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The Effects of Attendance on Student Learning in Principles of Economics

By Garey C. Durden and Larry V. Ellis*

Does attendance affect performance in college economics courses? David Romer (1993) found that attendance did contribute significantly to the academic performance of students in a large intermediate macroeconomics course that he taught in the fall of 1990. (See the Summer 1994, Journal of Economic Perspectives [vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 205-15] for numerous comments on Romer.) This conclusion held even after controlling for student motivation which, it may be argued, is the true factor determining performance and is only approximated by attendance. An earlier study by Kang Park and Peter Kerr (1990) found that attendance was a determinant of student performance in a money and banking course, but not as important as a student's GPA and the percentile rank on a college entrance exam. A study by Robert Schmidt (1983) reported that time spent attending lectures contributed positively to performance in a macroeconomic Principles course.

On the other side of the ledger is evidence from Neil Browne et al. (1991) showing that students who did not attend a typically structured class with lectures did just as well on the Test of Understanding College Economics (TUCE) as those students who attended a standard microeconomic Principles course. They also reported, however, that those students who attended the lectures performed better on essay questions than those who did not. A similar study by Campbell McConnell and C. Lamphear (1969) found no significant difference in the performance of students with no classroom attendance vis-à-vis those attending class. Finally, Stephen Buckles and M. E. McMahon (1971) found attendance at lectures that simply explained material covered in reading assignments did not enhance students' understanding of economics. In this paper we present new evidence on the effects of class attendance on student performance. Our results pertain to the Principles of Economics course as it is taught in a two-semester sequence at a medium-size, comprehensive state university.

I. The Data

The data for this study were collected by surveying students at the end of the semester in several sections of the Principles of Economics course (both micro and macro). A questionnaire was administered over three semesters, Spring and Fall 1993 and Spring 1994. The data on absences are the estimated number of classes missed as reported by the students themselves. The observations on student grades (on a ten-point scale as collected, or as a percentage of the possible course points for those using a point system) were normalized to a single instructor's grading scale. This was done to minimize any grade effects in the data across instructors. Table 1 provides descriptions of the variables employed in the study, along with their means and standard deviations.

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*Department of Economics, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608. We thank John Siegfried, Tim Perri, Barry Elledge, and Peter Kennedy for helpful comments.

1Since some classes were large, roll was not called in all sections. However, one researcher was able to correlate attendance on eight unannounced quizzes with student reported absences. The correlation was 0.79 (p < 0.01), even though some students reported more than eight absences.
Table 2 reports two ordinary least-squares (OLS) regressions with course grade average (AVE) as the measure of student performance and the dependent variable. In regression (1), absences (ABS) enters as a continuous independent variable along with other variables which were included to control for differences in background, ability, and motivation across students. The estimated coefficient on the number of absences per semester (ABS) has the expected sign and is statistically significant at the 1-percent level. Using the mean values for those independent variables that are significant at the 5-percent level, regression (1) implies that an average student who has not missed any classes during the semester obtains a course grade average of 74.8 percent. Alternatively, an average student who has the average number of absences during the semester (3.5) achieves a course grade average of 73.7 percent. It appears that the opportunity cost to the student in terms of grade average of those 3.5 absences is low, but it could result in at least a half-letter-grade reduction for those who are on the numerical margin.

In order to explore further the relationship between absences and academic performance, we included absences as a dichotomous independent variable. As shown in Table 1, ABS1 equals 1 if the number of absences is 1 or 2, and is 0 otherwise; ABS2 is 1 if the number of absences is 3 or 4, 0 otherwise; and so on. The results with absences entered this way are reported in regression (2) in Table 2. Regression (2) indicates that absences do not affect student performance until a typical student has missed five or more classes (i.e., with ABS3). Zero through four absences (i.e., ABS1 and ABS2) have no statistically significant effect on course grade average.

Regression (2) also reveals that as the number of absences increases above the threshold level of 4, the negative impact on grades increases. The coefficient on the binary variable distinguishing more than eight absences exceeds (in terms of absolute value) the coefficient on the variable for
seven or eight absences, which in turn is larger than the coefficient on the variable for five or six absences. The data seem to suggest what many professors have thought all along: the typical student is not adversely affected by a few absences, but excessive absenteeism (in this case, five or more misses) is associated strongly with poor academic performance.

The estimates reported in Table 2 also reveal interesting results with respect to other independent variables that were significant at the 10-percent level. Previous studies, including a recent one by Park and Kerr (1990), confirm our findings that GPA and college-entrance-exam scores (i.e., MSAT and VSAT) are among the most important determinants of student performance in college economics courses. In addition, we find that having had a course in calculus has a significant positive effect on student performance. This is consistent with the results of David Brasfield et al. (1992) who found that students who have had a first course in calculus perform better than students who have not.

At one time, the preponderance of evidence suggested that having taken a course in high-school economics had either no effect or, possibly, a negative effect on student performance in college economics (John Siegfried and Rendigs Fels, 1979). Recent studies, however, have reported a contrary result, that a high-school economics course improves performance at the college level (A. Myatt and C. Waddell, 1990; Brasfield et al., 1993). Our results are consistent with the recent studies and show that having taken a high-school economics course (HSCH CON) contributes positively and significantly to student performance in Principles of Economics. Not surprisingly, we also find that parents’ educational attainment is positively associated with students’ performance. Minority students (RACE) and students who are members of a fraternity or sorority (FRATSOR) do not perform as well, other things constant.

Finally, we find no gender-related differences in student performance. This is contrary to much of the reported evidence on gender effects in the literature. Many studies have found that males score higher than females on multiple-choice exams in college economics courses (see Siegfried, 1979; Keith Lumsden and Alex Scott, 1987). Our result is consistent, however, with a recent study (Mary Williams et al., 1992) that found no significant difference in the performance of males and females. Their result held across different courses and also for performance measures other than multiple-choice exams.

### III. Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that attendance does matter for academic achievement in a Principles of Economics course. The evidence suggests that the effect is nonlinear, becoming important only after a student has missed four classes during the semester. What really seems to matter is excessive absenteeism.
Why absences beyond a certain threshold level affect performance is not clear. Is it because there are only a certain number of lectures that the student can afford to miss before it begins to affect comprehension of the material? Or does this “threshold effect” simply reflect the fact that the better students make good class attendance a habit and typically do not miss more than three or four classes per semester? Further work will be needed to answer these questions definitively.

Finally, our results largely confirm the findings of previous studies with respect to most other factors which have been found to affect student performance in economics. As exceptions, we find no difference between the estimated average scores of females and males and that having had a high-school economics course increases the average student’s grade (all ceteris paribus, of course). These latter two findings are consistent with the more recent literature, indicating that the high-school economics course may be more effective than in past years, and that women may be more inclined to take those analytical high-school courses which foster the type of reasoning that enhances performance in college economics classes.

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This suggests improved teacher training in college and in economics education programs.
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