

To: FSU Faculty Senate Steering Committee
From: Illness and Attendance Task Force for Reopening
RE: Suggestions for Absence Documentation Requirements for Fall Semester 2020
Date: July 23, 2020

Florida State University (FSU) has well-established policies regarding class attendance. These policies are readily available in the Faculty Handbook and General Bulletin. They explain the responsibility of the instructor to create and communicate an effective attendance policy as well as a student's responsibility to follow the policy created by the instructor. In typical times FSU's attendance policies and practices have served FSU and the faculty well. However, with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we are currently operating in an environment that certainly cannot be described as typical. FSU has developed a plan for reopening the university for the Fall 2020 academic semester. This plan indicates specific practices to be followed by students, faculty, staff, and administrators regarding Covid-19 testing, contact tracing, and isolation of those who show evidence of Covid-19 infection. The reopening plan covers issues related to documentation for those members of the university community who are infected, or suspected of being infected, with Covid-19.

The pandemic also impacts healthcare providers and members of the university community in additional ways. A primary concern for healthcare workers is the ability to treat those patients with the most serious health conditions with a limited amount of resources. Healthcare agencies and providers may recommend that students stay home for less serious health issues rather than visiting healthcare facilities for face-to-face treatment. Such recommendations may be made to save healthcare resources or to limit the spread of Covid-19 and other infections within the community. This potential situation may make it difficult for students to obtain a "provider visit verification" from a healthcare provider for less serious illnesses or health conditions that may necessitate short-term absences. Difficulty in obtaining a verification document from a healthcare provider may in-turn motivate students who are sick to attend class. This may cause additional risk to their health and the health of other members of the university community.

Given the potential need to limit burdens on healthcare providers and students during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Illness and Attendance Task Force recommends that instructors consider the need for heightened communication and flexibility in documenting short-term absences due to illnesses other than Covid-19. In such situations absences may pertain to illnesses or health conditions that may not necessitate a medical visit but may still interfere with the student attending class for a limited amount of time. The task force makes the following observations and suggestions:

1. In deciding what effect undocumented absences will have on grades, instructors may wish to build in flexibility to their class attendance policy when it is feasible to do so. This flexibility should extend to the type of documentation needed for a small number of absences related to illnesses. Instructors should clearly indicate in the class syllabus that communication is vital during the semester and should also clearly indicate how students should contact them (FSU Email, Canvas messages, etc.) regarding such absences.
2. The suggestion for flexibility in requiring documentation in no way eliminates the responsibility of students to immediately notify the instructor regarding a potential illness and/or the necessity to make up *all* work that is missed. The class syllabus should indicate the number of undocumented absences that are allowed, as well as how students should make up missed course instruction, activities, or

assignments. Whereas this may mean providing an alternative task to make up a small number of missed lectures, class discussions, or synchronous class activities, students should still be held responsible for making up missed instruction. Some examples may include asking students to watch a video of the missed class, complete an alternative learning assignment related to the missed material, or otherwise provide evidence that learning objectives for specific missed sessions have been met. For some classes, alternative assignments could be made available in Canvas. Similarly, instructors should clearly communicate to the students both their policy regarding accepting late work for such undocumented absences and any penalties that might accrue if late work is accepted.

3. While we encourage flexibility in attendance policies, we also recognize that each member of the university community is responsible for maintaining the university's academic integrity, educational content, and the overall learning environment. Even in a pandemic, each instructor must make sure that students complete and master the required work necessary for achieving learning outcomes. Excessive absences or missed assignments, whether due to illness or other reasons, will undermine a student's ability to successfully complete a class. The class syllabus should clearly indicate any negative impact of excessive absenteeism, missed work, or late assignments on the student's final grade. Students who are still unable to complete class expectations due to any illness should promptly communicate their situation to the instructor, their program's advising staff, or program administrators. Depending on the circumstances, students may be advised to continue in the class, offer to withdraw from the class, or in rare instances, give the student the opportunity to receive an "incomplete."

4. We recognize that University-wide policy requires all students to attend the first meeting of all classes for which they are registered. We suggest that instructors make use of online tools within Canvas to facilitate the first day attendance process. We also suggest that instructors accommodate students who must miss the first class meeting due to illness by allowing students to remain in class based on an email or other notice of their situation. For example, students who promptly email instructors their desire to remain in the class should be allowed to stay enrolled if they accept responsibility for remaining in the class. Students who are not in attendance on the first day of class or who do not otherwise contact the instructor about remaining in the class will be dropped from the class roll.

In making these suggestions for flexibility in requiring documentation for illnesses, we again recognize that FSU has a wide variety of classes and each may pose its own challenge to allowing flexibility about attendance. The subject matter, learning objectives, and course assignments may compromise flexibility as far as attendance is concerned or in constituting suitable means to make up missed work. However, we should also consider that providing flexibility in documenting less serious illnesses may help alleviate burden on healthcare providers, as well as reduce the overall health risks to the university community.

Chris Hinnant
Enrique Alvarez
Evan Jones
Brian Parker
Elizabeth Cecil
Bridgett Birmingham