



Research

Classroom attendance: Factors and perceptions of students and faculty in US schools of pharmacy

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Abstract

Objectives: To determine which factors most influence pharmacy students' decision to skip class from the perspective of students and faculty in schools of pharmacy in the United States. In addition, a secondary goal was to assess perceptions about the importance of classroom attendance.

Methods: Using self-explicated methodology, a survey was developed that assessed course and instructor attributes and factors, attitudes, and perceptions surrounding student decisions to skip class. The survey was administered electronically to students and faculty at six pharmacy schools. Student–faculty comparisons were made to identify areas of disagreement.

Results: The top course-related attributes for why students skip class were access to digital recordings of class, access to internet-streamed class, and the provision of detailed handouts with class time offering little new information. The top instructor-related attributes for why students skip class were instructors who predominately lecture, who are dull and boring, and who lack organization. Students also were asked to identify circumstances in which they have actually skipped class and 69% of students marked they missed class to get other schoolwork done, and over 50% marked because they had an exam that day. When asked about the importance of attendance, students and faculty felt attendance was part of professionalism and impacted their grade. Other factors related to attendance are reported.

Conclusions: In general, there was agreement between students and faculty on why students skip class, but not on the need for attendance policies.

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Introduction

Faculty tend to believe that student attendance at scheduled class is an integral part of higher education. However, anecdotal reports by faculty and administrators suggest that there are “too many” empty seats in classrooms. This anecdotal evidence is supported by objective data that describe student attendance patterns. In one

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survey, students reported being absent an average of 3.17 times per course.¹ In another study, 52% of respondents admitted to missing at least one class or tutorial session in the last seven days.² Much of this research has been completed at the same time that colleges and universities are devoting more resources to distance learning: archiving digital content and utilizing technologies that enable asynchronous teaching and learning. These changes may provide additional reasons why students may choose to skip class.

Student attendance is influenced by many factors including student and faculty attitudes about learning, assessment methods, technology, lifestyle-related pressures (e.g., competing work and family obligations, the need to travel to and from campus, extra-curricular activities) and the health of the student-teacher relationship.^{1,3–5} Whether frequent attendance is causally associated with better grades is a subject of debate; there is evidence that coming to class is at least modestly correlated with success on course assessments.^{1,3,6–8} These findings are intuitive as frequent class attendance provides students greater interaction with course material and distributes the interaction over time as opposed to all at once or “cramming,” which has been linked to better exam performance but not necessarily retention of material.⁶

Besides the potential negative impact on course performance, poor attendance is a problem in programs that train health professionals, including pharmacists, because classroom attendance may also encourage professional socialization. This socialization may be a function of encouraging stronger student–faculty relationships and student–student relationships. In turn, stronger relationships and better interactions can promote the development of professional skills, behaviors, attitudes, and values—each integral to a successful pharmacist.^{9,10} The research suggests that faculty–student interactions are key determinants of professionalism and the developing of critical thinking and metacognitive skills.¹¹

As previously mentioned, the past decade has seen widespread adoption of various technologies that allow students to access digital handouts, archives of recorded class lectures, or wholesale online coursework in addition to, or sometimes in lieu of, traditional classes.^{12–14} Several papers have characterized the relationship between expanded access to learning materials and attendance in scheduled classes and have not demonstrated a negative impact on attendance as students made use of additional materials.^{13,15,16} Another paper demonstrated a positive correlation between the availability of online notes and class attendance and performance on exams.¹⁴

In a 2009 paper describing the impact of offering digitally recorded files in a pharmacotherapeutics course, researchers concluded that students valued the recordings and found them helpful to their studying. Overall, 82% of students reported listening to the audio files in preparation for exams. However over the same period, faculty noted an estimated 25–75% decrease in class attendance.¹² Another project that

evaluated the impact of offering audio recordings, in addition to traditional in-class pharmacotherapeutics lectures, found that 71% of students reported listening to the recordings; most while taking notes from the material. Overall, 90% of respondents agreed that availability of recordings did not affect class attendance, though objective measures of attendance were not reported.¹⁷ In a follow-up project, student self-reported utilization of audio recordings were not associated with improved examination scores.¹⁸ Since use of internet-based content and course management systems have become a mainstream part of higher education, a meta-analysis was conducted examining the relationship between attendance and grades. The researchers found no notable correlation suggesting that widespread use of technology has not altered the value of classroom attendance.⁶

While there are equivocal results on the impact of class attendance on academic performance, there is little information describing the opinions of pharmacy school faculty about their students' pattern of classroom attendance or if students or faculty perceive attendance is important in the age of podcasting and asynchronous learning. As such, this study sought to determine which factors most influence pharmacy students' decision to skip class from the perspective of students and faculty and to assess perceptions about the importance of classroom attendance. The goal is to characterize perceptions or misconceptions in order to inform development of policy or instructional techniques that would better engage students in learning.

Methods

Study procedures were approved by the IRB at each of the participating institutions: Campbell University College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Duquesne University Mylan School of Pharmacy, D'Youville College School of Pharmacy, Northeastern University School of Pharmacy, University of North Carolina Eshelman School of Pharmacy, and College of Pharmacy at Xavier University of Louisiana. Students were eligible to participate in the study if they were enrolled in the PharmD program at one of the participating institutions. Students who were under 18 years of age or who were not full-time students were excluded. This study was conducted between January and March 2012.

Two surveys were developed, one for eligible students and a parallel survey given to all full-time, pharmacy faculty members at participating institutions. Part time and adjunct faculty were excluded as they often are clinical preceptors with little classroom experience. The survey had three sections. Section one included Likert-type questions regarding attitudes about attendance. Section two was a self-explicated conjoint analysis (SE) on course and instructor factors that impact a student's decision not to attend or skip class. The last section asked for demographic information.

The SE is an analytic approach popular among marketing researchers to determine customer preferences.^{19,20} It has been increasingly used to answer questions about

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