

COVID Absence Statement Spring 2020

Background

In July, the Faculty Senate adopted a COVID-19 Absence Statement to be included in all Fall 2020 syllabi. The Senate said that we would, in October, revisit the issue and determine whether a COVID-19 absence statement is needed for the Spring 2021 semester.

To help inform the Faculty Senate on this issue, a survey was distributed to full time and adjunct faculty. The results of the survey are detailed below.

Results

Q: Do you think the Faculty Senate should adopt a COVID-19 Absence Statement for Spring 2021 syllabi?

	Full-time	Adjunct	All Faculty
Yes	154 (82%)	48 (89%)	202 (84%)
No	32 (17%)	6 (11%)	38 (16%)
No answer	1 (1%)		1

Q: If a COVID-19 Absence Statement for Spring 2021 syllabi is adopted, should the Senate use the same statement that was used in Fall 2020?

	Full-time	Adjunct	All Faculty
Yes	120 (64%)	38 (70%)	158 (65.6%)
Yes, but with changes	44 (24%)	10 (19%)	54 (22.4%)
No, need to create a totally new statement	20 (11%)	5 (9%)	25 (10.3%)
No answer	3 (2%)	1 (2%)	4 (1.7%)

Q: What changes, if any, would you recommend be made to a COVID-19 Absence Statement?

Clarify Specific Language

I think that this language needs clarifying: "You will not be penalized for absences or late course assessments unless you are unable to complete course learning outcomes." should be emended to "You will not be penalized for COVID-19-related absences or late course assessments unless you are unable to complete course learning outcomes."

The following statement has made it very difficult to hold a student accountable. I think that we as faculty need to have some system of accountability: "Students will not be penalized for absences or late course assessments unless they are unable to complete course learning outcomes."

The part stating verifiable documents are non-necessary should be removed.

"The following excerpt from the policy is confusing:

You must notify me of your absence by email within 48 hours, if possible. You are not required to provide me with documentation of COVID-19 symptoms. You will not be penalized for absences or late course assessments unless you are unable to complete course learning outcomes.

I recommend clarifying that the absences must be related to COVID-related illness. For example, I had one student ask if the policy covered her absences and late coursework when she worked, because her work schedule was more demanding than usual due to the pandemic and the policy noted, ""You are not required to provide me with documentation of COVID-19 symptoms."" My department head and the interim vice provost clarified for me that the policy only related to illness, not other COVID-related situations."

You are not required to provide the instructor with documentation of COVID-19 symptoms. You will not be penalized for absences or late course assessments unless you are unable to complete course learning outcomes."" This gives too much flexibility to the students, making it impossible for faculty to regulate class attendance and due dates.

Emphasize Student Responsibility / Need to Contact Instructor

Need to have somewhere in the statement that it is the student's responsibility to contact their instructor to make arrangements for late submissions.

I have been receiving the notifications of students who have tested positive/are in quarantine and then cleared to return to campus but I don't always hear from them directly.

I know they are instructed to contact the teacher but they don't always do that.

The notification process should be more clearly articulated. That a student will receive grace for COVID absences once an instructor receives notification from the DOS & that making up or exempting work is reliant on a student contacting the instructor.

Please clearly reiterate that students are responsible for continuing their coursework while in isolation and they are symptom free.

The last statement was good - but I think something to the effect of: "It is expected and assumed you will continue coursework in the event of quarantine unless you are in communication with your instructor."

* Actively contact the instructor within a week after your symptoms go away to discuss the new due dates.

* It is the student's responsibility to follow these new due dates.

Deadlines for Making Up Work

There need to be more specific parameters regarding follow up with students and make up time for work. Otherwise, it is just a barrage of letters with arbitrary wording. Extensions are granted for students and then they still end up not following up to make up the work.

Concerned about the makeup work section - the note about considering an incomplete seems like it could be in conflict with the catalog, which states students should have work of "passing quality." I'm worried about (and have heard anecdotal accounts of) students relying on incomplete grades as a way to not stay accountable.

Support us in making students accountable for meeting deadlines and attending live sessions or give us succinct guidelines for determining our own guidelines.

Stronger language that students need to complete work in timely matter. Students now are taking advantage of the policy and not completing work.

Include details/guidance about making up of assignments/exams/etc. that were missed due to their quarantining. Perhaps deadlines/extensions on make-up work. Additional guidance needs to be given to faculty as well regarding this issue. I have had some students in quarantine who were able to complete their work. Others disappeared completely.

Student Reporting Requirements

Include language about reporting & include the univ link - students are not reporting to the univ and then want extensions.

Include a link to the self-check and the self-reporting form for students.

Perhaps a mandatory symptom report to the Dean of Students Office.

Ones that reflect the current procedures in relation to COVID-19 more clearly.

Shorter notification period.

Don't give students blanket excuses without requiring proof. If they are asymptomatic COVID carriers then that is very different from being actually very sick. Maybe a form with checkoff boxes could be quickly completed by the doctor.

The notification process should be more clearly articulated. That a student will receive grace for COVID absences once an instructor receives notification from the DOS & that making up or exempting work is reliant on a student contacting the instructor.

Clearer guidance for students to have a COVID letter from the Dean of Students or requirement to still complete the Self Check if they cannot come to class due to symptoms.

I think students should have to provide verification of a positive test or that they were in a high-risk exposure situation. Until COVID-19 is under control and treatable, I think we will need a statement and policy. The issue we have to be careful of is students using it as an excuse to not show up for class or for turning in assignments late.

Students have been using the policy as carte blanche to skip class whenever they want and with the expectation that they can simply get the material online, completely ignoring the fact that many courses are rooted in discussion, conversation, or other partner/group based activities that cannot be simply replicated in person. Documentation should be considered an absolute must.

Many students have taken advantage of the open deadlines and not completing the work...these are students that I did not receive a quarantine letter from the Office of Student Outreach and Support. Yes, there should be a statement about COVID-19, but it should include a statement that if a letter does not come saying that the student is quarantined, points will be deducted for late work. If a student is released from quarantine, there should be a time limit on when makeup work will be accepted. Over 1/3 of my students have taken advantage and not submitted work on time on 3-4 assignments.

Students need to provide documentation if they have COVID-19 in order to receive extensions on assignments.

Attendance Requirement / Clarify What Absences it Applies to

There needs to be some mention that students should remain in the f2f class unless the daily check in indicates they should not be in class. Students have to at the beginning of the semester indicate if they will be attending online due to COVID awareness. Students should not be allowed to move to online in the middle of the semester unless it is due to isolation or quarantine. Why have a f2f class if most students decide they do not want to come to class for the instruction?

* clear student responsibilities/expectations: regular attendance for F2F, or scheduled synchronous sessions as scheduled

* students who do not attend regularly, are missing more than one major assignment, or exam, will not be eligible for an Incomplete

* Allowances are at the sole discretion of the faculty member teaching the course.

There has to be a way to have students who signed up for In-person class to be required to attend. I have about 1/3 of my students who actually attend the face to face rotation. It's not fair to those who want to and would rather attend all sessions to be limited because some are supposed to be there and don't show up. If they continue the Covid absence statements and students do their self check, there's not need for a policy because they have university medical excuses. Students are abusing the leniency of the Covid policy and not communicating. It is beyond the ability of instructors to keep up with 250 students personal lives and offer Face to face simultaneously asynchronously in every class. The students who aren't showing up need to be bumped to an asynchronous model to not be a drain on the class, other students and instructors.

The statement apparently needs some language clarifying its purpose. I interpret it to be a policy statement regarding the protection of students from unreasonable expectations by faculty concerning class attendance and deadlines for assignments, when those students are impacted by COVID-19. I have a few students this semester who are interpreting it as absolving them of responsibility for class attendance under any circumstances. They also seem to feel that it gives them freedom to choose when and where they will attend class. I have a rotating face-to-face course where a few students are using the COVID-19 Absence Statement as cover for staying out of the classroom at all times. This begs the questions: Why register for a face-to-face course that you don't intend to attend except via Zoom? and What is the purpose of having face-to-face courses at all, if students who register for them can choose to attend virtually?

Clarify the existing policy so that students understand that the absence policy ONLY pertains to those in the CV protocol or those who suspect they may have CV. Students are abusing the policy. Yet, we need to keep students who may have CV out of the classroom.

The students' responsibilities need to be clearer. They can't just drop in and out of classes no questions asked, or do assignments long past the time other students have completed them when the course has moved on to different topics/units. We wouldn't allow that to happen even with a severe illness or personal problem in a usual semester. The current statement is so vague and all-inclusive that I don't know whether students OR faculty understand how much to/not to accommodate. My courses are very flexible with options of assignments and even exams that can be dropped, but other courses do not have that luxury and need to be able to ""warn"" students in advance that there is little flexibility with some deadlines and assignments.

Students should not be able to miss classes at will. They are abusing this and then performing poorly because they are missing so much class.

A statement that somehow stresses that only sick students are allowed online in classes that have both face to face and streaming component

There needs to be a statement included that the Covid-19 statement does not mean they can just decide to not come to class. There needs to be a way to have an attendance policy and give grace to those who need it for illness. Faculty shouldn't be at the whim of their students and teach to 3 people because everyone else decided not to come to campus that day. Faculty should be given the expressed freedom to only post recordings for those particular students if they think people are abusing the system. I know of faculty who felt very powerless this semester in terms of holding students accountable. Additionally, advisors need to make sure students who want the F2F section understand that's what they are signing up for and they don't get to "force" a faculty into then offering them an asynch experience in the F2F course. Perhaps after so many absences, a student should just be switched into an asynch when one is available.

Students in f2f classes need to be available during the time of the class to participate either online or to do scheduled work. I have had students want to be excused who are in quarantine (not isolation) for missing work that I posted for them to finish during our class meeting time.

Address Class Modality

The statement doesn't clearly address hybrid classes. It would help to have a statement about how attendance is impacted in the virtual sessions.

It's not clear to me just what sort of teaching modalities will be popular and/or "encouraged" in the Spring schedule. That might necessitate some modifications to the COVID absences statement.

Because there are (or will be) five modalities for teaching, we should address each in the new COVID statement. The Fall 2020 statement can be used as a foundation, but according to each teaching modality craft a condition statement.

I think the statement needs to be more adaptable across modalities (or there should alternative versions of it for online courses). Some of the required language really doesn't make sense when applied to online classes, and it's rather confusing to have to include language about attendance in face-to-face classes in a syllabus for an online course. That said, I do believe in the need for a policy and I appreciate the spirit of the one that's been created (both in making it clear that students will not be penalized for getting sick, and also in reminding students that they must be proactive in making up work).

more specific requirements for the courses of different formats, especially online format.

The statement wording can be improved. Also, it is recommended that asynchronous vs synchronous (f2f or online) be addressed separately. When I added the statement to my asynchronous class, it did not fit the model because it was focused on in-person attendance and synchronous learning.

Be more specific about online classes.

Clarification of language; separate statements for online and in-person classes.

The first paragraph of the statement deals with face to face classes. I suggest a strictly online class be allowed to omit that portion of the statements. Statements dealing with taking temperatures and wearing masks are not relevant to online classes and can lead to confusion for the student.

Make it not applicable to online courses

Instructor Flexibility

Let each faculty set up an absence policy for his/her own classes.

Provide some flexibility to modify.

Appeal Process

The last part about the right to appeal the accommodation process is also already in the catalog. Rather than spelling it out it might be better to direct the students to a link about resolving those issues as it exists in the catalog.

I am uncomfortable with the last paragraph. I think it sets a bad precedent to encourage students to complain to administration before approaching faculty directly, and it also demonstrates a lack of trust in faculty. I think that students should be directed back to their instructor for complaints in this regard as they would be with any other course-related complaints.

Expand to Include Stress & Mental Health

There should be changes to the statement encouraging professors to be FAR more understanding about the stress that this school year, in our covid-impacted world, will bring. If students have covid, or are living with someone who does, or are caring for someone who does, their health and life are far more important than the professor's work. Students are under tremendous strain and stress this semester from a myriad of directions. the added stress of this semester alone may inflame underline health or mental health issues. Professors need to be more understanding and considerate of those issues.

Shorten

Much shorter!!

Make it shorter. My students often do not know the syllabus. Why do we think they would read a long COVID-19 Absence Statement?

Other

I think we need to mention the UT Board policy on vaccine requirement.

Any changes that seems appropriate. Maybe some links to CDC guidelines before returning to the classroom.

Empower professors to keep class attendance and remove the blanket accommodation for it. The current one introduces a moral hazard problem.

I think the absence statement is being misused; students are using it as an excuse not to attend class.

Simplify. I also don't think it should be mandatory for all faculty and courses.

I think any changes to the COVID-19 statement should reflect the state and national discourse. In other words, according to whether the pandemic explodes or the number of cases go down.

I would advocate for changes to the terminology if the university releases new guidelines or alters guidelines based on local governance, etc.

I think this depends on what kind of restrictions are in place for Covid during the Spring semester.

I do not think there should be a COVID statement. First, if a student is ill, has a medical emergency, or a personal circumstance, we ask the student to document it (which is really easy to do if it's a true emergency with hospital intake forms, speeding tickets, obituaries, etc). By inferring that students could simply say 'I have COVID' and get out of the responsibilities of their course but we require all others to jump through hoops creates an inequality. Plus, it is unfair to the instructor who needs to maintain the integrity of the course and maintain rigor.

There should not be any such statement. It should be up to the students to attend or not.

The statement as it stands gives too much leeway to students who might want to abuse it. I understand the need to be flexible with students who have COVID or another illness. However, it appears that students are abusing the allowances made in the current statement.

Attendance in F2F/Hybrid classes this fall is at an all time LOW. If UTC is going to adopt more F2F classes in the spring, and keeps this policy or even a version of it, they're be about 30-50% who come based on my current fall experience with seniors. Seniors are savvy - they want a degree and get out of here. I'm teaching almost to myself and the remote students don't interactively engage the chat in livestream as you'd hope - they stay in passive mode. They say "they're possibly experiencing symptoms" or "living around a vulnerable person" etc to get out of class yet not go thru DoS. I have zero recourse with the current overly lenient policy.

I have not experienced a need for a special statement this semester.

Students should be allowed to select from the course-delivery formats available and commit to their choice for the semester. There should be an option for students to change their selection, but only through an agreed-upon notification process. This could be done at the course/instructor level."

This should be a general absentee statement related to illness or injury. What difference does it make if the person has the flu, a cold, severe allergies, a concussion, an orthopedic injury or COVID 19? Sure COVID 19 is more infectious, but from the perspective a student not feeling well, it would be fairly similar. A statement that is consistent across multiple situations would be recommended (if we do not already have such a statement).

If someone is infected with COVID-19, it does not matter if it happens now or a year from now, the effect is going to be the same. Maybe the statement can be modified to cover significant health events instead of being specific to COVID. We can use COVID as an example. That way we're inclusive of all health conditions.

I see a Covid related absence to be essentially the same as any other medically related absence. Impact to the overall student body perhaps broader, but impact to the individual essentially the same for an occurrence.... some cases will be mild, some severe, each should be addressed appropriately for the circumstances encountered.

Require students to seek medical testing or treatment available through UTC or their provider if they claim to have been exposed or are not feeling well.

I am especially concerned about how this would be managed by contingent faculty.

Students will still get COVID next spring and will certainly be exposed. It would be wise for us to adopt the statement again, and continue to express leniency for our students.

None. It is perfectly serviceable, both as a CYA tactic and as a genuine, functioning statement of policy. Given all the upheaval and uncertainty, any sort of continuity for students and faculty alike is appreciated.

None, I think it is very important to ensure that students cannot be penalized for absences and/or late work due to Covid. I also believe it is important not to require documentation because doing so would mean that students who don't have access to such documentation would be penalized or feel forced to come to class, even if they were exhibiting symptoms or had been exposed.

The statement produced for Fall 2020 worked for me, and that is why I have voted "yes" without stipulating any changes. However, I realize my own experience is highly specific to one set of parameters. I am grateful for the Senate's work on this and welcome any changes that would make the statement more appropriate for all of our students and helpful for all of our colleagues. Thank you for your leadership, support, and advocacy.