

The Surveillance of Learning: A Critical Analysis of University Attendance Policies

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Abstract

Universities have recently strengthened their class attendance policies along with associated practices that intensify the surveillance of learning: a series of administrative and pedagogic strategies that monitor the extent to which students conform with behavioural expectations associated with learning. Drawing on university policy statements, the paper identifies implicit arguments underpinning attendance requirements for students in higher education. These include demonstrating the accountability of publicly funded higher education, a concern for the pastoral and academic welfare of students and their appropriate preparation for expectations associated with workplace and professional practice. In a critique it is argued that attendance policies promote presenteeism as part of the discourse of learnerism. Such rules further infantilise students rather than developing their capacity to make informed choices as adults thereby failing to respect their academic freedom.

Introduction

Absenteeism from classes has long been a common phenomenon in universities in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and North America (Romer, 1993; Rogers, 2001; Gump, 2005). The problem was described as ‘rampant’ in a study of economics students at three elite United States (US) universities in the early 1990s (Romer, 1993). In recent years, however, the issue of class attendance at university has attracted increasing attention. Universities have identified (poor) attendance as a problem, established working groups to look into the issue and developed or re-designed more robust attendance policies as a result. The word ‘class’, in this context, is intended to include all forms of scheduled student contact time including lectures, seminars, tutorials and laboratory sessions.

The first part of the paper will draw on university attendance policies to analyse the reasons underpinning their development and justification.

These rationalisations are essentially divided into three categories related to 'accountability', 'student well-being' and 'workplace preparation'. The second part of the paper will present a range of arguments against compulsory attendance requirements that, it will be contended, substantially challenge the assumptions that inform university policies.

Why should students attend?

University policies normally state that class attendance is compulsory detailing any exceptional circumstances that justify absence. These exceptional circumstances coalesce around certified illness, the death or funeral ceremony of a close relative, the performance of public duties (for example, jury or military service) and certain religious festivals specific to ethnic minority groups that are not covered by public holidays. Institutions further detail how a student may apply for permission to be absent and a range of penalties for unauthorised absence. This can include stating that a student can be presumed as withdrawn from studies if they miss a stipulated percentage of classes. Regulations can also require that professors or instructors maintain a record of attendance. Policy can vary across institutions with some departments developing their own compulsory or 'mandatory' attendance policies (Leufer and Cleary-Holdforth, 2010). More draconian control and punishment measures, such as excluding students who are not punctual for class, or locking classrooms shortly after the start of classes, may also be observed. The attendance policy of the School of Nursing and Midwifery at Middlesex University states, for example, that students who arrive more than ten minutes late for mandatory sessions may be excluded from the class (Middlesex University, 2011).

Drawing on an analysis of university policy statements (Table 1), arguments that justify compulsory student attendance at class fall into three main categories: *accountability to society; student well-being; and preparation for the workplace*. Accountability arguments are based on the idea that it is a student's responsibility to attend class as a mark of respect to those that sponsor their educational experience, their peers and their teachers. The second category of argument is focused on student welfare. Here, it is stressed that absence is bad for students since their academic performance is likely to suffer and it may also indicate that they are experiencing a personal or social problem. Finally, arguments connected with preparation for the workplace emphasise that students need to attend and be punctual as these are expectations associated with future employment. Finally, depending on the nature of

TABLE 1
Justifying the roll call

Category	Argument	Explanation
Accountability	<i>Stakeholder argument</i>	Absence is a waste of public (and private) investment in higher education by the state, employers, parents and wider society and shows a lack of 'respect'.
	<i>Compliance argument</i>	Attendance monitoring is a legal requirement for some categories of international students in compliance with visa regulations (eg in UK)
	<i>Learning community argument</i>	Attendance is important as a member of a learning community to demonstrate respect for peers and teachers.
Student well-being	<i>Academic performance argument</i>	Attendance is positively related to academic achievement.
	<i>Student care argument</i>	Absence might indicate that students have personal and/or social problems that they need help in addressing.
Work preparation	<i>'Real world' argument</i>	Attendance and punctuality are workplace 'skills' or 'competences' that students need to learn.
	<i>Professional practice argument</i>	Attendance seen as essential to comply with professional training requirements for competent or safe practice (eg nursing)
		'The University recognises the investment that students and their sponsors make when a student enrolls on a course and believes that, as a responsible institution, it has a duty to monitor attendance' University of Bolton (2011)
		'The UKBA places a duty on HEI sponsors to report non-attendance.' University of Worcester
		'good attendance..enhances the quality of the learning experience both for individuals and for those engaged in group working' Nottingham Trent University (2012)
		'class attendance and course grade are demonstrably and positively related' Missouri State University (2012)
		'a proactive approach to attendance and subsequent pastoral care has been demonstrated to support improved retention and student well being' University of Leeds (2011)
		'helps students to build work patterns appropriate for their time after university' University of Leeds (2011)
		'In view of health and safety reasons, students will not be permitted to commence your (sic) practice placement if they fail to attend such scheduled mandatory sessions and annual updates.' Middlesex University (2011)

the subject, it is sometimes further argued that students studying to enter a profession (such as, teaching or nursing) need to attend to ensure future competence or safe practice.

Accountability to society

Compulsory attendance at class may be justified on the basis that students are accountable to a society that, directly or indirectly, supports or subsidises their educational experience. This is the *stakeholder argument*. While private and corporate higher education has grown in recent years, many universities continue to be publicly funded. Despite the marketisation of higher education, notably the creation of markets in students (Brown, 2011), the role of the state has become increasingly 'hands on' given the growing importance of this sector for modern knowledge-based economies. The importation of management principles into the public sector means that the state is concerned to see universities offering an efficient return on investment. Hence, higher education is increasingly regarded as an economic investment made by a range of 'stakeholders', notably fee-paying students and parents, employers, the government and wider society. According to this argument a failure to attend on the part of students is an insupportable waste of public and private funding. University attendance policies occasionally invoke this argument as the following example illustrates:

The University recognises the investment that students and their sponsors make when a student enrolls on a course and believes that, as a responsible institution, it has a duty to monitor attendance and to act on non-attendance, so that students can be supported to complete their programmes of study. University of Bolton, UK (2011, p. 1)

Governments, and their respective funding agencies, are key stakeholders who are concerned about student non-completion as a waste of resources and as an indicator of inefficiency. Hence, institutions need to report on or are monitored in respect of their 'drop-out' rates. Often higher education funding agencies in different national contexts will withhold funding from institutions until several months after the beginning of the academic year. This increases the incentive for institutions to keep a close eye on attendance in order to maximise their income stream from teaching activities. This means that there is frequently an added financial incentive for universities to design means of improving student attendance as part of seeking to minimise non-completion.

The assumptions of the stakeholder argument are closely connected with the ideology of new managerialism (Deem and Brehony, 2005). Teaching-led institutions, heavily reliant on government funding for student places, are the ones most likely to respond to such pressures. Students graduating from these institutions are more likely to have lower social and cultural capital and tend to face potential labour market disadvantage. Hence, in this context, the motives of institutions in adopting a more directive approach toward attendance requirements may be viewed sympathetically as an attempt to maximise the chances of their students to develop the skills needed to compete more effectively upon graduation.

Second, there is a *compliance argument* that attendance policies need to meet the demands of government immigration rules aimed at ensuring that international students are attending classes and are abiding by their visa restrictions. In the UK, universities have a legal duty to report students from outside of the European Union with so called 'tier 4' visas to the UK Border Agency (UKBA) when a student has missed ten consecutive working days or ten 'learning contacts' (for example, Canterbury Christ Church University, 2010). The University of Leeds attendance monitoring policy, for example, states in its introduction that it is designed to 'provide a co-ordinated response to the UKBA's reporting requirements' (University of Leeds, 2011). Institutions who do not comply with UKBA reporting requirements risk deregistration and prosecution.

Finally, in relation to accountability, there is the *learning community argument*. Here, the assertion is that attendance is critical in building up a sense of belonging to the group or cohort and the importance of active and collaborative learning. Students, in other words, are, in a communal sense, accountable to both their peers and tutors. This argument also fits contemporary expectations that pedagogy should be focused more on the active engagement of students as learners rather than relying on a conventional 'didactic' model of teaching. The University of Bolton (2011, p. 2) attendance policy states that late arrival or early departure from classes is 'unprofessional and unfair to other class members and tutors' while the University of Leeds (2011, p. 13) states that attendance is important because it 'fosters a culture of courtesy towards teaching staff and other students'. The policy issued by Heriot Watt University (2007, p. 1) more directly emphasises the importance of 'encouraging active participation through regular attendance in all areas of study'. Similar arguments can be found in the attendance policies of a large number of other universities. For example, according to Nottingham

Trent University, attendance is important because it ‘enhances the quality of the learning experience both for individuals and for those engaged in group working’ (Nottingham Trent University, 2012, p. 1).

Student well-being

The second principal way in which universities justify attendance policies is by linking this requirement to the welfare of students. Here it is argued that regular student attendance leads to improved academic performance and that such procedures are further necessary to monitor possible pastoral needs. This category provides universities with perhaps the strongest moral case for imposing more stringent attendance requirements. At the core of most university attendance policies is the contention that poor attendance has a detrimental effect on student learning and achievement. Alternatively, the same point is made more positively by asserting that attendance leads to students achieving better grades. This is the *academic performance argument*. Students who do not attend are thus regarded as more likely to drop-out of their studies, do less well in coursework and examinations, or simply fail.

Because class attendance and course grade are demonstrably and positively related, the University expects students to attend all class sessions of courses in which they are enrolled. (Missouri State University, 2012, p. 1)

There is a body of literature that broadly supports this contention although the evidence is not overwhelming (Gendron and Pieper, 2005; Allen and Webber, 2010). In a study of business and economics students attendance was found to have a small, but statistically significant, effect on their academic performance (Rogers, 2001). The possibility of teacher bias in giving students who attend more regularly a higher grade also tends to undermine the strength of this contention. To some extent it could also be argued that the academic performance argument is really a sub-set of the stakeholder argument in that universities need to demonstrate good results to further justify public funding.

A further way in which attendance policies are justified is the *student care argument*. Universities often assert that they are concerned for the social, moral and emotional welfare of students. In recent years, institutions have established more professional support for students, such as counselling and financial advice services. Western society has developed greater openness about issues connected with psychological health and this is reflected in what has been somewhat disparagingly termed the ‘anxious campus’ (Vye *et al.*, 2007, p. 3), which recognises that students experience a range of psychological and emotional

problems. While personal tutoring by academics may be in decline due to massification, universities have developed a burgeoning infrastructure of professional support services to deal with social problems encountered by students.

Reflecting this trend, attendance policies invoke a language related to the importance of student support and guidance from a pastoral perspective. Heriot Watt University in Scotland states that their attendance policy 'has been developed as part of the University's commitment to provide a supportive learning environment' (Heriot Watt University, 2007, p. 1). Canterbury Christ Church University (2010, pp. 3–7) has what it calls a 'cause for care and concern procedure', which involves a student being invited to discuss 'any problems' with their personal tutor. Here, the suggestion is that attendance requirements are necessary to monitor student well-being from a pastoral as well as academic point of view. Students who are not found to be attending can thus be contacted to see if they have 'any problems' that may involve social, personal or financial difficulties. Appropriate action, according to policy statements, can then be taken to refer the student to support services depending on their individual needs. The University of Bolton details the responsibility of staff for drawing the attention of student support services toward students who might be 'at risk' (University of Bolton, 2011, p. 2). Here, the thinking is that being at university is only one element of a student's lifestyle, particularly for those who are in employment either part- or full-time. It is recognised that students may feel isolated and lonely in modern mass higher education institutions and that monitoring attendance is a means of ensuring that teachers can 'keep an eye' on students and provide an early warning system for student welfare needs.

Preparation for employment and professional practice

Universities further seek to justify attendance policies on the basis of student preparation for the workplace and in order that they can enter a variety of professions as a competent and 'safe' practitioner. There are essentially two strands to this argument. First, it is said that students studying any programme need to be familiarised with the expectations and demands of the workplace. In this respect, punctuality and reliable attendance are attitudes that students need to learn. This is the '*real world*' argument that if students were employees they would be expected to be punctual and would not have the choice as to whether or not to attend. The attendance policy of the University of Leeds (2011, p. 4)

states that attendance is important because it ‘helps students to build work patterns appropriate for their time after university’.

Second, attendance policies are considered to be of heightened importance for students studying a variety of degree programmes specifically linked to, or validated in conjunction with, professional bodies in occupations such as nursing, midwifery and teaching. Here, ‘covering’ the curriculum is considered essential in order to be a safe and competent practitioner, particularly in professions where human lives can be at risk if students do not learn key knowledge and skills (for example, a nurse being able to take an accurate blood pressure reading). This is the *professional practice argument*. The importance of regular attendance is also particularly stressed in the context of certain other subjects, such as the learning of foreign languages, where absence might cause students to fall behind quickly and then be unable to catch up (University of Pennsylvania, 2012).

Writing in the context of nurse education, Leufer and Cleary-Holdforth (2010) described the introduction (and later abandonment) of a mandatory attendance policy by the school of nursing at Dublin City University in Ireland. They detail the tensions between professional and academic values given the integrated nature of nurse education in Ireland (and the UK).

Student non-attendance for theoretical instruction is a concern now more than ever for nurse educators as this may pose ramifications for the profession and indeed for public safety. (Leufer and Cleary-Holdforth, 2010, section 18.3)

While some institutional policies provide justifications for rules on attendance, a large number are more presumptuous giving no reasons whatsoever and simply stating procedures and penalties for non-compliance. However, the emerging policy of UK and US universities in this area rarely takes account of the counter-argument that a compulsory attendance requirement is inappropriate in the context of a higher education. This counter case will be outlined in the second part of this paper.

The arguments against attendance requirements

There are many reasons for contending that attendance requirements should not be associated with a higher education experience on moral and philosophical grounds yet, curiously, there is very limited literature that addresses this subject explicitly. Instead, most discussion is focused around the empirical evidence for suggesting that attendance is

positively correlated with achievement (McMillan and Cheney, 1996). The case against compulsory class attendance, where it is made, is predicated on the argument that the connection between attendance and achievement cannot be empirically proven, rather than a case based on social or moral grounds.

Voluntary choice and infantilisation

Higher education is a voluntary activity and is invariably paid for at the point of delivery or as part of deferred personal debt. It is a post-compulsory phase of education and students are, in most national systems, legal adults although in some contexts (for example, Japan and some US states) the age of majority comes during or soon after the completion of undergraduate study. As a post-compulsory system, students are at university through choice rather than compulsion. Moreover, the massification of higher education in many national contexts means that a large proportion study part-time and are mature students.

Requiring students to attend removes choice and is connected with a process sometimes labelled as 'infantilisation' (Furedi, 2003). In the context of a higher education, university students should be treated as adults rather than children. Attendance requirements remove choice and judgement about the value of personal time and how this is best spent. This curiously contradicts the oft-espoused commitment of universities that students should become independent learners. Many of the arguments in favour of attendance requirements are implicitly premised on the notion that university students need to be taught how to be 'mature' and that they are vulnerable individuals without the capacity to make decisions for themselves (for example, the student care and 'real world' arguments).

Furthermore, students increasingly pay (or defer payment) for the cost of their own university studies via tuition fees and are portrayed as customers or consumers (McMillan and Cheney, 1996; Bejou, 2005). The 'real world' argument for insisting on attendance is that going to class (and getting there on time) is an important workplace skill. However, this contention is counter-balanced by the argument that students are customers. Even in systems without tuition fees, students are incurring an opportunity cost to study at university rather than expend their time or energy undertaking other activities (such as full-time employment). Hence, students are still incurring an opportunity cost. As customers of a (professional) service they have a right to 'consume' as much or as little of the 'product' they have paid for as they

wish. Joining a university has been likened to joining a gym or health club (Jenkins, 2007). In other words, you only get out of it what you put in. If you do not train, you cannot expect to get fit or lose weight. Gym club members can pay their membership fee but not choose to attend and exercise if they wish. They will not get fit without effort and self-discipline in much the same way as university students will not learn without personal engagement. It is a free choice.

While many academics have railed at the legitimacy of the 'student as customer' analogy (Cuthbert, 2010; Barrett, 2011), government policies have been increasingly shaped by the market-led, re-positioning of higher education as a customer-driven service (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011). If students are entitled to expect more in the way of information and a higher-quality experience from universities, it seems incongruous that universities can dictate the terms of student engagement via an attendance requirement. It is unclear what reciprocal rights students derive from the imposition of an attendance requirement. Hence, the increasing transfer of higher education costs from the state to the student undermines the validity of *the stakeholder argument*.

Student academic freedom

In a broader sense, attendance policies conflict with the basis of student academic freedom in the German tradition of *lernfreiheit* prevalent in the nineteenth century. This meant that students were free to learn in the same way in which academics enjoyed freedom to teach (*lehrfreiheit*). Freedom to learn in the German tradition meant that institutions were limited in their authority over students except in helping to prepare them for examinations leading to degrees. They were not guardians of their behavioural standards and students were free to find their own lodgings rather than being housed in university residential halls.

Having relegated character training to the family, general education to the gymnasium, and residence halls to the mists of history, the German university faced the student as a producer and purveyor of knowledge, not as a landlord, custodian, or parent surrogate. And the German student, liberated from grades and classroom roll calls, required to find their own lodgings and diversions, and free to move from institution to institution sampling academic wares, presented himself to the university as an independent being, not as a tenant, a neophyte, or a ward. (Metzger, 1978, p. 95)

Academic freedom is about the freedom of *scholars*; and students, not just academics, are scholars too. They are members of a community of scholars (Monypenny, 1963). This is an integral part of the

Humboldtian tradition, where scholarship is defined as having the pursuit of knowledge and understanding as a common goal, necessarily involving both students and teachers (Karran, 2009). Both are, in essence, learners. However, academic freedom is widely understood as a self-regarding phrase that applies to academic staff but not to students (Russell, 1993). This overlooks a student's freedom to learn and the choice of when and what to attend, as a constituent element of student academic freedom. Hence, the idea of an attendance requirement or the taking of a register or roll call is anathema to student academic freedom since it treats students as children without independence of thought, judgement or maturity. The Indian economist Amartya Sen (1999) argued that if someone is poorly educated, or perhaps illiterate, they will never really be able to fully exercise their political freedoms. Freedom, in other words, is adversely affected by 'capability deprivation'. It is not meaningful to talk of academic freedom unless students are given the capability to enjoy it in the first place. The close policing of attendance at university means that students are not allowed to develop the capacity to develop mature judgements about the use of their own time and intellectual energy.

University students (at least in most higher education systems if not all) are legally adults. They therefore need to be allowed to make choices in how they allocate their time and in setting their own priorities. Students at university need to develop independent and critical thinking skills. This is something that sets higher education apart from other stages of education (Barnett, 1990). They should become more reliant on their own judgement and less dependent on lecturers and professors. This is about attaining intellectual maturity. Attendance requirements tend to reinforce a passive and dutiful model of learners rather than people who are thinking for themselves about how to develop their own academic skills.

Presenteeism and learnerism

Another way of understanding the development of attendance policies is to relate it to what is often called a culture of 'presenteeism'. This is a phenomenon of the modern workplace defined by Cooper as 'an overwhelming need to put in more hours or, at the very least, appear to be working very long hours' (Cooper, 1998, p. 314). It is about turning up for work just to be seen to be there even if someone is too ill or sick to work effectively. Job insecurity and the increasing demands of the modern workplace are often blamed for presenteeism. Organisations can become 'treadmill cultures' (Cullen and McLaughlin, 2006, p. 511) as

a result of presenteeism and are associated with high work demands leading to emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Cullen and McLaughlin, 2006). Despite increasing market-based relations, students are essentially in a position of dependence within institutions that hold the power of certification in respect to their educational achievement (Monypenny, 1963).

Gaining academic credit for attendance is part of a growing pattern of presenteeism in higher education. Most group assessment allocates a single grade to the group without account being taken of individual contributions. Attendance at group oral presentations is necessary for students to demonstrate that they 'deserve' the grade regardless of how little they may have contributed. Despite the rhetoric that students need to develop group-working and peer-assessment skills the support of university teachers for such modes of learning is closely connected with the time-saving benefits in assessing students in an age of mass higher education (Brew *et al.*, 2009). Another example of this trend is the use of online tracking systems that can gauge how often a student contributes to an online forum as part of a discussion. While the number of contributions may be recorded electronically this pays little regard to the quality of such interventions no matter how banal or ill-informed they might be.

The professional practice argument links attendance with issues of workplace competence and safety. Here there is a concern that unless a student attends they will not acquire skills essential to safe professional practice. However, in the context of a modern curriculum shaped by learning outcomes physical attendance does not of itself guarantee the acquisition of essential skills unless they are tested through assessment.

It follows that attendance should not be mistaken for engagement. The mature part-time student who works full-time may have a poorer attendance record than the 18-year-old full-time undergraduate but they are not necessarily 'engaging' less in learning especially as much of this activity can now take place asynchronously via online platforms. Evans (2004, p. 59) noted the way that the modern university is based on mutual surveillance:

Teachers are expected to record the presence of their students, and increasingly their performance when present, while students are asked to record comments on their teachers.

Evans also considers what the word 'participation' implies. While many conventional rules affecting student life, such as religious tests, dress codes and restrictions on mixed accommodation and sexual contact, may have all but disappeared in Western universities, there is a new set

of rules that Evans (2004, p. 117) described as 'essay deadlines, attendance and formal 'participation''. The role of the student, as Evans suggested, now includes being an active participant and grades are routinely awarded, especially in a North American context, for 'contribution in class'. Beyond this, however, so-called 'participative assessment' involving peer and group working has expanded in higher education (Brew *et al.*, 2009).

According to Holmes (2004) a 'learning turn' has occurred in discussions of education and training that represents a new ideological discourse, which he refers to as 'learnerism'. This is performative in nature by seeking to empirically analyse results of educational achievement through the assessment of 'learning outcomes'. The discourse also means that students are expected to be 'active participants' who 'engage' and 'manage' their own learning. These demands are justified as part of the rhetoric of modern learning theory emphasising the primacy of learning as a social process of knowledge construction. Such performative expectations are also justified on the basis of employer demands for workplace readiness in which skills connected with group or team working are highly valued.

The demands of learnerism on students is now such that those who attend seminars but remain silent or fail to participate in online learning communities more specifically are known by the derogatory term 'lurkers' (Nonnecke and Preece, 2000). These are individuals who read and observe but do not make contributions to oral or written discussion. Lurkers are seen as a problem because they are regarded as essentially selfish, non-contributors who take without giving to the learning community (the learning community argument). However, this type of labelling is based, to some extent, on Anglo-Western assumptions about the dialogic nature of the social construction of knowledge. These assumptions have been applied to students from 'Confucian-heritage' cultures with insufficient attention to prevailing social values in these contexts. Expectations connected with individual participation and grading of such contributions ignores a student's 'right to reticence' (Chanock, 2010) and the role of silence in learning among Chinese students (Jin, 2012). Moreover, the emphasis in the literature on the superiority of active learning over 'passive' or 'traditional' styles of teaching tends to overlook the research evidence that students still rate lectures very highly (Carpenter, 2006) and find elements of active learning, such as the time-consuming nature of these activities and the fear that they will not be able to cover the course material (Qualters, 2001), disconcerting.

Conclusion

Poor attendance at lectures and seminars is nothing new to higher education. What is new is the *expectation* that students should attend and engage. This is partly related to the fact that students have traditionally 'read' for a university degree. In the long established UK quiz show, *University Challenge*, which dates from the 1960s, contestants introduce themselves by the subjects they are 'reading'. This is more than a semantic point since it implies that at the core of what it means to be a university student is to engage independently and individually with texts. It suggests that students engage with knowledge first hand rather than defining their primary activity as 'attending' classes. The emphasis on attendance at class in modern university contexts risks hollowing out the importance of student rights as learners despite the rhetoric of modern learning theory adopted by most higher education institutions that more emphasis is placed on 'learning' rather than 'teaching'.

Judging whether an educational experience has been 'successful' or not, has little to do with attendance records. Rather, in a world of learning outcomes, it is about whether a student succeeds in achieving good grades and an intrinsically worthwhile educational experience. Attendance and engagement policies are part of a culture that treats university students as children rather than adults. Such infantilisation removes choice and judgement about the value of personal time and how this is best spent. This curiously contradicts the oft-espoused commitment that students should become independent and critical, learners, the goal of a real 'higher' education.

In developing their attendance policies, institutions need to think through the wider implications of such measures and the effect they can have on the culture of learning at university. While UK universities must comply with legal requirements to monitor the 'engagement' of some types of international students, theoretically and in a wider international context, this alone is not a sufficient rationale for introducing heavy-handed measures that undermines student academic freedom.

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