

COMING LATE TO CLASS

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Nina, a tenured Associate Professor of management in College of Business at MU was faced with a dilemma in her human resource management class. Some of her students were always late to class. In spite of her reasoning, threats, attendance policy mentioned in her syllabus and random graded quizzes at the beginning of each class, this problem continued to persist. Nina was left wondering what was the secret or strategy to overcome student tardiness?

BACKGROUND

Nina finished typing her email, and then clicked the send button. She glanced at the digital clock down on the screen of her MacBook and then verified the time by looking at her watch. She still had another fifteen minutes. She half smiled at her own impatience. But then she did not always have this luxury.

Nina was a tenured, Associate Professor in College of Business at MU where she taught human resources management and organizational behavior at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Only last year she had been promoted and tenured. She had been working at MU for over seven years now and was classified by her colleagues and superiors as senior faculty.

MU was an historical black university in the USA and was situated in a rural town with a racial make-up of 79 percent Blacks, 19 percent Whites and 2 percent Hispanics and Asians. MU itself was a predominantly Black institution with 90 percent of the students and staff being of African American origin. Founded primarily with the objective to educate African American youth, the university committed itself to the concept of “students first” as its core institutional value. MU offered bachelors, masters, and educational specialist degrees along with a variety of non-degree educational programs. The college of business at MU offered bachelors in management, marketing, accounting, healthcare, information technology and supply chain management and logistics.

THE CHRONIC PROBLEM

For the past two years, Nina’s human resources management class was scheduled at 8:25 in the morning. She found herself rushing to class, arriving a few minutes early, collect-

ing her attendance sheet, dumping her laptop computer in her office and then running to classroom. It was a real task getting herself to class. But this semester the schedule was a pleasant surprise. Her class was on Mondays and Wednesdays from 9:50 am till 11:05 am.

She hoped this later class timing would resolve the student tardiness and attendance problem she faced every semester. The class at 8:25 a.m. usually started with some of the class on time, some arriving five to ten minutes late, and the rest approximately 15 minutes late. Rarely was everyone present before 8:40 a.m. She tried to discover the reasons for this tardiness, but received a variety of excuses: “your watch is too fast”, “my alarm clock did not work properly”, “had to drop my child at day care which opens at 8 a.m.”, or “got stuck in the traffic jam on the road”. Most students simply blamed the early hour of the class. Nina argued that if you have a problem with early classes, then sign up for afternoon, evening, or online courses.

She made some compromises, including waiting five minutes before taking attendance. Instead, she spent those five minutes getting the PowerPoint slides ready and talking to the class about topics for that day. Anyone arriving late, but before 8:40, was counted as tardy. Those arriving later than 15 minutes after the scheduled start time were counted as absent. The students protested that in other classes, professors marked them tardy, with three tardies counting as one absence. They wanted the same policy in her class as well. Some even threatened to complain to the chair of business administration department about her attendance policy. Nina repeatedly referred to the school attendance policy which stated that more than three absences without any valid absence excuse letter would result in grade reduction as a penalty. After three absences, all other three would lead to deduction of one mark from the total overall grade. She recorded all student attendances in a file so that she was aware of who was absent.

One semester she tried a different tactic. At 8:30 am, she had the door closed to avoid latecomers from strolling into the classroom. But this produced a violent reaction from the students. They actually complained to the chair and the dean about her. She was advised to keep the door open, allow all students in no matter what the time, and mark them as tardy. “*Try giving them random quizzes which add up towards the overall course grade during the first ten minutes of the class. There will be no more latecomers*”, suggested the Business Administration Chair. Nina followed this suggestion next semester. She allocated 20 percent towards overall course grade and had random quizzes throughout the semester. Students who walked in late missed the quiz and their overall grade suffered.

However, this failed to produce the desired outcome. Instead, students who were tardy and missed quizzes would come to class a few days later with excuse letters detailing valid reasons for their tardiness, citing work responsibilities, day care issues, carpool problems, or illness. As a result, Nina had to develop, administer, and grade make up quizzes, which added to her workload rather than addressing the real issue of student tardiness. After two semesters, Nina abandoned that policy. She felt her prior attendance policy allowed her to better handle teaching, advisement, service, and research.

Nina sighed. With this new schedule maybe she would not face this problem again. Two weeks into the semester things seemed to be going okay. She got up, picked up the attendance sheet and her textbook and walked towards her classroom.

Her eyes scanned the room nervously. The numbers seemed small. She inquired if any student events were taking place that day, but received a negative response. It appeared that the later class start time did not improve punctuality. Students walked in during her lecture unapologetically tardy. At the end of the class, Nina explained the college's attendance policy, penalty for absences and tardiness, and the importance of punctuality. She walked out quietly.

OBSERVATIONS AND INQUIRIES

Over the next few days, Nina made a conscious effort to find out what her colleagues were facing in their classrooms. She was not an overtly social person, but maintained a professional working relationship with all her colleagues. Her investigations revealed something similar happening in almost all of the other classrooms. The few exceptions were taught by professors who happened to be administration as well. During the next faculty meeting, Nina spoke with two of her female colleagues who always received very good teaching ratings. She learned that students were always on time to their classes. In fact, they finished roll call on correct class time. They were always 5 minutes early, finished attendance right on time with a full classroom, and no one walked in late. *"It is all about class management. You have to be firm and tough with them. You just need to announce about your policies on the first day and then take no nonsense from them. In fact the other day one student walked late, and she looked at me and said –okay I lost 5 marks. I strictly enforce the penalty policy discouraging anyone who is tardy"*.

The discussion continued. Nina listened avidly for any insights to deal with this problem in her class. The Dean ordered the attendance policy to be strictly implemented and all latecomers to be penalized. If anyone came late they should be allowed to sit near the door so as not to disturb the class, but should not be given attendance credit for that day. He talked about the importance of punctuality amongst business professionals and its relevance in corporate environments. He requested faculty to keep this in mind and implement the attendance policy vigorously in classrooms. Nina nodded. She wanted to eradicate this tardiness in her classrooms and amongst her students.

In the next class, she reminded the students about the rules and regulations of the business school. She referred to the policies mentioned in the syllabus and how they had signed an acknowledgement sheet on the first day of class. She made the class turn to the attendance policy mentioned in their syllabus and read it out aloud:

Class attendance at MU is compulsory. Students' grades are based on daily class participation and performance. Teachers will not administer examinations and quizzes to students who have been absent for reasons other than official business of the University, sickness, or emergencies such as death in immediate family, jury duty,

court summons, etc. When students are absent for emergency reasons, the number of absences permitted should not exceed the number of credit hours awarded for those except for the most extreme emergencies (e.g., death of family members, jury duty, etc.). The instructor will officially certify all excused absences.

In administering this policy, each College of Business faculty will apply college-wide consequences for students who fail to attend all classes in a timely and regular manner. “Timely” means that the student is sitting in her/his seat at the prescribed hour and minute set forth in the schedule. Class typically begins with the taking of the class roster, which means every faculty will mark students absent if they are not present during the calling of names from the roster. (Alternately, instructors may have a quiz at the official start time of class, and only those in timely attendance for class will be permitted to take the quiz. (Those late or absent receive a grade of zero on the quiz.) Quiz grades given in lieu of calling roll will comprise at least 20 percent of the overall course grade. Faculty choosing to occasionally, or randomly, give quizzes at the start of class will also assign at least a 20-percent weight.

For faculty calling roll each day, a student who misses “roll-call” is considered absent, although he/she may attend class regardless of how late the student might arrive. (Seats close to door may be reserved for “late arrivers.”) Points will be deducted from the midterm exam for absences occurring during the first half of the semester and from the final exam score for absences occurring during the last half of the semester. Points will be deducted in accordance with the following scale, depending on how many days per week the class meets: for classes meeting “two-days-a-week” the instructor will deduct 2.5 points from the midterm exam grade for each unauthorized absence, and between midterm and final exam he/she will deduct 2.5 points from the final exam grade for each unauthorized absence. Any and all absences from class will result in the above penalties.

Attendance on the first day of class is essential as “attendance verification” is a paramount faculty responsibility and thus the instructor will, via banner web, be notifying the Registrar and Financial Aid about student attendance beginning the first day of class and continuing until at least midterm.

She continued with a discussion about the importance of punctuality in their professional lives and the good impressions it created. Students all agreed to follow it. But some explained that they had classes in other buildings and the time difference between classes was 5 minutes. This was the reason why they walked in late, it was not on purpose. It was not her, not her class or her subject personally. It just happened to be unavoidable. Nina reasoned that she would ignore five minutes of lateness, but was not willing to compromise beyond 9:55 am. Somehow Nina felt nothing had been effectively resolved, and that this problem was going to continue.

HER DILEMMA

The semester continued. Nina had to attend a workshop the next week. She felt uneasy about allowing another faculty member or the chair into her classroom for that one session. She would have to inform the chair about her inability to take the class. And he would insist on having someone else take that class. She was the only full time faculty in human resources management. The chair was from a similar area and he would agree to teach that session. He liked discipline and punctuality which always spelled trouble for Nina. He usually complained about student tardiness soon after the class. He would bring this fact in front of everyone during faculty meetings. Nina was in a fix. If only somehow she could make her students come on time each class. What was the secret or strategy to overcome tardiness?