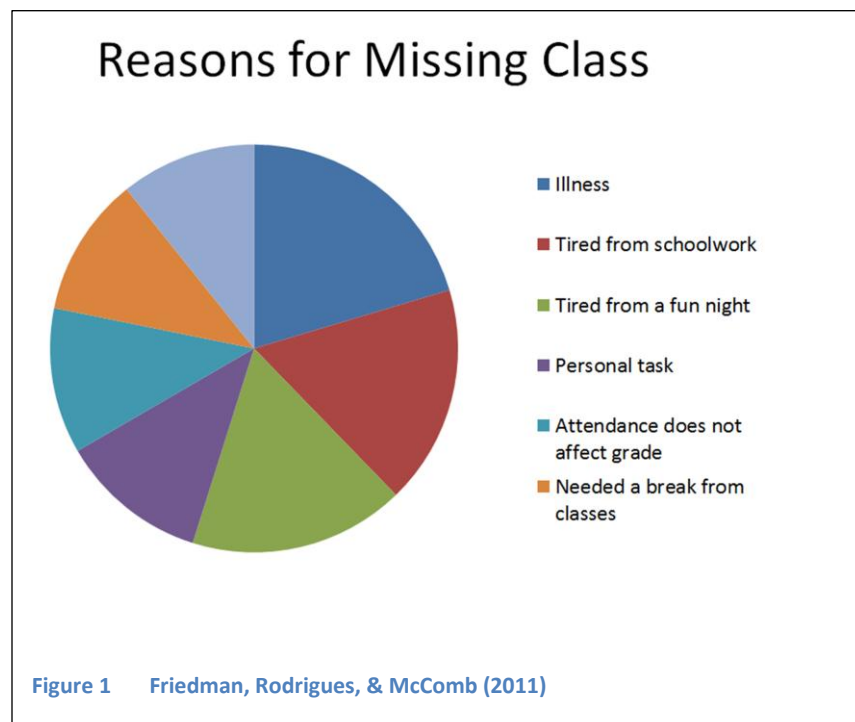# Promoting Academic Continuity for Students Temporarily Absent from Class

Academic continuity is the process of maintaining continuity of learning in a situation caused by events that make it difficult or impossible for students and or faculty to attend classes. This resource offers faculty tips and strategies for supporting students who are temporarily absent from class.

Students temporarily absent from class are at risk for falling behind and possibly being unsuccessful or abandoning the course all together. There are many proactive strategies and tools we can put in place to accommodate such students who will be absent for a block of successive classes. *The goal is to keep them active during and successful by the end of the course.*

Friedman (2011, p.) cites illness as the most common cause of periodic absenteeism from class. Although typically only 1-2 days away from classes, these missed days can make a big difference in the student's continuity of learning especially if assessments have occurred during those days.

Figure 1   Friedman, Rodrigues, & McComb (2011)

What follows are some *suggestions* for how we can support those students who, although they are unable to attend their classes/labs/field experiences, would be able to stay connected with peers and accomplish some or most of the course work/assessments off-campus. These suggestions include both the face-to-face and online learning environments and are organized around maintaining four categories of support:

(I) Proactive Orientation Activities,

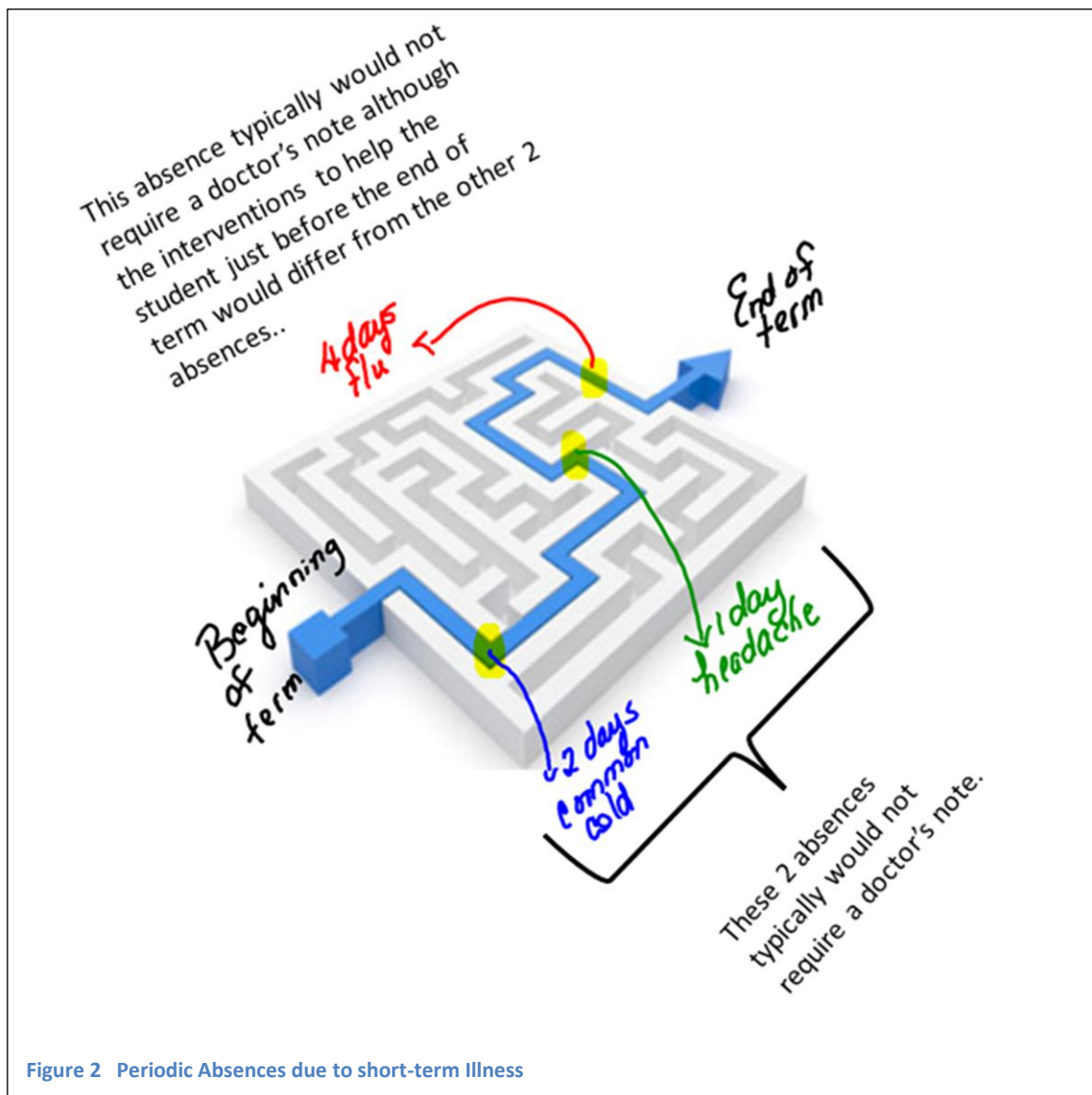*(II) Strategies for Supporting the Absent Student,*

(III) Using Technology to Support Learning and Assessment

 (IV) Return-to-College Support.

The list of suggestions serves to stimulate our thinking about how we can be both proactive and supportive of students who are at risk for succeeding in the course because of unplanned, temporary absences. The Centre for Organizational Learning welcomes input from faculty for expanding the list.

I.   Proactive Orientation Activities

- *Discuss and publish expectations* of students once they know they will be absent from the course for a period of time (e.g., for one week or more). These can include
a) sending *you an email with* a subject line that alerts you to the absence along with a message which includes the information you need to advise the student what would be best for her/him to realistically maintain academic continuity in your course, and
(b) *discussing with students the department's policies* related to absences in your course (e.g., traditional, hybrid, experiential, or fully online).

- *Instruct students that for minor absences (e.g., a couple of days with the flu) they DO NOT require a Dr.'s note.* Asking sick students who are infectious to go to a doctor's office, clinic, or hospital is counterproductive: it aggravates their own illnesses and increases the spread to other people."

Figure 2 Periodic Absences due to short-term Illness

- ***Encourage students to generate and share their own strategies for dealing with unexpected absences. It might be helpful to collect and post some of them in Blackboard.***

- Discuss and publish in Blackboard ***critical steps for getting off to a strong start*** in the course so that, in the event of a temporary absence, the student isn't facing the double jeopardy of already falling behind and now facing time away from the course.

- ***Within the first two weeks, identify students at risk*** for succeeding in the course and set up a plan for how they can uses the college resources to address these risks. For example, if they have difficulties with writing or basic math, you can refer them to the student success specialist and/or Student Support Services.

- *Establish a buddy support system* (groups of 2's or 3's) so students can keep each other up-to-date should one of them be absent from class. It's a good idea for them to generate the expectations for both the buddy and the student who is absent. Publish these in Blackboard to reinforce the value of the system and as a reference.

- *Appoint a class scribe.* To aid students in getting access to course material, consider appointing a class scribe or ask for volunteers who will record the lecture (ipod, mp3.) and/or write out the class notes and post them onto Blackboard for other students to access.

- *Consider taking attendance* for the first couple of weeks to get to know the students and give them the message that you care about their presence in the class. With very large classes, a sign-in sheet might be used for efficiency's sake.

II.   Support during the Student's Absence

- *Respond to the student's email* regarding the temporary absence promptly, including a plan for what the student can realistically do about keeping up in the course at that point. Be sure to establish some check-in times with the student so you can provide ongoing support.

- *Inform the coordinator and student success specialist* about the student's absence and the action plan that was initiated.

- *Send the student some virtual 'chicken soup'* to keep them connected and engaged. They are no doubt struggling with what decisions they should make to succeed. They are counting on you for guidance.

- *Consider holding regular virtual office hours that encourage students who are away to have regular contact with you and the other students.* See suggestions in the Blackboard section regarding office hours.

- *Depending on the student's situation, encourage her/him to take advantage of the buddy system to keep in touch and up-to-date with homework and assignments.*

- *Refer to the next section on using Blackboard and other technologies to support student learning and assessment during a period of absence.*

III. Using Technology to Support the Absent Student's Learning & Assessment

Use Blackboard to:

(a) *Hold virtual office hours*:

- Set specific times for these office hours (e.g., one during the day and one in the evening)

- Use a discussion forum for issues that students are comfortable sharing with the whole class and allow emails during that period for private issues.

(b) *Support the buddy system*:

- Group area which includes a private Discussion forum and email list

- Group blogs/wikis

(c) *Provide easy access to learning and assessment materials:*

- Post materials in folders or learning units organized by date and including instructions for completion. Although this seems like just good teaching practice, it really helps students who are at home trying to keep up with the course as independently as possible.

- Consider using other technologies such as podcasts that summarize lectures and give direction for completing homework assignments.

IV. Return-to-College Support

- *Meet with the student to create an action plan for getting caught up* with learning and assessments. Include timelines and ways to monitor her/his progress.
- *Collaborate with the coordinator and student support specialist to ensure a realistic learning/assessment plan* given expectations from the student's other courses.

Further Reading Resources

Note that there is little current research on why students miss class once enrolled in their program. Friedman, Rodriguez, & McComb's (2011) research sited below gives some insight into why today's students are absent from class and more importantly what encourages them to attend.

Friedman, P., Rodriguez, F., & McComb, J. (2011). Why Students Do and Do Not Attend Classes: Myths and Realities. *College Teaching, 49(4), 124-22.*

Stucky, T. D. (2008). Investigating Whether Contacting Absent Students Increases Course Success. *Journal Of The Scholarship Of Teaching And Learning*, *8*(1), 61-71.

Young, J. R. (2011). Absent Students Want to Attend Traditional Classes via Webcam. *Chronicle Of Higher Education*, *57*(22), A11.