "prior engagement." In his mind, it was OK for me to sit waiting. Here we have someone whose priorities are out of whack.

The freshman year of college is not Grade 13. It is a bridge to adulthood, and those who enter it should be proud to be there, knowing they have embarked on a journey that is not meant for everyone.