



SOLVING FOR WHY

Be Curious about
Students' Absenteeism

By Cathy Cassata

Managing chronic absenteeism is a reality of teaching medical assisting students. In recent years, attendance has declined across higher education. The number of hours students have spent attending class, discussion sections, and laboratories declined significantly from the 2018–2019 academic year to 2022–2023, according to an analysis of over 1 million students at 22 major research institutions.¹

When students miss class, they risk underperforming. In fact, one university study found that students who attended more than 80% of classes passed final exams at much higher rates compared with those who attended fewer classes.²

“Chronic absenteeism disrupts learning and makes it hard for teachers to keep students on track,” says Michael Gottfried, PhD, professor at the University of Pennsylvania. “But more so, when students miss class frequently, teachers have to reteach material, which affects the entire classroom, not just that single student. Finally, teachers themselves face job dissatisfaction.”

A disruption in the effective delivery of content is a challenge, adds Kimberly Scott, DBA, MPH, CMA (AAMA), a medical assisting educator at Keiser University.

“Instructional planning is carefully tailored to be presented to every student in class, and ... chronic absenteeism results in a disruption of the flow of the information, preventing effective delivery, and could interfere with the understanding of the material,” she says.

This is because each student has something to contribute to the topic, such as a personal experience that could help bring clarity to what is being discussed, adds Scott. “The instructor relies on students to interact with them as well as with each other, and when absenteeism is a problem, it limits what is reviewed collectively, which is a form of instruction that helps close learning gaps,” she says.

STUDENTS, SUBTRACTED

To properly address chronic absenteeism, it helps to understand why students miss class often. “This understanding allows educators and institutions to develop a contingency plan that supports students facing life circumstances,” says Scott.

Gottfried notes that chronic absenteeism is rarely due to students’ lack of motivation and is often due to competing responsibilities. “Addressing it requires

both accountability and understanding of local conditions, such as homelessness, food insecurity, absent parents, poverty, and so forth,” he says. “When institutions build systems that support students and their lives, outcomes improve.”

Research suggests that students miss school due to the following reasons^{3,4}:

- Class being nonmandatory
- Lack of engagement or interest
- Lack of transportation
- Physical or mental health issues
- Work or caregiving conflicts

“Educators deal with students having to work in order to pay rent, babysitters, car insurance, et cetera, and [often] students don’t realize the amount of time going to classes and homework takes. Kids get sick, so the student can’t come to class,” says Diane Morlock, MS, CMA (AAMA), a retired medical assisting educator with over 20 years of experience.

PUTTING TWO AND TWO TOGETHER

Understanding why a student chronically misses class can help tailor how you help them succeed. Below are some strategies to consider:

Set attendance expectations early. Morlock required that all students attend a mandatory orientation during which she provided a student handbook for them to review and discuss together. The handbook covered grading, syllabi, attendance, and more.

“Attendance issues will always be an issue, but [addressing attendance] before classes begin, [and] giving some suggestions on how to be in attendance can be a start,” she says. “Students need to understand that the classes offered in a medical assisting program are not [optional]. Yes, there will be times when it is necessary to be absent. [But ask]: Did they contact the instructor to let it be known they will not be in class? Did they make arrangements with a classmate to get the missed material?”

She also found it helpful to have a former student talk to current students about how they handled attendance.

Offer understanding and support. Before absences pile up, Gottfried advises reaching out to students right away and having honest, supportive conversations with them that encourage them to reveal barriers they are facing. “Students are more likely to show up when they feel supported and see the value of being there,” he says. “Connecting students to advising or support services can address challenges outside the classroom.”

Scott tries to build rapport with students by acknowledging they are struggling to attend class, inquiring about their obstacles, sending assignment reminders, and inviting them to engage as much as possible. “This is also an opportunity for the reiteration of their motivation to enroll in the first place. Bringing them back to a positive space could be a great motivator,” she says. “Acknowledgment shows that the educator is attentive and invested in the student’s education and willing to go beyond the fact that the student is absent again without inquiry.”

A CLASS DIVIDED

Approaching students who often miss class requires a balance of empathy and directness. Michael Gottfried, PhD, recommends addressing the issue by first encouraging students to reflect on why they are absent—whether it’s health, workload, or motivation—and then take proactive steps to help students succeed.

“Missing classes consistently can make it harder to keep up, but students shouldn’t feel hopeless. Reaching out to professors, using office hours, and connecting with classmates can help fill gaps,” says Gottfried. Helping students build a routine, set small goals, and prioritize attendance for classes can make a big difference.

“Ultimately, it’s about combining self-awareness with concrete strategies so that they stay engaged and in control of their learning,” says Gottfried.

Implement a flexible grading system.

Flexibility is critical, especially because medical assisting programs are short and intensive, which means missing even a few classes can have a big impact, notes Gottfried. “Flexibility doesn’t mean lowering standards; it means giving students realistic ways to meet them,” he says. Options like makeup laboratories, alternative assignments, or recorded lectures help students stay engaged.

“When programs recognize real-life challenges, students are more likely to persist. That ultimately benefits both students and the health care workforce,” says Gottfried.

Rather than offering a flexible grading system, Morlock provides open laboratory opportunities and lecture time so students can make up what they missed. During orientation, she explains her reasoning. “I ask them if they would want someone to give them an injection or draw their blood if that person did not come to class to learn and master the skill,” she says.

Retain attention and engagement. A disruption in attention and engagement is a result of absenteeism and could be viewed as a form of disengagement, says Scott. “When students are absent, they miss important information, and when they return, they may encounter difficulty understanding what is currently being presented,” she says.

This requires educators to invest additional time and resources in reintegrating the student into the learning process. “This means reestablishing engagement, [providing] extra effort on retention, and motivating positive

behavior,” says Scott.

To keep students engaged, she asks them to plan their personal journey for success, including identifying their goals and aspirations. She also checks in with them periodically to hold them accountable and keep them proactive in achieving their goals.

“Another strategy is organizing collaborative groups in which students

with stronger content understanding support peers who may be less engaged or motivated,” says Scott. “At times, peers tend to interact and communicate in a more relatable way than the educator and students.”

IN SUM

While there might not be a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing chronic absenteeism, Scott says identifying life-extenuating circumstances students face, developing contingency plans, and applying various strategies in the classroom help educators reduce its effects. ♦

References

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