



Attendance and Student Engagement

Strategies from VT Faculty

After nearly two years of disrupted learning with remote instruction and necessary hybrid approaches, faculty are reporting that many students seem more passive, have a reduced sense of classroom belonging, and appear disengaged from the active learning process.

Although we are beginning to see effects of pandemic-disrupted learning, we do not fully understand the effects of isolation, modality changes, and personal trauma on student engagement. What we do know is that **research shows students who attend class and actively engage in their courses are more motivated, demonstrate academic persistence, and have higher achievement.**^{1,2}

These strategies for encouraging attendance and student engagement were shared by Virginia Tech faculty and noted during CETL teaching observations and mid-semester feedback sessions.

Encouraging Attendance *(with accommodation for illness-related absences)*

Throughout the pandemic, instructors have gone to great lengths to make in-person classes available and accessible for students who are ill or in quarantine using a video option. Canvas analytics in observed classes show that students who do not attend class in person (or synchronously) are most likely NOT watching recordings. The small number of students who did view recordings waited until an exam or assignment was pending.

However, we know that attendance is a key predictor of academic achievement, in fact attendance is a better predictor of college grades than standardized test scores or HS GPA¹. Rather than offer an unlimited “Zoom Option” or post all recordings, faculty are seeing better well-student attendance with these alternative strategies.

Add Accountability Measures

In courses with attendance accountability, students were more likely to attend in person and only “Zoom In” if absolutely necessary. Examples include:

- Require students to contact instructor BEFORE CLASS for access to the Zoom Option.
- Post recorded lectures to Canvas if a specified percentage of students attended class (e.g. 85% attendance for video to be posted).
- Send recording link to student(s) with a valid and timely communication regarding absence, and limit link availability for a set period of time following absence.

Use Alternative Media

To allowing faculty to move around the classroom for in-person student engagement, some instructors are providing students who are unable to attend:

- Audio recordings of class.
- Class transcripts (Zoom can produce a downloadable txt file).

Facilitate Peer Learning

Rather than a centralized Zoom Option, in addition to other classroom technology, students develop relationships with classmates for both peer learning and in case they are absent.

- Provide class time to form study groups.
- Each student has a Zoom Buddy to be present in class with Zoom turned on allowing the remote student class viewing as well as engagement in small-groups.

Promoting Active Engagement

At the heart of a hands-on, minds-on education is students' active engagement in class and with learning materials. In addition to the learning benefits, engaged students have higher levels of motivation, report enjoyment when achieving learning goals, demonstrate academic persistence, and report higher levels of intrinsic motivation for deep learning².

However, faculty are reporting student apathy for deep learning and a perceived helplessness with a tendency to avoid academic challenge. Countering the effects of isolation, social distance, and passive delivery of academic content with engagement strategies can encourage students to take ownership and agency of their learning and academic achievement. These strategies are presented in the order recommended by faculty for building engagement and classroom community in small, manageable steps.

Facilitate Student Conversations: Get them talking

Faculty report students are not conversing with their classmates and seem alone in a classroom of strangers. Take a few minutes to facilitate student conversations for improved classroom community in the classroom. Faculty shared the following strategies:

- Incorporate a thought exercise: "Imagine a world without cell phones..." Students introduce themselves and share their thoughts with classmates.
- For each class, ask students to introduce themselves to one other person. "Turn to the person on your right. Introduce yourself."
- Use a simple *either/or* ice breaker at the beginning of class: "Pancakes or Waffles? Discuss." OR "Solar or Wind Energy? Discuss." (can be content-based)
- Give a warm-up problem for students to complete in pairs.

Prepare Students for Expected Participation

Calling on students can improve student focus and attention. Students reported knowing they could be called on during class improved their class preparation and attention. This strategy is most effective (and least anxiety-inducing) if you create an early expectation of participation.

- Notify students you will be calling on three people (or another number) to answer a question before asking.
- Ask students to write down their answer to prepare to be called on (a variation: the student reads the answer of the person next to them).
- Utilize Think-Pair-Share.
- Track participation (in smaller classes).

Be Transparent about Learning in the Course

When students know the learning objectives and key takeaways for a class session they can organize their learning and focus attention on key ideas.

- Project the day's learning objectives at the beginning of the class period.
- Save 5 minutes at the end of the class for summarizing key points.
- Outline key terms.
- Have students summarize the lesson using an "exit ticket".

Build Connections with Students

Students aren't the only ones feeling the effects of isolation, intentionally plan your interactions with students.

- Informal chats before and after class.
- Schedule time for students' questions during class.
- Ask students for feedback.

¹Crede, M., Roch, S. G., & Kieszczyka, U. M. (2010). Class attendance in college: A meta-analytic review of the relationship of class attendance with grades and student characteristics. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(2), 272-295.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0034654310362998>

² Sousa, D. A. (2016). *Engaging the Rewired Brain*. Learning Sciences International.