

August 12, 2021

Re: Attendance Policies for Fall 2021

Colleagues:

For the last few semesters, instructors have been asked to adopt flexible policies on attendance and late work. While all of us had hoped to return to a relatively normal semester in Fall 2021, the ongoing pandemic and the spread of the COVID-19 Delta variant make that impossible. Nevertheless, we can draw on the experiences of the last year to put clear and practical policies in place that will help students succeed this semester. With all these factors in mind, the Academic Affairs Task Force and the Provost are hereby providing an updated policy.

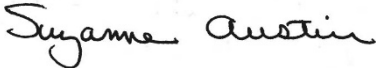
As a reminder, both the [Faculty/ Administration Manual](#) (VIII.A.9) and the [Catalog](#) emphasize the importance of attendance, stating that “students are expected to attend all classes and laboratory meetings of each course in which they enroll.” In practice, of course, students may miss class for any number of legitimate reasons, including the need to isolate or quarantine because of COVID-19. Instructors have primary authority to determine the best way to address absences in their classes but must provide reasonable accommodations in certain circumstances. In addition, all absence and late-work policies should be provided in the syllabus and are subject to the approval of the department chair. The interim policy is as follows:

1. **The Absence Memo process has been permanently eliminated.** Historically, many instructors have relied on absence memos to help them decide how to handle a particular absence. In recent years, however, it has become clear that the process is more burdensome and less effective than it might seem. Students frequently seek out memos for conditions that are not externally verifiable (such as migraines) or better managed by self-care at home (colds). Worse, when students seek absence memos for contagious illnesses, they expose other students to infection--a concern that arises not only during COVID-19 but also during a regular flu season. Ultimately, absence memo requests overwhelm Student Health Services, can contribute to the spread of disease, and yield a deluge of memos of uncertain value. Eliminating this process is consistent with the practice at [other institutions across the country](#).
2. **Instructors should adopt policies that address occasional absences or late work.** Departments may also adopt policies that cover some or all of their courses. These policies may include grade penalties, including failure for excessive absences. (Note that the Faculty Senate eliminated the WA grade; students who violate these policies should be given an F instead.) Instructors may also decide not to record attendance at all except as required for [attendance verification](#).
3. **Instructors should endeavor to provide reasonable accommodations for major life disruptions.** Occasionally, students will experience an event that causes a significant and sustained disruption to their progress in a course--a disruption that goes beyond the occasional absences noted above. Examples include serious illness or injury (including the need to quarantine or isolate because of COVID-19), victimization, legal obligations, or

military service. The precise implementation of “reasonable accommodations” will naturally differ from course to course, but generally speaking, a reasonable accommodation provides a student with the opportunity to continue making progress in the course but does not compromise the course’s goals and learning objectives. Students may directly notify instructors of these disruptions; notification may also come from the Dean of Students’ Office. If a particular situation cannot be accommodated during the course of the semester, students can [withdraw from the class](#), request an incomplete (if the instructor agrees), or [petition for a late withdrawal](#).

4. **COVID-related absences might require different accommodations.** Given the nature of a pandemic, a student--or more likely a group of students--might be absent from a course for an extended period of time. In these situations, instructors have several options. They may move the entire course online for the duration of the quarantine period, record class periods and share them with the quarantined students, or choose some other accommodation that provides students with the opportunity to continue in the course. Instructors have the discretion to choose the approach that works best for their course (in consultation with their chairs).
5. **Limit requests for documentation.** In some situations, such as a [missed final exam](#), instructors might wish to request some sort of documentation. These requests should be made judiciously. Instructors should refrain from requesting detailed medical information (an ordinary doctor’s note should suffice) and keep in mind that some exigent circumstances cannot be documented. If instructors have cause to believe that a student is being dishonest about the reason for an absence, they may report that potential [Honor Code violation](#) to the Dean of Students.
6. **Use the [FAST system](#).** As always, instructors are encouraged to use FAST to notify appropriate College personnel of any student who seems to be struggling, whether because of excessive absences, personal circumstances, or any other cause.

Sincerely,



Suzanne Austin