

How to Promote Attendance in the Post-Pandemic Classroom

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[Working paper context: The broader hypothesis behind this paper is that universities made genuine progress in encouraging more accommodating teaching practices during the pandemic. These practices should be maintained, but we also need to be aware of the potential risks or downsides of overcorrecting pre-pandemic teaching practices. Too much flexibility can increase burdens on students, teaching assistants, and instructors, and it can undermine a productive teaching environment. In this short paper, I focus on my concerns regarding classroom attendance, specifically how accommodating class policies can undermine class attendance and participation. I describe my attempts and initial success at balancing the options of pressuring students to attend class or giving them the freedom and flexibility to manage their schedules as best fits with their life circumstances.]

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The shift to remote teaching in 2020 was difficult, taxing, generally horrible, but I must admit that I improved as a teacher going through the experience. I saw that my students were more disengaged during remote classes and having a much harder time learning, so I adopted new teaching practices to reach students. I also became more aware of the challenges facing different students and I adapted my classes to be more flexible and accommodating to student needs. When we were transitioning back to in-person classes in 2021, I was excited not only to see students again but also to enhance my classes with hard-earned pandemic lessons. Appreciating that students have complex lives and various burdens, I would record class sessions and make all course materials readily available. Formal assessments would be available online with a high degree of flexibility in terms of topics and timing to allow students to manage the class according to their schedule and interests. I would also try to make the most out of the

in-person experience by making classes more interactive with more opportunities for questioning, discussing, and applying ideas. Unfortunately, this was not a success. Students seemed eager at first to be back, but class attendance plummeted over the term, and many students seemed as distant as during remote classes. There are external factors at work but I believe that my new course policies also played a part as students felt less need to attend classes.

I see now that it is necessary to be cautious with new course policies, as poorly implemented flexibility can undermine the development of a rich classroom learning environment. I stress that the policies were poorly implemented; I believe that it's important to offer options and accommodation, but we also need to be ready to mitigate potential drawbacks. In what follows, I offer strategies for encouraging student attendance in the post-pandemic era while still maintaining accommodating course policies. I begin by considering reasons for why students skip classes, particularly in the post-pandemic era. I then discuss some corrections I made in my classes to improve attendance and I share some evidence of initial success with my new attendance policies.

1. Why is attendance low?

It has been well-observed that students seem more disengaged than they were pre-pandemic. For example, [McMurtrie \(2022\)](#) discusses a “stunning’ level of disconnection”: students not attending classes, missing assignments, uncertain how to interact with each other, and generally just seeming lost or isolated in an environment they don't understand. McMurtrie focuses in particular on external factors that are

weighing down students. For example, we are still in a global pandemic, hyper-partisan politics remain tense, students and their families may find themselves in increased health and financial insecurity, and students are simply relearning how to balance social and academic life. However, she also suggests that some sources of disengagement may stem from class policies themselves, particularly flexible, lenient policies that students relied upon during their pandemic classes. “Did the accommodations that grew out of the pandemic — including flexible attendance policies and fluid deadlines — foster a belief that they could catch up later, but they don’t?”

[Holstead \(2022\)](#) also highlights this trend of student disconnection. In surveying her students, she found that along with external factors, students pointed to class policies, particularly if they saw that attendance was not actually required in a class. One student, for example, confesses, “I would often skip if I knew the material covered would be accessible to review.” Another student confesses for her roommate: “[she] oftentimes does not go to classes because the lectures are recorded and posted on Canvas. So why would she go if she can lie in bed and watch them?” Holstead’s observations match pre-pandemic literature on student absenteeism. See, for example, [Moore et al \(2019\)](#), who survey a wide range of studies. In particular, they identify how accommodating course practices like providing lecture notes and recordings can have a detrimental impact on attendance. Similarly, [Edwards & Clinton \(2019\)](#) report how the introduction of lecture capture technology can substantially decrease class attendance.

In order to bring students back to the classroom and help them engage with the course, it is thus tempting to scale back some of our course accommodations. Holstead, for example, recommends having a mandatory attendance policy (with a few free

absences) and reducing the amount of material provided online so that in-class time is essential. [D'Agostino \(2022\)](#) similarly explains why many instructors have decided to stop recording lectures in order to restore attendance (though she also lists other concerns such as privacy). Instructors could go even further with other graded elements like in-person quizzes or making things like review sessions only available during a live class.

I'm hesitant, however, to abandon the accommodations I adopted during pandemic teaching. In principle, at least, I agree with scholars like [Macfarlane \(2013\)](#) and [St. Clair \(1999\)](#) who oppose strict attendance policies on the grounds of respecting student choice. They also point out that strict policies can discriminate against students who have disabilities or need to work full- or part-time to support themselves and sometimes even their families. Some students will seek accommodations which will hopefully be granted but others might not, or they might seek other classes that can accommodate their needs. I think it's important to respect the medical, financial, and other pressures put on students and to make courses flexible enough to allow them to succeed while balancing their other responsibilities (particularly in the ongoing irregularity of our world).

Instead of forcing attendance, Macfarlane and St. Clair suggest that instructors need to make their class sessions more inherently valuable so that students willingly attend simply for the sake of learning. The surveys of absenteeism listed above echo this point. Moores et al, for example, note that students appreciate interactivity in class, such as discussions and group work. [Sloan et al \(2020\)](#) also point out that students become apathetic when classes are only lectures. Holstead's students put it even more

bluntly: a key reason students reporting skipping classes is because of “boring teachers.” I agree with these obvious points: interactive classes are more interesting and are presumably more valuable. Further, I also understand why students would opt to rely on recordings rather than attend classes that are purely lecture based. If they are going to sit still and watch an instructor talk for an entire class period, why not watch that same lecture somewhere more comfortable and convenient? Students will miss out on spontaneous interactions before and after class, as well as some potential to ask questions, but they understandably feel they won’t miss out on much else. If the class is interactive, with different learning activities and chances for student engagement, then there is much more reason to be in class.

However, I’m not convinced that interactive classes are enough to sustain robust attendance. My initial post-pandemic course efforts focused on creating a variety of interactive opportunities in my classes to make them more intrinsically valuable. At first this was successful and met with student enthusiasm, but as the term progressed, students gradually ceased coming to class; this led to a downward spiral with the classroom becoming increasingly empty and participatory exercises thereby suffering as there were fewer people to contribute to a discussion. Moreover, the content that I offered online such as recorded lectures and tutorials were vastly underused, although access did spike shortly before the last chance to complete major assignments. While I respect students’ autonomy, I also believe that many students make some shortsighted decisions, particularly as they are learning how to navigate the independence offered in university and a newly (quasi-)adult life. As much as I might wish that students would

value and appreciate the value of class opportunities, I believe that they may need more concrete incentives to encourage them to be in class and to experience the value offered.

After two quarters of poorly attended classes, my main focus was to find a way to bring students back to class. I wanted to put enough pressure on students to participate while at the same time still respecting their freedom as well as continuing to offer as much flexibility and accommodation as I could. I believe that I have found a way of balancing these concerns. I will turn now to share some of the strategies I have developed.

2. Encouraging Attendance

To be clear about my goals, I am not encouraging attendance for its own sake or for mine (though I admit it is somewhat demoralizing to try teaching a room missing the majority of the class). My primary goal is to have students present and interacting with ideas, thinking on their own or discussing concepts with each other. While I try to put some pressure on students to attend class, I want to give them the freedom to not be in class, whatever the reason for their absence. I also want my course material to be as accessible as possible and I record all class sessions so that students who are present can review and so that students who are not present can still learn from the class. For those students who do not come to class, I still want to offer them some form of the active learning experience that I seek to offer in my classes.

Overall, I am seeking to balance goals of attendance, participation, freedom, and accessibility. I will explain my strategies in more detail below, but the most basic way of putting it is that I incentivize students with a participation grade. Class attendance is the simplest way of earning this grade. Students can still earn their grade outside of class,

but it takes a bit of extra effort. Ideally the quality of class activities draws students in, but if not, the effort otherwise still nudges students towards deciding to come to class. I will elaborate on this basic outline to give a concrete set of examples, but the core point is the incentive structure to be present and the extra effort required if not present.

I dedicate a relatively small portion of the overall grade to participation (10%), expecting or hoping that all students will get full participation points, while the rest of the grade is divided among more discerning assessments (quizzes, papers, tests). The default assumption is that participation will be completed during a live class session. Students who miss class can make up for their absence by watching the class recording and responding to the participation questions in a timely manner. My policy requires responses to be completed within a week of a class session; time extensions may be granted, but without the time pressure I worry that students will delay, waiting until the last moment or finding that they ran out of time. The make-up opportunity is quite minor, not requiring much extra effort beyond reviewing the class, but it seems to be enough to alter many students' calculus in deciding whether to attend class. Some students attend class for its own sake or because they genuinely appreciate the interactive opportunities. If that intrinsic motivation is not enough, the small extra assignment changes the incentives for other students: to avoid the make-up effort, it is easier for them to attend and participate in class. For students who nevertheless can't make it to class (e.g. because they're sick or have other obligations), they still have incentives to keep up with the course and respond to the class material. However, for students who do attend, they interact with each other more and have a richer class environment because of it (which in turn may encourage future attendance). A benefit of

this open structure is that I do not need to adjudicate reasons for absences (other than potential longer term extensions).

I will try to identify a variety of related strategies within this general incentive framework, but it may be helpful to offer even more concrete details, so I will describe more precisely my class structure. Most of my classes are in public law though I also teach political theory classes (enrollment ranges from 70-120 students). Occasionally a class session will be entirely lecture based, but I try to include some participation events in every class. Most often, I will give students a group exercise (“think-pair-share”) where they need to discuss and respond to a few set questions on the topic we are covering (clear questions are important to keep students on track). On the first day of class, the discussion is mostly an exercise to get students used to talking with each other, though beyond introductions, I ask them to identify questions about the course and discuss the application of a broad course theme to get them interested in the topic (e.g. “1. When does it seem like free speech is particularly in danger today?, 2. When does it seem like we have too much free speech such that it is a danger?”). In later classes, I ask them to respond to the material such as evaluating competing ideas (e.g. a free market or regulation approach to campaign finance) or applying a theory to a new situation. While students are discussing, I can listen to their responses, I can ask quiet students to explain what their group is discussing, and when we return to the larger session, I can draw on salient points or call on groups to share their response. In other classes, I may give students individual response tasks where they think and write an answer to a question. I often do this for more controversial material (e.g. views on abortion or affirmative action, explaining a perspective they favor or the strongest challenge they

can identify to their own views) though this exercise can also be used as a simple check on their understanding, asking for summaries and questions. The aforementioned exercises are relatively short (e.g. about 10 minutes of discussion along with a larger class breakdown) but towards the end of a unit, I also create larger dedicated discussions such as a debate on a topic or a jigsaw activity where students pledge to read one of a set of articles then come to class ready to share ideas on their article with each other. For example, in my law classes, I have students divide up a set of proposals on Supreme Court reform or competing perspectives on hate speech (libertarian vs critical race theory responses). In my theory classes, I assign a small number of students to be discussion leaders for an article, where they write a reading reflection ahead of time and then take the lead in longer group discussions, responding to set questions and sharing their views on an applied article that I do not lecture on (e.g. a debate between civil rights leaders such as Malcolm X and James Baldwin).

In all of these participation events, I have students record an outline of their responses to the questions on a separate piece of paper, either by a group recorder or individual students. At the end of class, students turn in their participation sheets which are graded purely based on completion: were students present and did they discuss or reflect on the questions? If so, they get participation credit for the day. If not, they are marked absent with an incomplete score. Scores are recorded quickly by myself or TAs as the sheets require very little scrutiny (though I sometimes skim through responses to see if any themes were present that weren't addressed in the larger discussion). For students who missed the participation credit, they have one week (barring exigent circumstances) to make up for the absence. They do this by watching the recorded

lecture, turning in a sheet that includes their notes and their response to the participation questions. I currently have students email their note sheet to a shared course folder (I use Box.com, though Dropbox would work too) so that a TA or I can correct their incomplete score. This is also a quick process, just checking for completion of the task (notes and a response to questions).

There are many other ways that participation could be encouraged and assessed, whether in larger groups (e.g. debates) or more of a focus on individual activities (e.g. minute-papers, murky questions). If I were to scale up the strategy for larger classes, I would use a quiz survey function on our learning management system (Canvas), relying on one student in a group to have online access during class (while still offering a paper option if necessary). The participation quiz could be left open after class, locked with a code accessed through the lecture material. An even more automated option would be to use clickers or an online multiple-choice quiz to indicate a response to some preset options; this option would not allow the same range of substantive responses (though students could still give voice to other ideas especially as they talk with each other), but it would have the benefit of being recorded immediately and offering a quick display of the range of responses. Students not in class could still log on outside of class to respond to questions with a time-limited code posted with the lecture.

I should note that lecture capture is not strictly necessary. I rarely have access to rooms with built-in recorders, so I use a webcam and microphone attached to the laptop I use with my slides. An audio recording would also serve the purpose of giving students access to the content and exercises that they miss. If an instructor preferred not to have any type of recording, they could post content slides or even just the questions covered.

This latter option might be a bit too sterile, not offering the same living sense of connection to the course, but it would still have the benefit of putting some pressure on students to keep up with the material. I suspect, however, that if it is easy to quickly respond to the questions (as opposed to watching the session's video), students might increasingly take this option, as attending class won't seem like the easier default.

I think there are many ways of implementing this general strategy, but the general goal, again, is to try to balance putting some pressure on students to attend class while at the same time preserving their freedom and keeping the course material accessible. I will turn now to share some preliminary evidence of the success I have had across the two previous quarters of instruction.

3. Success at Balancing Participation and Accommodation

I will share some evidence and feedback from my courses, but I stress that this is not empirical evidence from an experiment. There are too many confounding factors and I don't have sufficient data from previous quarters to make any strong comparisons. In pre-pandemic courses, I had strict attendance policies and the recorded attendance rates were generally 85-90%. However, these classes were not very accommodating (other than a free dropped absence) and much of the class content was unavailable outside of the live class. In my first two quarters back in person (Fall 2021, Winter 2022), I put a premium on accommodation. I avoided any kind of participation grade because I did not want to pressure students to be in class if they weren't yet ready and I made all material available online. Anecdotally, I'll share that these early classes had abysmal attendance. Each course started relatively strong with around three-quarters of students in attendance, but these rates consistently fell over the quarter, going down to

around a third near the end of the quarter. The only measurement I have from this period is occasional sign-up forms for the larger jigsaw discussions in which around 45% of students signed up (though not all followed through to attend the class discussion).

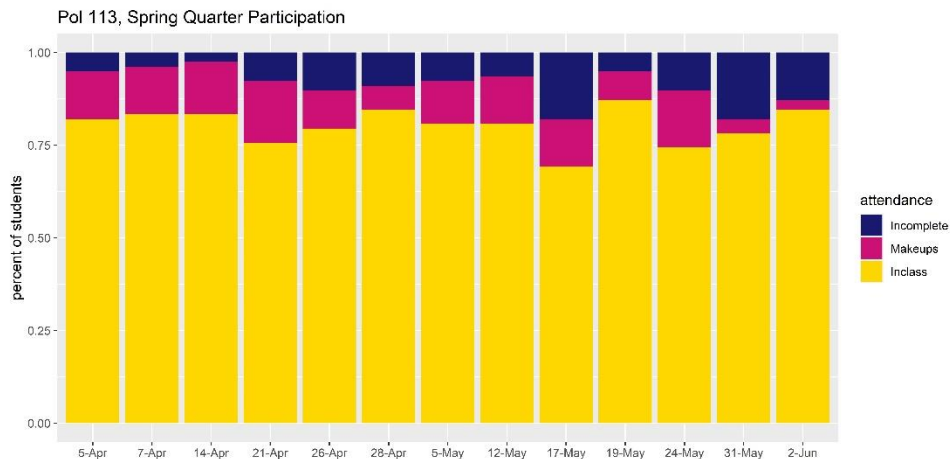
When I changed attendance policies in Spring Quarter 2022, attendance remained high (over 80%) even at the end of the quarter. There are some confounding effects here that surely account for some of this dramatic change. Most notably, students may have been reacclimating to in-person classes over time. Along with getting used to being in class, pandemic concerns were decreasing (e.g. the mask mandate was removed in Spring Quarter 2022 as case rates fell). I also believe that the intrinsic value of my class sessions improved as I felt pressure to have more participation activities (I previously had many such events but with the explicit participation policy, I adopted more and more, enhancing the interactive elements of class). Despite these other potential sources of increased attendance, I am confident that the class policy changes also had an important effect. I come to this conclusion primarily based on responses to anonymous course surveys where students explain their attendance (why they did or did not come to class). However, while I cannot measure the change caused by new policies, the main accomplishment was managing to maintain a high level of attendance while offering a wide range of options to succeed outside of class.

I share below the quantitative data that I have on attendance rates and student satisfaction scores with the policy as well as some qualitative data from the open-ended questions (though this is very preliminary as I need more time to code these responses).

A. Participation Data

I have precise information on the attendance and participation rate for every class session. On Canvas, I have the corrected attendance scores for each session (“corrected” meaning the record of the students who were present in person combined with the students who later received credit for the make-up assignment. In the shared Box folder I have the make-up assignment that was submitted, so for each class session, I can identify, a: the number of students attending in person, b: the number of students who completed for the make-up assignment, and c: the number of students who did not complete the make-up assignment (and thus receiving a zero participation score for that class period). However, I do not have attendance data for the class sessions without a formal participation exercise. Since these pure-lecture days were mostly random and not-announced ahead of time, the in-class attendance was roughly the same as surrounding sessions, but make-up exercises were not required.

Graph 1: SQ22, POL 113 – American Political Theory (enrollment = 78)



There was a unique confound with Fall attendance. In the final weeks of the quarter (weeks 8-10), there was a strike by the graduate student union across the

University of California system. While graduate course instructors went on strike, faculty instructors were required to continue teaching their courses. There were mixed messages as to how undergraduate students should respond to the situation, but some chose to not attend any courses in solidarity with the strike; other students were unable to get to campus because other students blocked public transport to increase the disruption. Finally, because of the disruptions and uncertainty, the university ultimately extended the pass/no-pass deadline, so some students changed their courses to a pass completion basis (requiring 70+% for a pass), which changes the significance of small incentives like a participation grade. After consulting with students (using a class Discord channel), I decided to continue with the original participation policy. While attendance did go down in the final weeks, students still had access to recorded lectures and participation questions.

Chart 2: FQ22, POL 113 – American Political Theory (enrollment = 76)

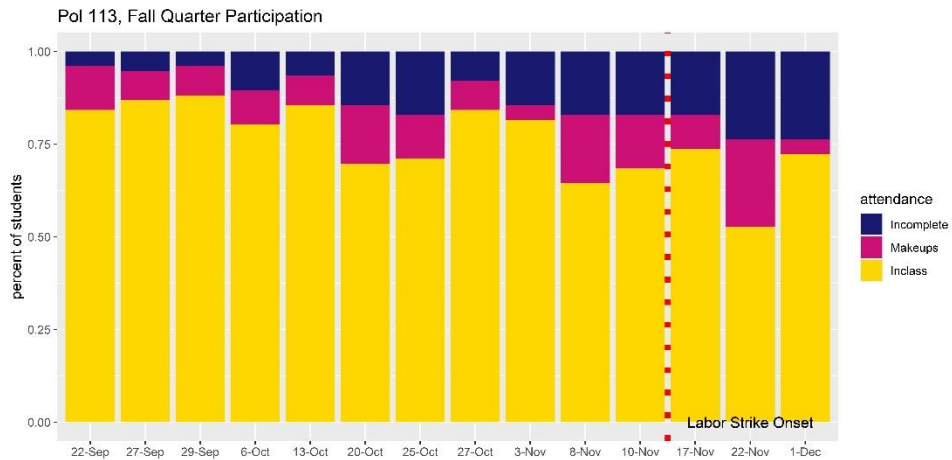
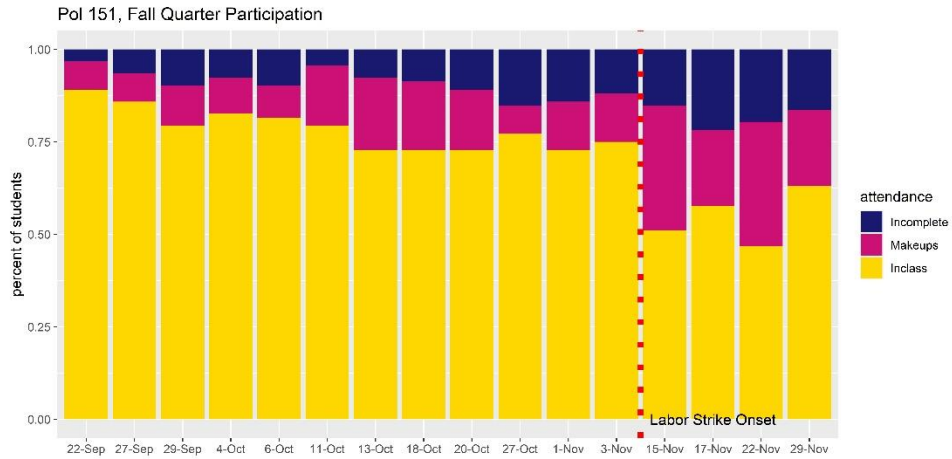


Chart 3: FQ22, POL 151 – Constitutional Politics (enrollment = 92)



B. Qualitative Data

At the end of each course, I gave students a survey to get their feedback on the attendance policies. Their responses were anonymous and the completion rate was quite high (93%) as they were offered extra-credit for completing the surveys. Their responses were anonymous and credit was given automatically on the basis of completing the survey (5% of students did not answer the questions but still submitted the survey and got credit).

Here the “working” nature of this paper is most apparent. In the surveys, I asked several open-ended questions. Along with questions about the course content and some novel assignments like reflection exercises, I asked students why they did or did not attend class and for their overall assessment of the participation policy. Overall, I have 215 unique responses. When I have time in the summer (and when I have survey data on three more classes), I will qualitatively code these responses, identifying a typology of points made and then identifying the prevalence of the different points. For now, I will just share some

sample responses of a few different types (positive and negative). The general tenor is very positive.

Table 1: Examples of student responses

<p>i. Positive: accommodate hardship</p>
<p>“About halfway through the quarter a lot of events/issues started popping up, meaning that I was unable to attend class. Therefore, I watched the recordings at home afterwards, however, having to turn in note sheets/discussion questions one week after the class kept me from allowing myself to let the lectures pile up before finally watching them. At the beginning of the quarter I was a little skeptical of an attendance system being implemented and thought as adults the responsibility of attending or keeping up with class should lie with us. However, I think this hybrid model allowed for more flexibility and worked out well for me as my ability to attend class changed over the quarter.”</p>
<p>“I have a weak immune system and have to be careful with sick people. Despite wearing a mask, when I notice a spike in sickness in class, I stay home to ensure I do not get sick. I think it was fine, fair that we had to go back and do the participation activity and take notes on the lecture.”</p>
<p>“This quarter I contracted COVID and also the flu. These illnesses alone took me out of class for two weeks cumulatively. In addition, some days I had assignments for other classes that urgently needed to be finished. Some of these circumstances were out of my control. In those cases, the present attendance policy was incredibly helpful. The option to complete the participation assignments at home ensured I did not fall behind. In some ways, I think the attendance make-up assignments encouraged more thorough engagement with the course than in-person attendance. In class, I could exercise much more discretion on what to take notes on. At home, however, I was obligated to take thorough notes because I had to turn them in. This requirement ensured that I engaged with the material, even while at home.”</p>
<p>ii. Positive: accountability, time pressure</p>
<p>“This system worked really well for me. It really encouraged me to come to class, and on the rare occasions I had to miss, I had ample time to make up my participation grade. It also incentivizes students to come to class without forcing them to. I really appreciate it when professors allow students to manage time in the way that’s best for the student (it may not always look like that in class that day).”</p>
<p>“I attended classes this quarter because the make-up assignment seemed onerous. If I’m going to have to take a picture of my notes, complete the participation assignment, and send all of my materials, then I might as well attend lecture during the normal time and complete all of those tasks that way I’m not forced to catch up later. After a couple of weeks, it became clear that the discussion component of the classes were equally as valuable as the lecture component, and being able to talk about the material with classmates in a group or classroom setting really helped my understanding of the concepts.”</p>
<p>“I personally don’t like participation grades since I prefer the freedom of watching recordings instead. That being said, I do believe that the participation grade helped me keep up with material and not fall too behind. While I may dislike it, I think it is a good class policy and should stay in place. The requirement to make up absences within a week is very helpful since it allows for some freedom in watching videos while still making sure that you can’t fall too far behind (without a consequence to grades at least).”</p>
<p>iii. Negative: stressful, too inflexible</p>
<p>“I feel as though the participation grade was fair, however, as a full-time college student dealing with other classes, jobs, personal life, finance, balance, and personal problems attending every class and keeping up with every lecture and reading can become overwhelming and it is easy to fall behind. I would suggest to allow for student to miss at least 4 or even 2 classes in the quarter without participation being penalized.”</p>
<p>“Was not a fan of this policy, personally. I know the stress is on all the flexibility it provides, but to turn in lecture notes and responses to many in depth questions felt like a bigger ask than acknowledged. I think at a certain point, the punishment for not catching up is doing poorly on tests, quizzes, and assignments. Mandating this felt kind of micromanaging and I do feel it was interfering with true flexibility.”</p>

Looking at the feedback so far, my primary concern is with the students who do not complete the participation tasks. Some students are very difficult to reach and the lack of participation is linked with broader performance issues in the course. Some students do not seem to understand the make-up task, so I may need to communicate more clearly or make the system simpler. Regarding the requests for more accommodation (e.g. having a set number of dropped participation days), I worry that would go too far to remove the pressure to attend or to keep up on material. A two-week window to complete the task could be feasible, allowing some more flexibility within the course period (keeping in mind that there are only ten weeks in the quarter system).

4. Conclusion

Overall, I believe that the course attendance policy has been a success so far. It has resulted in consistently well-attended classes, student responses are largely positive, and I believe I am able to accommodate the needs of many more students than in my more rigid pre-pandemic courses. I shared the precise details of my class policy and participation tasks as a potential model or springboard for brainstorming. However, the larger point to stress is that there are ways to balance the potentially competing goals of flexible, accommodating course policies with a desire to have students present in class. A very traditional course structure with a strict attendance policy might yield even higher attendance rates, though this would come at the cost of hurting students who simply could not make it to class and it could prompt student resentment. On the other hand, an extremely flexible and accommodating course set-up would give students complete freedom to decide whether and when to attend class while still having access to all class content. This latter path, however, might come at the cost of many students simply not coming to class, whether it is for legitimate concerns or transitory

opportunities. Ideally these different goals would naturally come together, with students simply appreciating the opportunity to learn, resisting all distractions, eagerly coming to class except in circumstances where they absolutely could not, and taking full advantage of the available course material to review and then learn all the more thoroughly.

Perhaps other instructors are blessed with such students or these instructors themselves inspire such incredible behavior. Not being either of these, I've been happy to find strategies that have offered some success at balancing these different teaching goals.

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