The pages of this and other science-education journals have described numerous pedagogical techniques and strategies to improve students’ academic success — reciprocal teaching, hands-on learning, active learning, directed learning, constructivism, group learning, cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching, and technology-enhanced learning are just a few of these strategies. All of these strategies have a common foundation: Effective teaching often requires hard work.

So does learning. Although teachers have an obligation to offer up-to-date, inclusive, and pedagogically-sound courses, students must be willing to work hard if they expect to excel academically. Learning is often enjoyable, but always requires serious engagement. Regardless of teachers’ hard work and good intentions, many students will fail if they refuse to participate in their own education.

Arguably the most basic aspect of students’ participation in their education is also students’ most basic choice — namely, whether they will attend class. Of course, the academic value of class attendance depends on what students, as well as teachers, do in class. Students accomplish little or nothing if they come to class only to socialize, read comic books, or sleep. Similarly, teachers cheat students by offering boring courses that put students to sleep. Attendance has the most academic value when students and teachers are engaged.

Class attendance among first-year students is often low. For example, Romer (1993) has reported that, on average, “about one-third of students are not in class” (p. 167), and Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb (2001) have claimed “that 25 percent or more [of] students are absent from classes on any given day” (p. 124). Absenteeism is highest in large, first-year courses, especially those in the natural sciences (Friedman, Rodriguez, and McComb, 2001) and those in which instructors use a variety of pedagogical approaches (e.g., student-centered discussions, cooperative learning, computer-assisted learning; see Caston, 1994). As Romer (1993) has noted, “A generation ago, both in principle and in practice, attendance at class was not optional. Today, often in principle and almost always in practice, it is” (p. 174). These high rates of absenteeism occur despite the fact that fewer than one-third of faculty feel that students are well-prepared for college (Thomas, 2002).

How Important Is It for Students To Come to Class?

Most teachers understand that students who attend class regularly have a much greater chance of making high grades than do students who skip lots of classes. Although this seems intuitive to many teachers, some studies have concluded...