

# ATTACHMENT B

## UCUE Subcommittee on Absences and Short-Term Leaves University Absence Policy Draft Revised Policy

The UCUE Subcommittee on Absences and Short-Term Leaves (Thomas Summerhill, Richard Enbody, Christopher Kaiser, Ebony Green, Marissa King, and Aaron Iturralde) respectfully submits the following report for the consideration of the committee of the whole.

### SUMMARY

The subcommittee makes three recommendations to the UCUE Committee of the Whole. The subcommittee's discussions & rationale for the recommendations are detailed in the following report.

1. Revise the university attendance policy [Academic Programs Catalog] to state that attendance is mandatory in all courses; faculty must take attendance; and faculty have discretion over whether or how to grade attendance.
2. Create a university absence reporting system modeled on the grief absence portal; establish 2 levels of absences—single class absences and longer-term absences and leaves; for latter, require review by administrator.
3. Provide new rights and responsibilities/best practices language to be published in Spartan Life and Faculty Handbook.

### COMMITTEE REVIEW OF EXISTING POLICIES

The subcommittee met four times in the spring 2023 semester to consider the following request by the Office of the Provost:

**Given the need to balance student mental, physical, and emotional well-being as well as public health by encouraging students to avoid attending classes when they are ill with the apparent need to incentivize (or at the very least not disincentivize) student attendance when reasonable and possible, the Provost Office is requesting guidance from UCUE for language that can be provided to instructors and for policy or best-practice recommendations to help guide a reasonable institutional position on this issue.**

1. Inventory—The subcommittee reviewed current university policies and found that absence and short-term leave policies are published in scattered places within the Academic Programs Catalog, Spartan Life, and the Faculty Handbook.
  - University Attendance Policy: <https://reg.msu.edu/ROInfo/Notices/Attendance.aspx>
  - Grief Absence Policy: <https://reg.msu.edu/roinfo/notices/griefabsence.aspx>
  - Religious Observance Policy: <https://reg.msu.edu/ROInfo/Notices/ReligiousPolicy.aspx>
  - Military Leave: <https://reg.msu.edu/academicprograms/Print.aspx?Section=17063>

- Final Exam Absence Policy: <https://reg.msu.edu/ROInfo/Calendar/FinalExam.aspx>
  - Code of Teaching Responsibility: <https://reg.msu.edu/academicprograms/Print.aspx?Section=514>
2. Committee members reported and discussed the shortcomings of the existing absence and short-term leave policies. These include:
    - a. Research shows that student outcomes strongly correlate to class attendance; indeed, students optimally must attend class 90% or more to succeed; the current policy ignores this research
    - b. Existing university attendance policy offers little clarity or guidance to students, instructors, academic advisors, and administrators
    - c. There is wide variation of attendance policies among individual faculty, courses, units, colleges
    - d. The existence of multiple attendance and leave policies, as well as reporting mechanisms, creates the potential that a student might “stack” excused absences and put learning outcomes at risk
    - e. Student uncertainty about attendance policies result from the range of instructor policies; especially regarding mental health, issues of privacy, equity, and standards
    - f. Academic advisors often are placed in awkward position of communicating absences to faculty
    - g. Instructors view attendance as essential to student success; however, they find it onerous to track and monitor attendance, or accept excuses on a case-by-case basis, especially in large lecture classes
    - h. Instructors are hesitant to view personal health information provided by students as a matter of privacy
    - i. Experiential learning and other applied programs such as Teacher Ed that require placements, internships, etc., face particular challenges accommodating student absences and leaves
  3. After review, the subcommittee reached the conclusion that,
    - a. The university attendance policy is outdated and needs to be revised as a foundational step;
    - b. The university should create an administrative process, modeled on the grief absence system, for ALL absences and leaves;
    - c. Publication of absence and short-term leave policies should be in one place for students, academic advisors, and instructors.
    - d. Implementation of a, b, and c in aggregate should meet the committee’s charge by standardizing attendance policy, reducing the time students take to report

absences, protecting student privacy, and enabling appropriate advising and administrative staff to track absences and intervene as necessary.

Each of these are explained in greater detail below.

### **Recommendation 1: Revise University Attendance Policy**

The subcommittee was not charged specifically with revising the university absence policy. However, in the course of its work on absences and short-term leaves, the committee identified apparent contradictions in the current policy.

#### A. The existing attendance policy states:

“There is no university-wide regulation requiring attendance.” Instructors are encouraged to take attendance, state a policy in the syllabus, and are given the option to make attendance a graded item. Students are encouraged to attend classes regularly.

Yet the two following sections of the policy [“Reporting Non-Attendance” & “Drop for Non-Attendance”] state: 1) “In compliance with federal regulations governing financial aid and veterans education benefits, instructors are required to report students who stop attending or who have never attended class”; 2) “Students may be dropped from a course for non-attendance by a departmental administrative drop after the fourth class period, or the fifth class day of the term of instruction, whichever occurs first.”

The two clauses taken together leave no doubt that faculty must play an active role in recording and reporting class attendance.

The university can only comply with federal regulations as stated in (1) if faculty are required to take attendance and report non-attendance.

Additionally, the administrative drop policy (2) depends upon faculty recording attendance and reporting and/or taking administrative action when a student does not attend class.

There can be only one conclusion based on (1) and (2): faculty must record attendance and report non-attendance.

The university policy must state that attendance is required and that faculty must record attendance and report non-attendance.

#### B. Faculty grading of attendance:

Assigning a grade for attendance is a separate issue. The existing policy fails to distinguish between the faculty responsibility to record and report attendance on one hand and establish a policy for grading attendance on another.

The university policy should be updated to state that faculty have discretion to choose whether to grade attendance, but that they do not have an option whether to record attendance and report non-attendance.

Proposed revision of existing attendance policy (Academic Programs Catalog):

**General Information, Policies, Procedures and Regulations**  
**General Procedures and Regulations**  
**Attendance**

**ELIGIBILITY.**

To attend a class at Michigan State University, a student must be officially enrolled on a credit or non-credit basis with the appropriate fees paid. Students who attend, participate, and strive to complete course requirements without formal enrollment will not receive credit for their work. Classes are not open to the public.

**REQUIRED ATTENDANCE.**

Attendance is required in all university courses. Attendance is an essential and intrinsic element of the educational process. Instructors are required to record attendance and should report non-attendance (see “Reporting Non-Attendance” and “Drop for Non-Attendance” below).

Students are responsible for notifying instructors of absences for illness, extracurricular activities, and other causes.

Attendance is defined as physical attendance or participation in an academically-related activity, including but not limited to the submission of an assignment, an examination, participation in a lab, study group or an online discussion.

**ATTENDANCE GRADING POLICIES.**

Instructors have the option to grade attendance. In any course in which attendance is necessary to the achievement of a clearly defined set of course objectives, it may be a valid consideration in determining the student's grade. The instructor is responsible for stating in the syllabus the grading policy for class attendance and participation. It is the responsibility of the student to know the grading policy for each course.

**REPORTING NON-ATTENDANCE.** In compliance with federal regulations governing financial aid and veterans' education benefits, instructors are required to report students who stop attending or who have never attended class. After the first week of classes, through the middle of

the term of instruction, instructors who identify a non-attending student should notify their departmental office. Upon receiving a report of non-attendance, departmental representatives are encouraged to initiate an administrative drop.

**DROP FOR NON-ATTENDANCE.** Students may be dropped from a course for non-attendance by a departmental administrative drop after the fourth class period, or the fifth class day of the term of instruction, whichever occurs first.

## **Recommendation 2: Creation of an Absence Reporting System**

The subcommittee recommends that the university develop an absence reporting system modeled on the grief absence system to manage all absences and short-term leaves.

The committee believes this step is necessary in the interest of efficiency, equity, and privacy. The goal is to create a single portal for students to report absences; the system would automatically notify instructors; the system would also provide administrators and academic advisors with essential data on student class attendance to allow for timely interventions.

Single-day absences would not require administrative approval, but would be on record. Longer absences would require administrative approval.

- a. The system would be to meet the Provost's request for guidance on how to lower obstacles for students who need to take days off for mental or physical health
- b. Such a system would protect student privacy
- c. Faculty time will be saved
- d. The potential problem of "stacking" multiple absences and leaves will be eliminated

Categories of absences & reporting/approval in the system:

There are two types of excused absences:

\* Single, e.g. missing one class, lab, or other single scheduled activity

- For a single a student simply registers the absence on the MSU Absence web site.

\* Extended, e.g. missing a week of class

- An extended absence requires documentation that is registered on the MSU Absence web site.
- A human evaluates the absence. A meeting with an adviser or administrator may be triggered.

- Note that a week's worth of accumulated Single absences raises the absence to be Extended requiring human intervention.

Notes:

1. The MSU Absence web site is new and requires resources and humans to evaluate
  - Extended absences require evaluation similar to the current Grief Absence procedure
2. Students will indicate the nature of the absence in the MSU Absence portal, e.g. sick, mental health, religious, etc.

### **Recommendation 3: Publication and Communication of Policy**

The subcommittee recommends that all absence and short-term leave policies be published together in a single location in the Academic Programs Catalog. The policies must also be published in Spartan Life and the Faculty Handbook.

Student, instructor, and advisor rights and responsibilities need to be published in Spartan Life and Faculty Handbook.

The following language is recommended for publication in both Spartan Life and the Faculty Handbook, as well as appropriate online venues.

### **Student/Faculty/Advisor Responsibilities & Communication**

Establish values behind policy & importance of attendance; best practices; clarify roles of each group in cases of absence & short term leaves

#### **ATTENDANCE**

**VALUE OF POLICY:** Attendance is an essential element of the educational process and is necessary to the achievement of a clearly defined set of course objectives. Michigan State University is proud to offer a variety of courses. Attendance is required in all MSU courses. Instructors are responsible for recording attendance. Individual instructors may vary in their grading of attendance, in alignment with course learning objectives.

Michigan State University values the health and well-being of our students and provides accommodations to students whose health requires absence from classes.

Michigan State University values the diverse identities and backgrounds of our students and provides accommodations to religious practices.

Michigan State University values the extra-curricular experience of our students and provides accommodations to allow students to extend their learning outside the classroom in university-sanctioned events.

## **ROLES & RESPONSIBILITY:**

### **Student**

- Attend and participate in your courses.
- Understand that attendance allows for the active participation in the course objectives, skills development, and communal experience—which cannot be replicated when absent.
- Understand and adhere to the course-specific attendance policy in the course syllabus.
- Communicate, respond, and work with your instructor for any planned or unexpected absences to obtain course material and announcements to ensure continuity of learning upon your return.

### **Faculty/Instructor**

- Record and maintain attendance rolls and report persistent unexcused absences.
- Establish and communicate a specific attendance policy for the course and the student-learning rationale behind the policy.
- Provide flexibility and understanding for students who need to step away from coursework for a short period of time.
- Establish an environment of learning that allows the student to be successful upon their return.
- Identify action items needed for success if students find themselves in additional academic distress.

## **SHORT TERM VERIFIED ABSENCE**

**VALUE OF POLICY:** Michigan State University values the experience of our students and provides support in times of need to support life experiences that draw attention away from your studies for a short period of time. These instances include but are not limited to, illness, emotional distress, grief, mourning, caregiving, etc. Students should understand that based on the course, structure, modality, and grading practices an extended leave (past two weeks) may not be a reasonable solution for success.

Students are accountable for missed assignments, quizzes, or exams and should work with the instructor to make up missing work.

Attendance in courses goes beyond the banking of knowledge, but also creates an environment of learning that teaches skills, content, and communal experiences. This learning cannot be replicated if a student is absent from their course.

Recommended if you believe you can successfully return to class within a two-week class period Grief Absence (Short Term Verified Absence):

Student has communicated with the college academic advising office and has worked out a plan for a return within two weeks. Students are accountable for missed assignments/quizzes/tests to be completed after the designated return date.

Language Modification to existing Grief Absence is as follows:

The faculty and staff should be sensitive to and accommodate the Short term absence of a student who is experiencing loss or emotional distress from a tragedy so that the student is not academically disadvantaged in their classes or other academic work (e.g. research). For undergraduate and master's (Plan B) students without research responsibilities, it is the responsibility of the student to: a) notify the Associate Dean or designee of their college of the need for a grief absence in a timely manner, but no later than one week from the student's initial knowledge of the situation, b) provide appropriate verification of the grief absence as specified by the Associate Dean, and c) complete all missed work as determined in consultation with the instructor. It is the responsibility of the Associate Dean or designee to: a) determine with the student the expected period of absence – it is expected that some bereavement processes may be more extensive than others depending on individual circumstances, b) notify the faculty that the student will be absent, and c) receive verification of the authenticity of a grief absence request upon the student's return. It is the responsibility of the instructor to work with the student to make reasonable accommodations and to include appropriate language describing such accommodations in their course syllabus, so that the student is not penalized due to a verified short term absence.

For master's (Plan A), master's (Plan B) with research responsibilities, and doctoral students, it is the responsibility of the student to: a) notify their advisor/major professor and faculty of the courses in which they are enrolled of the need for a short term absence in a timely manner, but no later than one week from the student's initial knowledge of the situation, b) provide appropriate verification of the short term absence as specified by the advisor/major professor and faculty, and c) complete all missed work as determined in consultation with the advisor/major professor and faculty. It is the responsibility of the advisor/major professor to: a) determine with the student the expected period of absence – it is expected that some short term absences may be more extensive than others depending on individual circumstances, b) receive verification of the authenticity of a grief absence request upon the student's return, and c) make reasonable accommodations so that the student is not penalized due to a verified grief absence. If employed as a RA or TE, the graduate student must also notify their employer. Both employer and student will swiftly communicate to determine how the student's responsibilities will be covered during their absence. Graduate teaching assistants (TAs) should refer to the bereavement policy in the MSU GEU CBU Article 18.

Students in the graduate professional colleges (CHM, COM, CVM, LAW) with their own grief absence policies are excluded from the above and should follow their own policies.

Students who believe their rights under this policy have been violated should contact the University Ombudsperson.

Medical Withdrawal: No Changes

Deans Drop: No Changes

Military Leave: No changes