

Tips for Faculty When Students Stop Showing Up

Compiled by Karen Eifler for the Teaching & Learning Collaborative at their brownbag session on the topic February 13, 2019.

As a body, we've developed a "UP Way" of holding students accountable, and that way is rooted in a caring ethos that pervades all units of the university. But there **are** natural consequences for allowing absences to pile up. It is possible to hold students accountable for their actions and maintain a caring posture.

Practical insights from the Shepard Academic Resource Center and the UP Care Team:

- 1) It's the professor's job to be the professor, not to sort out all the problems a student may face. Calling upon the SARC and Care Team allow professors to remain professors.
- 2) Stick to the policies stated in your syllabus, and do not waive them out of pity or concern that a student's problem may escalate if you adhere to the rewards and consequences published in the syllabus, which is a contract between you and all your students. Changing the rules mid-way does nobody any favors and may contribute to a perception of unfairness or that rules are negotiable.
- 3) Do not be afraid to file Early Alerts and Academic Warnings as warranted by any student's unexplained absences. A guideline suggested was a week's worth of unexplained absences.
- 4) Faculty should know that when students are asked about their regrets at the end of their first year, they invariably say that they realize faculty are in their corner and that they wish they'd gone to office hours much earlier, before problems piled up.
- 5) Fresh from high school, students do not share the same understanding of what office hours are for that faculty may take for granted. In high school, "office hours" are when teachers do their grading and prep, and do not wish to be disturbed. In college, office hours are when faculty wish to meet with students one to one to provide clarity and follow-up. Stating this difference the first week of class is a simple way to make sure students are aware of this culture change.
- 6) Another simple communication tip is to tell students they have already paid for office hours and assistance from SARC (so why throw all that money away?!), **INSTEAD** of saying those things are "free." You get what you pay for.

Practical insights from faculty colleagues:

- 1) You can accomplish a lot with the simple statement, in person or in an email to a student who has missed a class or two: "Hey, I noticed you haven't been in class for a day or two. Is there something going on I should know about?" Everyone likes to know they are noticed, and such a statement opens the door to more conversation, without being threatening.
- 2) If a student earns a poor grade on an exam or paper after a number of absences, it's okay to link attendance and grade with a statement such as "I don't really think this is all you are capable of. It is the natural consequence of missing instruction, and you have the power to fix that. Let me help you do that..."
- 3) Saying or writing the words "I care about you" go a long way toward establishing trust.

- 4) Some faculty require **each** student in class to meet with them for 5-10 minutes in the first three weeks of class, which is another way of forming personal, caring relationships that create a bit of obligation on the students' parts to hold up their end of the syllabus expectations, and help demonstrate that professors' offices are humane places. Other faculty have students make these early required visits in pairs or trios, which is not only an efficient way of getting through the whole roster, but can catalyze study partnerships among those students who find themselves in the office at the same time.
- 5) After a string of absences, the sense of failure and shame can be real for students, and paralyze them from seeking the simple help they need. Since most professors were very successful in school themselves, understanding the feeling of doom and helplessness may offer a booster shot of empathy that will serve us well in seeking out the students who may be struggling quietly.
- 6) Replacing the word "succeed" with "flourish" or "thrive" in talking with students (and their parents) can help adjust expectations in healthy, humane ways.
- 7) Faculty who reached out to Early Alert and Academic warnings reported a feeling of relief that they usually discovered theirs were not the only classes a student was skipping; chronic absenteeism is hardly every personal. In addition to their many services to students, Early Alert, SARC and the Care Team provide unheralded balm to busy, caring professors, and are happy to respond to teachers' concerns about students who stop showing up, so that teachers can focus on teaching.