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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Students' Motivations for Class Attendance

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Objective. The objective of this study was to describe and categorize students' motivations for attending class or choosing not to attend class.

Methods. Trained student facilitators conducted 5 focus groups. Nine first-year and 24 second-year pharmacy students participated in the focus groups, which were tape recorded and transcribed. A content analysis was conducted using the transcripts. Two coders coded the transcripts and percent agreement was used to assess inter-coder reliability. Frequencies were reported.

Results. Eighteen variables emerged from the data. The percent agreement for each variable ranged from 0.83 to 1.00. The variables cited most frequently as motivators for class attendance by both the first- and second-year pharmacy students were "class handouts not inclusive, faculty presented new information in class," and "faculty apply information to solving real problems." The variables cited most frequently by both first- and second-year pharmacy students as a motivator for not attending class were "class is before or after a test," "faculty read their notes," "personal logistics," and "two or more hour breaks before or after class."

Conclusion. Teacher behavior and test schedules impact class attendance. Faculty members can motivate students to attend class through modifying class schedules, testing patterns, and their own teaching behavior.

Keywords: class attendance, content analysis, professionalism

INTRODUCTION

Many faculty members, from a variety of disciplines and universities, complain about students' class attendance. Lack of class attendance can have a multitude of consequences, for both the faculty members and students. Faculty members may find themselves repeating information, directions, or explanations numerous times and in a variety of delivery formats. As a result, faculty members may require students who miss information presented in class to get that information from classmates. College students, after all, are young adults who are capable of making informed decisions and accepting the consequences of those decisions. A colleague from a nearby college of medicine recently said, "students don't go to class, but faculty don't care." Certainly, this view may be extreme, but it does express an ongoing problem in academia.

The consequences of students not attending class are documented. There is a body of evidence that supports the positive correlation between class attendance and academic performance within college classes across disciplines and on national licensure examinations.[1-9] While these results cannot be interpreted as evidence of a cause and effect relationship, the evidence does suggest a relationship between class attendance and academic performance. Given this evidence, regardless of their personal attitudes toward class attendance, educators should support class attendance and develop effective teaching methodologies that enhance class attendance.

Either from their experience or intuition, students also know there is a positive relationship between class attendance and performance. In a cursory review of student-authored articles on college tips to new students, the following comments were found: "Success in college is about getting your butt up and going to class and getting your work done,"[10] "class attendance is crucial,"[11] and "you may find it tempting to sleep-in and skip class. However, you will quickly find that success in the classroom is linked to class attendance."[12] While these statements are aimed toward undergraduate students, these tips on college success likely hold true for professional or graduate students. In a recent survey of over 200 undergraduate students at George Mason University, only 8% reported that receiving class notes after a missed class was as useful in learning course content as

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attending class and personally taking notes. This same study also reported that students perceived a strong relationship between class attendance and final grades.[13]

Concurrently, pharmacy faculty members are increasingly concerned about student professionalism.[14] Faculty members are concerned about student behavior in and out of the classroom or experiential sites, their attitudes, and their abilities to serve the profession of pharmacy. A variety of special programs and classes have been developed and implemented to inculcate professional attitudes and behaviors, with some success.[15,16] There is also evidence supporting the positive power of student-faculty relationships and interactions on a range of student outcomes, from cognitive skills and behavioral changes to attitudes. Students observe faculty members and preceptors and emulate their behavior such that students' decisions and future goals are shaped by faculty role models. Students who interact more with faculty members are more likely to shift occupational values away from the extrinsic rewards toward intrinsic rewards and to exhibit higher levels of altruism.[17] These values are integral to the ethos of a professional.

Given what is known about the positive effects faculty members have on student development during college and the concerns regarding student professionalism, what happens in the classroom is clearly paramount to changing a range of student outcomes from professional behavior to cognitive skills. Students who miss class lose opportunities to interact with faculty members from whom they may seek counsel and assistance on a variety of issues. Therefore, the objective of this study was to describe and categorize students' motivations for attending or choosing not to attend class.

METHODS

Focus groups were used to collect data, which were analyzed using content analysis. First, a series of questions were developed to address student motivations regarding class attendance. The questions were pilot tested on 2 second-year pharmacy students and minor revisions were made. The questions were: (1) Most likely there have been times when you have not attended class. Please tell us the reasons why you chose not to attend class. (2) Most likely there are classes that you try to attend regularly. Please tell us why you attend those classes regularly. (3) Do you think faculty care whether or not you attend class? (4) Do you think there is a relationship between class attendance and your grade?

Those same students were then trained as focus group facilitators. They were instructed to introduce themselves and provide students with background information about the project, guarantee anonymity and confidentiality, secure participants' permission to audio tape the discussion, and provide every participant with the opportunity to answer questions. Probing questions were developed and detailed facilitator notes were written to assist the facilitators. A pilot study using one focus group was conducted by the author to give the student facilitators a model of how to conduct the activity.

To protect the confidentiality of student participants, the 2 student facilitators managed the focus group selection process. Six focus groups were scheduled: 2 first-year pharmacy student groups and 4 second-year pharmacy student groups, with 10 students invited to each group. The focus groups were conducted in May 2004. That some students would decline the invitation to participate was expected, so the target number for each group was 8 participants. Refreshments were served as an incentive and the groups were scheduled during the lunch hour or at the conclusion of the academic day. Third- and fourth-year pharmacy students were not included in the focus groups as they were on rotations and scheduling would have been difficult.

Two methods were used to select participants. A systematic random-sampling technique was used to select the participants for 4 of the focus groups in an attempt to achieve adequate class representation. In addition, the 2 student facilitators selected a group of students who regularly attended class for the fifth focus group and another group of students who did not attend class regularly for the sixth focus group.[18] Participants' names were kept confidential in order to encourage complete candor from the student participants. The focus groups were tape-recorded and, in order to assure participant confidentiality, secretarial staff transcribed the tapes. As an additional measure to protect confidentiality, demographic data were not collected from the focus group participants.

A content analysis was conducted using the transcripts. Content analysis is a method of analyzing communication using coding, which is grounded in a conceptual framework.[19] It allows the researcher to make replicable and valid inferences from data.[20] Variables for coding were developed using an inductive approach.[21] Variables were designed to be mutually exclusive, exhaustive, and to answer the question posed.[22] Variables were revised after 2 of the 5 transcripts were re-read, and each transcript was read again for a final time before coding. A data sheet was developed for the coding process where a unit is an identifiable message or message component and complete sentences and phrases were the units of anlayses.[22,23] Two coders coded each transcript to establish inter-coder reliability.[23] Both

Table 1. Frequencies of Variables Related to Class Attendance

	Do Not Attend Class		Do Attend Class	
	PS-2*	PS-1*	PS-2*	PS-1*
Variables	N†	N†	N†	N†
Class scheduling				
Two or more hour breaks before or after class	12	8	0	0
Class is before or after test	18	10	0	0
Academic day too long	5	1	0	0
Early morning class	3	0	0	0
Class content				
Class handouts include all the information presented in class	9	4	0	0
Class handouts are not inclusive, new information is presented in class	0	0	21	6
Level of difficulty of class content	1	0	8	3
Perceived relevance of class content to pharmacy	5	2	6	1
Class content is redundant	3	0	4	0
In-class points provided	0	0	9	2
Faculty behavior				
Faculty read their notes	16	8	0	0
Faculty tell stories	0	0	4	1
Faculty apply information to solving real problems	0	0	20	5
Faculty level of expertise	10‡	1‡	0	0
Faculty level of credibility	9‡	0	0	0
Faculty clarity and organization in teaching	9‡	0	6	0
Personal logistics				
Traffic, weather, personal commitments such as doctor's visits, family emergencies, work	16	5	0	0
Class size	3	0	1	0

* Total number of PS-2 focus group participants was 24. Total number of PS-1 participants was 9.
† Highest frequency reported between the 2 coders.
‡ Faculty level either too low or too high.

coders were familiar with the nature of the material and the variables used for coding.[20] The first coder self-trained using the method outlined by Neuendorf[23] and then trained the second coder.

Using the inductive approach, variables were selected from the transcripts and were grouped in 5 broad categories: (1) class scheduling, which included "2 or more hour breaks before or after class," "class is before or after test," "academic day too long," and "early morning class"; (2) class content, which included "class handouts include all the information presented in class," "class handouts are not inclusive," "new information is presented in class," "level of difficulty of class content," "perceived relevance of class content to pharmacy," "class content is redundant," "in-class points provided"; (3) faculty behavior, which included "faculty read their notes," "faculty tell stories," "faculty level of expertise," "faculty level of credibility," "faculty clarity and organization in teaching"; (4) personal logistics, which were defined as traffic, weather, personal commitments such as doctor's visits, family emergencies, and work; and (5) class size (Table 1). The 2 coders then used these variables to determine frequencies in the transcripts' content. After both coders coded the documents, inter-coder reliabilities were obtained using percent agreement for each variable.[23]

RESULTS

Of the 60 students invited to the focus groups, 24 second-year pharmacy (PS-2) students and 9 first-year pharmacy (PS-1) students participated. Because of the low number of participants, the 2 focus groups for first-year students were collapsed into 1 group. The student participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to discuss class attendance and the transcripts indicated that the quality of their discussion was lively and passionate.

Variable frequencies are presented in Table 1 and are the most common representation of data from content analysis.[20] Percent agreements for each variable were calculated and ranged from 0.83 to 1.00. The variables

Table 2. Frequencies of references to faculty caring about class attendance and relationship between attendance and grades

	PS-2		PS-1	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Variable	N*	N*	N*	N*
Faculty care about class attendance	14	3	NA†	NA†
Relationship between class attendance and grade	9	0	0	4

* Highest frequency reported between the two coders.
† Students did not answer this question in the transcripts.

that were cited most frequently for both classes as a motivator for class attendance were "handouts not inclusive and faculty present new information in class" and "faculty apply information to solving real problems." The variables cited most frequently by both classes as a motivator for not attending class were "class is before or after test," "faculty read their notes," "personal logistics," and "2 or more hour breaks before or after class."

Students were also asked whether they thought faculty members cared about class attendance and whether they believed there was a relationship between class attendance and final grade. Those frequencies are reported in Table 2. The percent agreement for these variables was 1.00. The majority of the students reported that they believed faculty members cared about class attendance, and they also believed there was a relationship between class attendance and grade.

DISCUSSION

Several themes have emerged from these data. The first theme that emerged relates to examination scheduling and its impact on class attendance. These data suggest a "test-to-test" culture where students skip classes immediately prior to or after an examination. One student participant stated, "…after a test you are still worn out from studying and you're like, 'I'm not going to class, I'm going to go out and get breakfast.'" Another student stated, "I'm a late studier. It's really hard to focus by having a test so early and having to stay awake for classes until 5:00 that night." The second theme revolves around class scheduling. At this campus, which is primarily a commuter campus, students appear to perceive breaks in the day of 2 or more hours as lost or wasted time. In spite of ample study space on campus, commuter students prefer to leave campus during long breaks in the academic day and they do not return for classes scheduled after these breaks.

The final major theme in these data is class content and faculty behavior. Although class content and faculty behavior variables were coded separately, they are obviously closely related. The variables "class handouts include all the information presented in class" and "faculty read their notes" are closely linked and appear to be a driving force in classroom attendance. For example, one participant stated, "I don't go to those (classes) where they just review the notes where I can read them myself and they just read them to you. They don't explain any outside of what you know so…." and "…boring, they just read off the slides anyways and I can do that on my own time." On the other hand, students regularly attend class when the handouts are not inclusive and faculty present new information. Students report that applying material to real-life settings is an important motivator behind class attendance. Faculty members who provide real life examples and stories are more likely to have students attending their classes. For example, it was stated, "I actually like the psych stories, it helps explain. Make it real, don't just give me information, but give me actual cases or give me something that makes it more tangible," and "…examples they gave help me remember some concepts in another form…" However, expertise appears to be a delicate factor that drives attendance. Students do not attend class if the level of faculty expertise is perceived as either too high or too low.

Personal logistics included variables such as traffic, weather, doctor visits, and family emergencies. This variable category was ranked second by the PS-2 participants and third by the PS-1 participants. These are common and expected reasons why students miss class. Whether these students, given the urban-commuter nature of the University, experience higher levels of missed classes due to personal logistics than other students is not known.

Interestingly, class size was mentioned as a factor affecting attendance, but not as frequently as anticipated. The College had recently increased its incoming class by 33% and faculty members were concerned that larger class sizes might breed feelings of anonymity among students that could potentially negatively affect class attendance. However, this attitude was not largely apparent in this small study, even though a few participants thought that the large class size made the classroom setting too noisy and distracting, which deterred students from attending class.

Students believed that faculty members cared about whether they attended class and most of them believed there was a relationship between class attendance and grade. In spite of these beliefs, students were, at times, still motivated to skip class.

Limitations

Clearly this is a small, 1-school sample study with inherent limitations. The use of focus groups provided the investigator with an opportunity to probe for deeper understanding of behaviors. The questions were developed to be purposively broad to allow for conversation to evolve and for participants to choose their own answers, rather than to select from previously developed anticipated responses. These data describe only select first- and second-year professional students at an urban commuter campus who participated in the focus groups. However, the insights gained from this activity can guide the development of questions that quantitative research can address and inferences can be made to the larger student population.

The 2 student facilitators conducted all 5 focus groups within a 3-week period of time near the end of the quarter. Facilitator fatigue may have impacted the quantity of the data in the final focus group.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study have clear implications for practice. Today's students have many competing responsibilities, such as family and work commitments. In our primarily commuter population, students apparently do not view blocks of free time during the academic day as an opportunity to pursue on-campus activities, but rather as an opportunity to go home early and assume other tasks. Class scheduling may be one of the more difficult tasks in college administration, but care should be taken to minimize time between classes to avoid possible negative effects of large gaps of free time. In addition, the "test-to-test" culture impacts class attendance since students appear to follow a "rob Peter to pay Paul" routine. Faculty members must continue to grapple with the use of class time and examination scheduling in order to balance content delivery with skill development and assessment and allow students to focus on examinations without sacrificing class time and content areas. Shorter, more frequent assessments may be one solution. Focus group participants stated "…if you have an A going in, then you don't have to take the final" and "every 2 weeks we should have 1 Friday or 1 Monday off." Less scheduled classroom time, which could provide more study time, might result in increased attendance. Certainly proposed solutions must be weighed carefully against consequences.

Undoubtedly, teaching effectiveness has an effect on class attendance. Students appreciate effective and engaging teachers and attend their classes. Conversely, students do not attend classes where faculty members simply read from all-inclusive notes. This should serve as a reminder to make information come alive in the classroom by incorporating examples, cases, and stories to help students relate new concepts and information to their own experiences. Keeping students in the classroom can also provide opportunities for student faculty interaction, which in turn may enhance student professionalism.

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