



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

ATTENDING TO ATTENDANCE FOR RETENTION AND RESULTS

It was the end of the eighth week, and the semester was half over. In a classroom on the third floor of the humanities building, I was looking into the eyes of 27 freshman composition students out of the 30 who began my course—yes, I said 27, in the *eighth* week.

I believe that this high number was no accident. I had done something better this time around—called the roll at *each* class meeting. And during my one-to-one sessions, when I handed back papers with written and spoken comments, routinely I commented on each student's attendance: for example, a quick remark—such as "Good attendance, well done"—as my eye took in the check marks by the name in my roll book.

You ask what is special about that. We are *supposed* to track our students' attendance. But I did not always do it accurately or regularly because I thought the essays and paragraphs my students handed in weekly should take care of much of the attendance situation. After all, a student needed to be present to hand in a paper on Monday. As for Wednesday—well, on Wednesday there were important discussions connected to the next assignment. With such an organized lesson plan, why would a student want to miss a thing?

Yet, in the past, in spite of my attempts to design class sessions containing activities pointing toward success, some students regularly fell behind—beginning with an absence or two, then failing to submit work, and finally dropping out. My introductory course information handout has always warned students they are responsible for class information, whether they are present or not—advice which sounded good the first day but typically faded in importance as the semester progressed. The resulting "thinning out" of the ranks is as well-known to me as it must be to all English instructors who are busy ploughing through a semester's series of essays to grade.

What happened this semester has surprised me. Of the 27 students attending regularly at the eighth week, most were passing well enough. I hoped to take most of

those with me to the final day of the 16-week semester. Twenty-seven is about seven more than I was used to having at this point. (I have had similar results with my other three classes, but here I will concentrate on freshman composition for my statistics because this class has responded best—not only in showing up but in producing writing of higher quality.)

I have concluded that when a class knows that you call the roll, students perceive that you *care* whether they are there. Further, when you make a comment about attendance, you confirm that perception. It doesn't take any real effort to call the roll and make comments. You are simply focusing on elementary study habits at an important moment in a student's education.

But the best thing about calling the roll is that students actually *do* come to class—in large numbers—when they feel you care about their attendance. And because they are *there*, seated in a learning situation, they *succeed* in learning. Thus, they become better readers and writers. I have rarely given so many A's and B's as I have done during the last eight weeks. This kind of success contributes to the positive vibrations in the classroom. So as we approach the second half of the semester, I feel good about this group.

Some of the simplest things in this world are the most beautiful—in art, in music, in architecture, in fashion. Certainly calling the roll is a simple thing—so simple that I never believed that doing so without fail for eight weeks would produce such good results. Remember that the behavioral objectives in our course outlines are designed to produce measurable student success and that every objective is attainable. Therefore, if all of my freshman composition students are qualified to be listed on my roll sheet and if I can cause them to attend my class regularly—most with no absences at all in eight weeks—then why should I *not* expect good results? They are ready to learn. They are present. They know I care they are present. So they learn.

One Monday I forgot to call the roll, and suddenly I caught sight of a sheet of paper circulating around the room. Students were signing in, calling the roll by themselves! The same thing happened the following



Wednesday, and as I drove home I thought about how my students had taken this procedure so seriously that they *wanted* me to know they were there, functioning and productive.

By the sixteenth week I had no big changes to report, just the same general impressions and some statistics.

End-of-semester results included:

- Thirty students began English 100.
- Three withdrew before the fourth week census and so did not appear on my permanent roster.
- Two more withdrew just before the fourteenth-week-drop deadline and received W.

Thus, 25 students completed the 16-week course and received grades—many of them A's and B's.

- One student of the 25 faded too late to drop and received F.
- Two students of the 25 received incomplete grades for health reasons and are making up the work they missed. (Incomplete grades are unusual in my experience.)

I have always believed that good retention can come from good objectives and a quality course. But students can still fall by the wayside. I know that enrollment in classes is like dealing cards—not every hand is a winner. But I highly recommend calling the roll and making comments as one excellent method of retaining students in challenging classes.

Moreover, Golden West College's Operation Callback also promotes retention—by actively reaching out to specific students who are at risk of failure during the first hectic weeks of the semester. Participating faculty call or write to students who have been absent, missed assignments, or dropped out. I submit that checking attendance regularly and commenting on it to every student from time to time takes little effort and produces excellent results.

Michael Goodman, *Professor, English*

For further information, please contact the author at Golden West College, 15744 Golden West Street, Huntington Beach, CA 92647.

e-mail: pgoodman@goodmanconsulting.com

Suanne D. Roueche, Editor

November 16, 2001, Vol. XXIII, No. 27

©The University of Texas at Austin, 2001

Further duplication is permitted by MEMBER institutions for their own personal use.

Innovation Abstracts (ISSN 0199-106X) is published weekly following the fall and spring terms of the academic calendar, except Thanksgiving week, by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD), Department of Educational Administration, College of Education, SZB 348, Austin, Texas 78712-1293, (512) 471-7545. Periodicals Postage Paid at Austin, Texas. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Innovation Abstracts*, The University of Texas at Austin, SZB 348, Austin, TX 78712-1293. Email: sroueche@mail.utexas.edu