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### Free to Choose: An Argument Against Mandatory Attendance

Education is vital to the preservation and improvement of society. Those who are currently in school will eventually be responsible for the future of the nation. In April 2009 after analyzing the statistics from the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), McKinsey & Company published its findings, writing that “the longer American children are in school, the worse they perform compared to their international peers” (8). As American students fall behind internationally, the need for improvements and more competition in the education system makes education in the United States an important issue. Moreover, “American students are farthest behind just as they are about to enter higher education or the workforce.” Certain proposed solutions such as mandating class attendance would not solve the problem. Colleges should focus on creating incentives to do well in school by rewarding responsibility and academic achievement, yet proponents of imposing mandates emphasize attendance instead, encouraging dependency and encroaching upon individual liberty, which would only confer further problems on society.

Although attendance is important, mandating attendance does not ensure that a student will pay attention in class or make an effort to learn the material. Advocates of mandatory attendance argue that it will improve a student’s education, even though merely being in class does not guarantee greater productivity or better results. The Student Congress of the University of Oklahoma states, “Requiring students to attend class does not and cannot require them to

listen, attempt to understand, or encourage learning” (Delgado). Enforcing mandatory attendance creates a fear of punishment instead of an incentive to study. Under such a policy, students would go to class because they must, not because of a desire to learn. Therefore, forced attendance teaches compliance rather than personal responsibility. A student’s grades may improve with attendance, but only if the student engages in the class. “Although there is a correlation between class attendance and high grades, this correlation can only be applied to students that make an effort to understand the material during class.” Coerced attendance would not change a student’s attitude towards school, but would only compel him to be present in class, asleep or otherwise.

Instead of requiring attendance just to accommodate the irresponsibility of a relative few, colleges should allow these students to fail, conveying the consequences of such behavior. After years of education, a college student should recognize the benefits and costs of attending class and make an appropriate decision based on his learning style, the teaching method, and the nature of the course. Although attendance can be an important aspect of one’s education, diligent students that truly absorb the material better through self-study can afford to skip class and still expect a high grade. A student who does minimal work, exemplifies little effort, and performs poorly on tests should receive a failing grade regardless of whether or not he attends class. The University of Oklahoma Student Association concurs, “The true measure of a student’s understanding should be calculated by their performance on tests, quizzes, [or] papers ... but certainly not on their ability to come to class” (Delgado). A student’s commitment and performance in school, not his attendance, should determine his grade. Bad grades communicate to students that they need to change their approach to their studies, encouraging personal responsibility rather than dependence on others to make decisions for them.

Furthermore, colleges ought to stress and reward personal responsibility. Although the law requires children to attend school from kindergarten through high school, it purposely excludes college, because students are already legal adults who should independently make responsible decisions and not need authoritarian figures compelling them to attend class. The University of Oklahoma Student Association asserts, “The act of entering an institution of higher education upon graduation from high school necessarily implies some inherent level of initiative, responsibility, and maturity” (Delgado). Instructors do not need to force responsible, mature adults to attend class; committed students that make their education a priority will do it on their own without coercion. Students that need mandates to be responsible are not prepared for higher education. One of the main purposes of college is to prepare young adults for the job market, largely by fostering self-motivation. However, treating college students like children by making sure they show up for class promotes dependence, creating a society in which people heavily rely on others to manage their lives for them. To avoid this disaster, colleges should allow students to put responsibility into practice by choosing to attend class voluntarily in preparation of being mature, independent adults in society.

The emphasis on class attendance overlooks the determining factor of a student’s grade. Despite the fact that a student’s grade should depend on his understanding of the material, Walter E. Williams, a professor at George Mason University, reveals that a “survey found that a third of students expected B’s just for attending class” (Williams). These students believe that attendance by itself should largely determine one’s grade. Others who hold the same view would then insist that colleges force students to attend class. This survey demonstrates the excessive emphasis on attending class and the notion that attendance alone is sufficient to pass the class. However, as the University of Oklahoma Student Association claims, “The fundamental premise of an

education is understanding, which cannot be forcibly imparted on a student despite requiring their attendance in a particular class” (Delgado). Advocates of coercing attendance disregard that a student’s grade depends on his performance on examinations, not his ability to sit idly in class.

Even more so than personal responsibility, liberty and the freedom to choose are essential to the preservation and improvement of American society. Unnecessary and damaging restraints on freedom such as mandatory attendance policies tear at the foundational principle of individual liberty. “It simply does not make sense to infringe on the rights of the students by punishing them for not attending class” (Delgado). College students are grown adults who can decide for themselves whether or not to attend their classes. Although forced attendance may seem like a minor issue, the desire to make classroom attendance mandatory illustrates the destructive mindset that citizens constantly need the guidance of omniscient officials to direct the course of their lives, rooted in the belief that a removed, chosen few can make better decisions than the individuals that are directly involved in the matter. In his Inaugural Address, Ronald Reagan remarked, “But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else” (First Inaugural Address of Ronald Reagan). If proponents of mandatory attendance claim that adults in college are incapable of making responsible decisions, then how can one be certain that other adults will make responsible decisions for them?

Attendance in college is important, but that does not give colleges the right to mandate it. Students should have the freedom to voluntarily choose between responsible and immature behavior, and be prepared to face the consequences, good or bad. Instead of improving America’s education system, mandatory attendance would create more problems for society. Students should be free to choose so that they develop into responsible, mature adults sooner rather than later.

## Works Cited

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