Student behavior patterns and the classroom

These comments focus more closely on various behavior patterns that may frustrate faculty and the motivated students in a classroom. With increasing frequency, Skidmore students themselves have been expressing frustration with some of the class-related behavior patterns that both faculty and motivated students find distracting, demoralizing, and unfair to the many diligent students who want to give serious attention to their studies.

1) The tone and nature of faculty and student relationships

Clearly there is a wide spectrum of how faculty and students define their interactions, and no single approach to formality, informality, partnership, or accessibility can describe what is effective for different personalities and different disciplinary cultures. The one recommendation that we have heard from faculty is for the instructor to let the students know how he or she hopes to interact with them. If there once existed some degree of pre-defined relationship between college students and faculty, that has long since evaporated. We have found that many students are eager, or at least receptive, to having the faculty member let them know how to interact with them. Faculty can do some of this directly as the course begins, though the faculty member’s consistent modeling of the expected relationship is probably the most effective way to convey expectations to students. It may be that students need to be taught, for example,

- how they should address the faculty member;
- where the faculty member falls along the spectrum of “expert,” “guide,” “educational partner,” or “friend”;
- to what extent the faculty member shapes and oversees the classroom experience or expects shaping input from the students;
- what degree of independent thinking and research the faculty member expects from students, and how much special help the faculty member will or will not provide;
- to what extent, for what academic or personal purposes, and through what channels of communication, the faculty member is available to the students.

This list could be extended through many other complexities of human relationships; there is no simple way of saying what works best and is most appropriate. Some number of the faculty have told us that the most effective balance is a friendly desire to help students understand things coupled with clear messages about high expectations and the setting of objective and uniform standards of judgment. Further, faculty comment on the challenge of letting students know that the instructor’s liking or not liking the student has no bearing on the instructor’s evaluation of them. In a similar vein, in research conducted at Skidmore, students have commented frequently on their desire to be treated fairly and equitably by the faculty. The main point of this section, however, is to stress the need for faculty to define for students what is expected of them in the student-faculty relationship.

2) Attendance

As with every topic of this sort, faculty hold a range of views on whether the students’ regular attendance is of particular importance. No faculty member wants to monitor student behavior
on this level, and it is tempting to regard students as adults who are only hurting themselves when they attend classes irregularly. Some disciplines, moreover, are more comfortable than are other disciplines with regarding the evidence of exams, papers, and projects as sufficient proof that the student has mastered the course material or failed to do so. Faculty decisions about student attendance are complex and need, we believe, to consider such questions as the following:

- One has first to ask what constitutes the course one is teaching. If the course has something to do with what the faculty member says or presents in class; what questions students raise or ideas they propose in class; and, in general, the texture of interactions that often occur in the classroom, studio, and laboratory, then the students’ presence in class and acting as informed participants become important threshold considerations.
- The type of college Skidmore claims to be also comes into play. Were we a distance-learning school or a large university (not to equate the two), then the activities of submitting papers and projects and taking exams might be sufficient to conclude that the student has completed the course and deserves credit for it. Skidmore presents itself to the world, however, as a college that cares deeply about close faculty and student connections in the learning enterprise and about the richness of the students’ classroom involvement with the faculty and with their fellow students.
- The issue of course credit provides another important point of focus: setting the course grade aside, under what circumstances is it meaningful for us to award the student’s course experience and performance a certain number of credits toward the Skidmore degree?
- Faculty also wonder whether an attendance policy promotes or undercuts the student’s emerging adulthood. The conclusion may be that students need to make their own adult choices, but one needs also to consider, we believe, that a threshold criterion for success in the adult world of jobs and professions is the need to show up every day and work established hours. If part of our task is to prepare students with the perspectives and discipline that will help them succeed in the larger world, then perhaps we should present a model of classroom experience different from that of merely doing what one wants when one wants.
- While some may claim that students who do not attend and participate in classes are only hurting themselves, we should be mindful of the ways lack of participation may harm the broader educational environment. According to the observations of more motivated students and the perception of many faculty, the poor attendance of some students can drag down the morale of the academic experience for other students. Motivated students also sometimes feel that the poor attendance of some students is unfair, even if there may be grade penalties for poor attendance. In any case, a potentially good group dynamic can be impaired by the spotty attendance (and lack of preparation) of some number of students. Faculty have often voiced the same concerns because of the effect on their own morale. They sometimes even feel responsible for bringing the missing students up to speed later on.
- Many Skidmore faculty do consider the students’ attendance as important to the individual and collective course experience. It is common for faculty to give some weight in the grade to attendance or to participation in general. For example, it is common to see syllabi that dock the grade according to an explicit formula after the third, fourth, or fifth unexcused
absence. Other faculty take a stance that is, in students’ perception, less negotiable than this, in that the student is warned of impending failure after the third absence (or some other benchmark). One advantage of the precipice approach to attendance, in contrast to the sliding-scale of consequences, is that the definitive failure point is less likely to lead to negotiations and ambiguities in the minds of students. Students who are already inclined toward irregular attendance tend to use the sliding scale of consequences to calculate how many classes they can afford to miss and still get by. Some number of faculty who have embraced a more clear-cut, less negotiable attendance policy find that, as a result, they seldom have to deal with the close monitoring of attendance.

- Finally, even in the absence of a more stringent course attendance policy, faculty are expected to honor the minimal expectation set in the *Faculty Handbook*: “any students who miss more than a third of the [class] sessions may expect to be barred from final examination. In such cases, the course grade will be recorded as F.”

### 3) Classroom breaks

Many faculty have expressed frustration with the late arrivals, early departures, frequent bathroom breaks, as well as early departures for vacations and late returns after the break. The more focused students also regard these patterns as distracting and rude. These comings and goings constitute an unnecessary disruption of the academic process of the classroom, but faculty sometimes feel awkward when addressing the problem. This is, we submit, another area in which faculty cannot take students’ behavioral assumptions for granted. If their comings and goings have been tolerated for a long time, students may simply not realize what effect these patterns have on their instructors and classmates. They thus may need to be initiated into more acceptable patterns. Some faculty have found fairly comfortable means of letting students know just what patterns are expected and why. If all faculty were to address these issues with students, we could probably eliminate most of our frustrations with students’ comings and goings.

### 4) Extended periods of absence

Every semester some number of students (sometimes with parent involvement) request fairly long periods of time away from classes. This usually happens because of a physical or emotional illness and less often because of a planned event of importance to the family. Such requests have been of ongoing concern to the faculty and to the Office of Academic Advising. While each case needs to be considered on its own merits and in relation to the specific courses in which the student is enrolled, here are a few guidelines and practices to consider:

- Very seldom do we find a family commitment that ought to take priority over the student’s commitment to their studies. The faculty are thus encouraged to hold the line (tactfully but firmly) on most requests from students and parents for excused extended absences.
- The faculty’s sympathy for a student’s illness needs always to be balanced against our primary commitment as an educational institution: that is, our chief priority is the integrity of the student’s course experience and the quality of the credits awarded toward their Skidmore degree. These balances have to be expressed carefully so that we make clear the educational philosophy informing our decisions while not seeming insensitive to student problems.
• Both our Counseling Center and Health Services can be of inestimable help to students who are confronting stress, emotional illness, and physical illness. As these offices have often said, the illness itself does not make the student less responsible for meeting academic and other commitments if the student chooses to remain enrolled in courses. Our counseling and medical professionals do not help make excuses for students. They instead help them with both occasional and chronic difficulties and discuss with students their health-related and academic responsibilities.

• Skidmore does not have an apparatus for brief leaves of absence during the semester. In many cases, a student facing prolonged illness should make a more serious decision and take a full semester’s leave (or perhaps greatly reduce their course schedule) rather than try to juggle health problems and academic commitments.

• As a rule of thumb, the Office of Academic Advising regards a medical absence of one week as supportable for most students in most disciplines, two weeks moves toward the outer edge, and three weeks may call for a tougher decision from the faculty and the student.

Each faculty member needs, of course, to come to their own conclusions based on their academic discipline and their assessment of the student, but we urge faculty to take a firm stance when responding to prolonged absences. The Office of Academic Advising staff often advises faculty and students on how best to manage prolonged absences; the office staff is available to help with this complicated topic.

5) Honoring the academic calendar
An ongoing concern of faculty and members of academic and student affairs staff has been students who trim our thirty or so weeks of instruction and final exams. We send the strongest messages we can to students and their families about the necessity of our having the students’ full attention during the entire academic calendar. We encourage faculty not to be persuaded by the myriad reasons that some students (and too often their parents as well) provide for leaving early and returning late. The final exam schedule is a particular point of challenge.

The Faculty Handbook makes it clear that students must observe the times of and places for their scheduled exams. The issues are maintaining a serious commitment to the full academic calendar (a big morale issue), fairness to all students (equality of convenience or inconvenience), and the integrity of the exam processes (nearly every year we have a cheating incident made possible by students taking the exams at different times). Faculty need to be explicit about the exam schedule, exam integrity, what students will be expected to demonstrate on the exam, and how much time will be allowed for the final (if fewer than the usual three hours).

Of course, faculty themselves need to honor the entire academic calendar if we are to expect the same from students. A few points to consider:

• By faculty legislation, “written final examinations may not be given in whole or in part prior to the scheduled examination period.” Although individual instructors have every right to schedule quizzes, hourly exams, and written assignments at the times they deem appropriate
during the semester, final exams—those more cumulative and culminating tests which can be construed as “final” in nature—should be reserved for the final exam period. The final exam period may also be used to schedule non-cumulative exams, critiques, and projects. The goal is to preserve the last several weeks of the semester for instructional time and allow students to handle their end-of-semester load in a thorough and responsible manner.

- Skidmore policy does not allow the scheduling of events during Study Days that would distract students from study and review opportunities. Faculty may not hold exams and final presentations during this period. Review sessions to prepare for exams are acceptable as long as they are not mandatory. Additionally, curricular and co-curricular activities that are not directly related to academic work should not be scheduled by any department, program, office, or committee.

- The Monday and Tuesday prior to Thanksgiving are instructional days. Faculty thus should not cancel class or excuse absences during this period. Making special exceptions puts pressure on faculty colleagues to do the same and dissuades students from adhering to the full academic calendar.

6) Student participation and accountability
Motivated and diligent Skidmore students, of whom there are many, want to be informed participants in shaping their own education and expect to be held accountable for class preparation, work of high quality, timeliness, and regular attendance. With increasing frequency, the students complain among themselves or to the faculty when they believe the less diligent students are not being held to the same standards. They think it is unfair and demoralizing when this seems to be the case. In working over the years with many hundreds of students facing serious academic difficulties, the Office of Academic Advising has found that the dilatory or drifty student is often more likely to succeed academically if he or she is held accountable to classroom standards and expectations, whereas such students are very likely not to succeed if they are left to their own choices and rhythms. If we are interested in their academic survival and in promoting their emerging adulthood, it is useful to provide strong external academic and behavioral structures until the point at which the student internalizes such commitments. Our experience is that the vast majority of students in serious academic trouble, including those who are disqualified from further study at Skidmore, have plenty of intellectual ability and may reward the faculty’s extra educational efforts.

It is important, of course, to help students feel involved in and responsible for the courses they are taking. This is undoubtedly the most important aspect of classroom accountability. Faculty sometimes express frustration that some students repeatedly come unprepared to class and seem to feel no embarrassment about being an uninformed and uninvolved warm body. Motivated students often object to what they perceive to be special treatment of students who are not meeting classroom responsibilities. Faculty have the right to expect all Skidmore students to take full advantage of their academic opportunities and to meet the standards and expectations set forth by the faculty.
7) *Respect, civility, and politeness*

The large majority of Skidmore students act in a civil, respectful manner toward one another and toward the faculty. Students also usually understand that dialectical exchanges and disagreements in and outside the classroom are an important dimension of the life of the mind in a college environment. It can no longer be taken for granted, however, that all college students will act with respect and civility. Every member of our community, not least of all the faculty, has the right to expect civil discourse in the exchange of ideas and perspectives. Faculty are encouraged not to ignore or be intimidated by a student who does not observe an appropriate degree of respect (allowing, of course, for the disagreements and frustrations that all individuals experience and have the right to express). Faculty should confront inappropriate behavior, when possible addressing it outside the classroom but in a secure setting (for example, in one’s office but with the knowledge of neighboring colleagues). If faculty need advice or help with a problematic student relationship, they should consult with a department or program colleague, their department chair or program director, the Associate Dean of the Faculty for Student Academic Affairs, Office of Academic Advising staff, or with the Dean of Students and Vice President for Student Affairs. These offices and colleagues will be glad to offer strategies or even to meet with the faculty member and the student if the faculty member desires.

8) *Disruptive or threatening student behavior*

Skidmore has some experience with what seems to be increasing across the nation’s college campuses: students who act in an intimidating or threatening way toward their fellow students or toward the faculty and staff, or whose behavior seriously disrupts the academic processes of the classroom. We do not know enough about this phenomenon to analyze its causes, but we do need to prepare ourselves to respond effectively.

Faculty do not all share the same level of comfort with addressing disruptive behavior; each faculty member must first assess their individual level of comfort and willingness to address the inappropriate behavior with a student. The Associate Dean of Faculty for Student Academic Affairs, the Counseling Center, and the Office of Academic Advising have all engaged in numerous conversations with faculty who request suggestions on how to approach a potentially troubled student. Others are not comfortable with any interaction and ask the Associate Dean or Office of Academic Advising staff to intervene on their behalf.

In some extreme cases of disruptive and/or disrespectful student behavior, it may be necessary for an instructor to request that the student be placed on a “behavior contract” that clearly delineates the instructor’s expectations and the consequences of failure to meet them or that the student be withdrawn from the course in order to ensure the educational rights of other students, to protect the personal and pedagogical rights of the instructor, or to protect the personal or academic well-being of an individual student. Such a request is handled through a deliberative process involving the instructor, department chairperson or program director, and the Associate Dean of the Faculty for Student Academic Affairs. The process is described in detail in the *Advising Handbook, Faculty Edition* and in the Committee on Academic Standing’s (CAS) Operating Code. Both documents are available on the Office of Academic Advising’s website.
As described in the *Student Handbook*, formal charges of sexual and gender-based misconduct are investigated by the Title IX Coordinator and brought before an Administrative Hearing Board. Questions about this process may be directed to either Joel Aure, Skidmore’s Title IX Coordinator, or the Associate Dean of Faculty for Student Academic Affairs.