

Student absenteeism on university campuses

U.N.B. professor Gilbert Allardyce examines the negative consequences of student absenteeism in Canadian universities.

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In all the talk about problems in our universities, one important subject is not mentioned: missing students.

Student absenteeism is the black hole of higher education. The reason is simple enough: most professors do not take attendance. Therefore nothing is known for certain about the overall rates and patterns of absenteeism, or whether the numbers are rising or falling. My guess, after many years on campus, is that these numbers are higher than faculties want to acknowledge or parents would like to know. Conventional wisdom holds that absentee rates are lowest in small classes and professional schools, where an esprit de corps often develops early on. Highest rates are said to be among freshmen and sophomore, beginners adrift in the transition from high school to university.

These are two different places. Coercive attendance policies developed along with the public school system in the nineteenth century. More recently, the troubling problem of high school drop outs, and the recognition that absenteeism in many cases is an early warning sign of drop outs to come, have maintained the conviction that compulsory attendance and public education go together. In contrast, old attendance rules at most universities long since have become a dead letter, and, particularly since the 1960s, professors generally have come to accept individual responsibility as the defining features of college student life.

From long acquaintance with academics, I know that most of them in their hearts and egos want students to come to class. But they do not like to say so. They want students to come on their own, out

of intellectual interest, and not in dumb obedience to rules and roll calls. However, students can get the wrong signals. "Professors", I have heard them say, "don't care whether you come to class or not". Involved here is an incomprehension between faculty and students, two solitudes as far apart as any others in the country.

The causes of student absenteeism appear as different as students themselves. Some carefree types just seem to drop out of the picture now and then, hanging out at the mall, watching soaps, or getting into rock music. Others go to work. For various reasons, students in growing numbers are holding part-time jobs during the school year. When the job calls, classes can wait. This is because most profs will put up with absenteeism; most employers will not.

Just as "absence behavior" on the part of workers in industry sometimes is interpreted by industrial psychologists as a protest against alienating conditions in the work place, so students may go missing to protest what professors do to them in the classroom. Largely without a fight, students lost the voice in university affairs that they gained in the struggles of the 1960s, and, aside from limited opportunities to state their grievances in standard student opinion polls, they have few ways to express their resistance to teaching practices other than to take a walk. Today, as enrollments rise and faculty numbers remain fixed, the crowds grow larger in the lecture halls, the distance between teachers and students increases, and so does the probability of more alienation and absenteeism.

Faculties recognize that the quality of education usually suffers

when teachers face higher numbers of students. But what happens when students stay away? Unlike employers, who know that worker absenteeism costs money, profs are uncertain about the costs of absenteeism to education. Obviously there is some collateral damage to the integrity of learning: absentees, for example, usually catch up with courses in the last weeks by borrowing lecture notes and cramming for exams. Otherwise, however, the results may not appear all bad. The more some students go missing, the more others benefit from smaller classes. Indeed, the largest classes on some campuses may even count on the absentee rate to keep the crowd down. In any case, with more students on their hands, most educators are not inclined to worry too much about the missing.

Clearly, therefore, no one is going to propose paying students \$150 a day to show up for class. Indeed some free spirits on campus believe that there is something to be said for absenteeism. Deciding to go absent, they say, is - and should be - a free choice, a decision left to young people learning to manage their own lives. Anyway, students pay tuition, don't they? Certainly no professor is going to be using the ruler on them. Compulsion is not academic style.

Still, one way to think about what is wrong in our classrooms is to think about those students who are not there. In trying to reach them, we may find better ways to reach all those who show up every day. The challenge to teaching is clear. To get absentees to come to class, professors will need to make them believe in their hearts that there is a good reason for being there.