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## Paternalism in Academia

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PATERNALISM IN ACADEMIA

DANIELLE STAGER

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College  
at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for graduation with

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College is often seen as the next step that people take after high school graduation, with other paths being technical schools and working. Here, students pick a path in which they could see themselves enjoying a career. This step is where most students leave home for the first time, are no longer as supervised as strictly as they were before, are expected to keep track of their own homework and classes, and are expected to act as adults. These young adults also decide their major and potential future career paths at their respective colleges.

At these colleges, many instructors hold and enforce policies that people have debated fiercely. These policies include mandating attendance and banning laptops, even though these are not the only examples. The debate is so fierce because there is not one clear answer as most students benefit from restricted freedom but has their autonomy restricted, and others do not benefit at all. Should these policies be created and enforced? Many scientists argue that the policies should be in place, while others, especially in philosophy, find these policies unethical to mandate.

If a policy that is beneficial to most students nevertheless violates autonomy and harms even a minority of students in the process, then it should not be implemented. Banning laptops, requiring attendance, and other similar actions are beneficial to most students, but also violate autonomy and harm a least a minority of students to whom they are applied. Therefore, these policies, such as banning laptops and requiring attendance, should not be implemented. In this paper, I will defend this position.

This essay will start by presenting the benefits of these actions. Next, it will determine if harming the minority to help the majority is acceptable by deciding on an approach, then defining harm in this context. It will continue by showing how each policy harms a myriad of distinct groups. Then, it will argue that since there is harm being done, these policies should not

be put into place. Lastly, this essay will visit possible objections to this argument and how those objections can be resolved following this argument.

Many studies have shown the benefits of banning or limiting laptop use during college classes. Although I will ultimately reject the conclusion that laptop bans and mandatory attendance policies are justified, it is important to see how many people have reached this conclusion.

Computer use in college classrooms is a common sight. Patterson and Patterson's study showed the impact this has on the students who use laptops. It was shown that using computers in class has a significant negative impact on students' grades. This impact was shown most strongly with men and students who already had lower grades than other peers. The researchers also looked into whether banning laptops would help raise grades, based off of the previous findings. It was shown that banning laptops raised grades, which seems like a reasonable conclusion, as they also found that laptop use lowered grades. This study appeared to be supported by Carter, finding that in classes where laptops were allowed, final exam scores were significantly lower than final exam scores in similar classes that banned laptops.

Patterson and Patterson's study has results comparable to other studies, such as the one done by Mueller and Oppenheimer. The pair of researchers looked into the impact of using laptops while taking notes on students' grades. It was found that laptop use is detrimental while taking notes, likely because users tend to copy lectures word for word instead of reframing the information to better understand it. Writing in shorthand requires active thought into how to get all of the information that is needed written while also keeping up with the lecture; laptop users can type much faster and can copy down every word. In both factual and conceptual recall, laptop users with no intervention, such as using programs or websites designed for classrooms,

did significantly worse on tests than those who wrote by hand or used laptops with intervention. Even still, laptop users with intervention also did significantly worse than those who wrote out the information by hand. Due to the significant difference in the test scores, it can be safely inferred that writing notes during lectures by hand is the best way to take notes, if focusing on grades and information retention.

However, it seems that teachers are finding ways to meet their students halfway, by using one-to-one laptop programs, with some success. This is a program to make sure that every student in the program has their own laptop. Zheng found that one-to-one laptop programs significantly increased academic performance in multiple fields, including science, writing, math, and English. These programs enhanced engagement and enthusiasm among students in the classroom, as well as improving relationships between both teachers and students, as well as between home and school. Since many students prefer using laptops in classes instead of writing everything by hand, using these programs could be an effective alternative.

Ravizza looks deeper into the difference between laptop use, dividing it into 2 sections: non-academic use and class-related use. As non-academic internet use increased, class performance decreased, even when accounting for student motivation, interest in the subject, and intelligence level. Participating students spent a median of 37 minutes using the internet for non-class related purposes. Class-related internet use was not shown to be associated with a decrease to classroom performance in this study.

Just using a laptop was not the only thing that lowered students' grades. Sana found that students who multitask on a laptop during class receive lower grades on tests than those who do not multitask. However, multitasking students also impact other students. Students who are in direct view of a multitasking peer also receive lower grades on tests than students who are not in

direct view of a multitasking peer. This decrease in performance among non-multitasking students shows that multitasking on a laptop during class poses a significant distraction to both laptop users and their fellow students in class.

Kraushaar and Novak also looked deeper into the types of multitasking behavior of student during lectures. The researchers found that as the ratio of distractive, or non-course related, multitasking to productive, or course related, multitasking increased, academic performance decreased significantly.

With all of the research done in this field, it is understandable that teachers and colleges often hold policies that ban or restrict laptop use during class, although still mistaken, as I will soon argue. These studies show that laptop use lowers grades, especially when multitasking, when compared to students who do not use laptops during class. From these studies, we can see why some scientist think we can ban laptops in class. **Banning laptops is not the only action a professor can do to help improve students' grades. Another option is mandating attendance.**

In Lukkarinen's study, the researchers studied multiple groups of students to see how attendance impacts final exam scores. These groups were students who drop out before the final exam, students who attended the class and the exam, and students who study independently and attend the exam. The last two groups were most relevant to showing how attendance impacts final exam scores, so the first group will not be discussed. In the group of attending students, there is a positive trend between attending class and higher grades, while in the independent study group, there does not appear to be a trend. Independent students had a higher average score, but a lower range of scores, while attending student had a slightly lower average score, but a significantly larger range of scores. The researchers suggested that the independent students have compelling reasons for absenteeism, along with a good ability to proactively search for

information and study independently. The researchers also concluded that it makes more sense to assess students as several small subgroups, instead of as all students belonging to one homogenous group.

Credè et al performed a meta-analysis to determine the relationship between class attendance in college and grades received. These researchers found that attendance in classes correlates strongly with performance in an individual class, as well as higher college grade point averages. This relationship was found to be slightly stronger in science classes than in non-science classes. The researchers also looked into whether a mandatory attendance policy would help raise grades, finding that there was a slight increase in average grades associated with a mandatory attendance policy.

The research done into this subject shows that higher attendance rates correlates to higher grades in college. It follows that teachers and colleges would have a mandatory attendance policy, in order to help boost attendance. Thus, it is once again understandable why teachers and colleges would want to have a mandatory attendance policy.

There are multiple views that could help define whether these and similar policies are acceptable. Different philosophical views can be used to determine if these policies are acceptable, such as utilitarianism and a rights-based approach. These views hold different perspectives on harm. I have so far explained why research seems to support the imposition of laptop bans and mandatory attendance. However, in the next few sections of this paper, I will argue that despite this research, such policies are wrong. The first premise of my argument is that it is that if a policy is beneficial to most students nevertheless violates autonomy and harms even a minority of student in the process, then it should not be implemented.

Utilitarianism is the theory in which the outcome that leads to the most happiness for all in total is the best option to follow. This is beneficial to the majority but can harm the minority in any situation. Since utilitarianism makes everyone's happiness count the same, we can already see that colleges do not see this as the best option. Colleges do not tend to place their current students' happiness first, instead focusing their attention at attracting incoming freshmen.

A rights-based approach fits better with society. This states that if something violates a right, it is not acceptable. The right that comes up for this argument is the right to autonomy. The right to autonomy and self-determination is a right that all people should and do have. Taking away this right in any way violates these rights and is unacceptable, even if it is for the apparent good of those being affected.

What counts as harm depends on the context of the argument. Since this essay focuses on harm in respect to rights, anything that harms one's ability to use their rights constitutes as harm towards a person. Even if an action may not seem as harmful on the outside, the action would still be considered harmful.

A person's autonomy can be violated and that person can be harmed by that action. For example, if an employee needs to leave work for any reason, such as an emergency in the family, but is not allowed to leave by the employer, then their autonomy has been violated and they were harmed. Another example is if a person is stopped from driving their car in otherwise safe conditions while trying to get to the hospital, it is easy to see both that they have had their autonomy violated and have been harmed by that action.

A person can also have their autonomy violated, this action can harm others in the process, even if it does not harm the person directly interfered with. For example, if an employee is sick and goes to work both because they do not have sick leave and they want to go



to work, instead of staying home, another employee could get sick. Even if the second employee does have unpaid or paid sick leave, the policy has still harmed the second employee, even if the first is not harmed by the policy.

Through these examples, it is clear that a person's autonomy can be violated, and they can be harmed, as well as the action harming others. Utilitarianism, while it could fit, does not focus on individual harm, focusing rather on the greater good, and is therefore not the best way of thought for these policies. A rights-based approach fits much better, as it focuses on the individual person, harm, and violation of autonomy.

While all of the students who were studied had better grades than when they did have laptops, the authors of the study are leaving out valuable variables, such as the students stress levels during class, how well they can pay attention, and if they're missing the information due to professors speaking too quickly. It also doesn't state if students are given print outs of the slides from class or if they have to take all of their own notes. It also does not include using laptops for coursework. Since most classes require online work, this leaves out valuable information.

However, all of these actions violate autonomy. Autonomy is defined, in the context of this paper, as "self-directing freedom and especially moral independence" or "the quality or state of being self-governing" by the Merriam-Webster dictionary. Most students in college are legally adults, therefore are entitled to the right of autonomy so long as it does not interfere with the rights of others. It could be argued that since it is harmful for students to see laptops while taking traditional notes that using laptops in class also interferes with the autonomy of students, but this is untrue and easily fixable. Students taking traditional notes could be separated from

students taking notes on laptops. This would still be an inconvenience; however, it is still less objectionable than banning laptops altogether.

Since students are typically not seen as full adults, society does not seem to have a problem with limiting how technology can be used during classes. However, this doesn't make sense, even if it's agreed that students are not full adults. Students are eligible to vote, drive, choose a life path, and join the military, all of which require more maturity than being in a class. If we can expect and allow this, it would follow that students are responsible enough to choose how to take notes in a class.

These actions taken by teachers, such as not allowing computer use and mandating attendance, fall under hard, strong, and impure paternalism. Society has made it abundantly clear that these types of paternalism are unacceptable to use on adults. Hard paternalism believes that it is permissible to stop someone whether or not they are acting of their own accord. This is shown as unacceptable in medical settings. It does not matter if a patient has a life-threatening illness, if they refuse treatment, they cannot be forced to take treatment. They also cannot generally be forced to stay in the hospital. Strong paternalism interferes with both the means and the ends of one's actions. This is not acceptable when it comes to smoking. While smokers may want the nicotine and know the drawbacks to smoking, strong paternalism says that knowing the drawbacks is not enough, as the desire for nicotine is considered irrational. However, since there are no laws outright banning smoking cigarettes, our society has shown that it will not accept this type of paternalism. Impure paternalism is also not accepted, also in cases of smoking. Impure paternalism means that the group being interfered with is larger than the class being protected. While there are laws stopping smoking in certain areas, there aren't laws banning smoking outright, even though it would protect both the smokers and others around them

The above cases illustrate what society will and will not accept. It is shown through these examples that society does not accept these types of paternalism because they violate one's autonomy. Hard paternalism is unacceptable in college settings; college students are able and responsible enough to decide whether they would like to pay attention and take notes or to ignore the lessons, even if they might harm themselves in the process. Strong paternalism would require students to be seen not as responsible, independent adults with lives outside of class to be acceptable. However, since college is often not the only priority a student has going on at any one time, they should be able to choose which is more important to them, paying attention to class or not paying attention, for any reason. Since we view students as responsible enough, society would not accept using hard paternalism. Lastly, impure paternalism also is often unacceptable. While there are cases where it is accepted, there are just as many that are not acceptable. Just as smokers harming others with second hand smoke not being enough to ban the action, students harming themselves or others with laptops or missing class is not enough to ban those actions. These actions are not acceptable because it takes away the autonomy of those affected.

Not only are these actions objectionably paternalistic, they may also be harmful. All students are harmed by having their right to autonomy taken away, but this violation harms other students more. Male and lower-performing students benefited significantly more from laptop ban policies than other groups (Patterson), but enforcing a laptop ban policy based on these groups would harm both this group and other groups. If all students were not allowed to use laptops, higher performing students and women would have to give up an option so that others did not feel left out, which could foster resentment. However, if only men and underperforming students were banned from using laptops, this could foster resentment as well.

Mandating attendance harms all genders and performance levels, as it places schoolwork primarily in the students' lives, while students might not hold these same values. Students, in this case, might have to put a class they do not believe should be mandatory above what they believe is mandatory, such as work, family emergencies, or sicknesses. While some teachers offer exceptions for these circumstances, there should not be the policy at all. If students find a class important and valuable enough, they will make arrangements with other priorities, so they can attend class.

Disabled students are also at risk of being harmed, as they could need accommodations for their disability. Not being granted these accommodations would be against ADA laws, while being granted these accommodations when others aren't would put the disabled student in a place where others may be jealous and not accepting of these students. Students with motor control difficulties may not be able to write out the notes as quickly as they would need to be able to keep up with the class. Students with learning disabilities might struggle to process all of the information fast enough to know what to write down or burn themselves out from writing everything down. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students may need more time to receive the information, especially if professors do not give out copies of the notes. With laptops, all of these can be mitigated.

Mandatory attendance policies also harm disabled students. For example, students with chronic fatigue, depression, or similar disorders might have intense problems getting out of bed, let alone getting to class and sitting for an hour or more. Students with chronic pain might be unable to leave their bed from the amount of pain they are in. Autistic students or those with sensory processing disorders might not have a classroom that is willing or able to accommodate

their needs. None of these students should be punished for missing class due to something outside of their control.

Non-traditional students are also harmed. These students are nearly always considered 'official' adults by society, and even if traditional students are not granted the same, should be able to determine how they should spend their time. However, this puts non-traditional students in a similar place as disabled students, where classmates could become jealous and intolerant towards them.

Non-traditional students have other priorities outside of schoolwork. Many may be parents, working full time, or have any number of reasons that they cannot attend every class. It is unacceptable to mandate attendance for non-traditional students, especially considering that they are 'official' adults by society's standards and often cannot miss work or stop being a parent. Since Bowling Green State University is a public university with many working-class students, this is something that teachers need to consider before making these policies.

While there are groups helped by banning laptops and requiring attendance, there are no groups that aren't harmed by these policies, even if it does help improve grades for students. A blanket policy that makes exceptions singles out the students who do not have to follow the policy. A blanket policy that does not make exceptions at all harms the students who need the exceptions.

All teachers are harmed by having these policies. Banning laptops makes teachers' jobs harder, because students might dislike them, or they have to keep all of the students' attention for much longer than if they had allowed laptops. Mandating attendance harms teachers by forcing them to keep track of students every class, which takes up time. Bowling Green State University itself does not require teachers to mandate attendance or have laptop policies, but teachers

continue to make these policies, whether it be from habit, the belief that students should attend and pay attention, or out of peer pressure. No matter the reason, teachers are harmed.

Not only are all teachers who implement these policies harmed, so are the students. Banning laptops makes it so students no longer have a straightforward way to productively let their attention wander, giving them a break during long lectures. It also assumes that all teachers are good at their jobs and that all students learn best from a certain type of instruction, which may be untrue. Mandating attendance also harms all students by guiltting them into showing up, missing other priorities, exposing students to illnesses, wasting time while attendance is taken, exposing students who want to be there to distracting students who do not want to be there, and assuming that all students learn best in class, which as shown by Lukkarinen et al is untrue.

Not only do these actions harm many students, it also goes against Bowling Green State University's mission and learning outcomes, as stated on the college's website. 3 columns of the mission are respect for one another, intellectual and personal growth, and pursuit of excellence. Taking respect to include respecting one's rights and autonomy, banning laptop use or requiring attendance would not follow the mission. If Bowling Green State University aspires for intellectual and personal growth, it follows that students must be given opportunities to grow. This would mean allowing students to fail. Growth cannot come without being put outside of one's comfort zone. However, growth cannot occur if students are sabotaged. Allowing students to be autonomous during classes also allows for the pursuit of excellence. These paternalistic actions attempt to force all students into a pursuit of excellence, instead of pushing students.

These actions also go against Bowling Green State University's learning outcomes: intellectual and practice skills and personal and social responsibility. Taking away options for

students damages their ability to think critically and constructively, as well as assumes their values are the same as the university's. Steps in this process include inquiry, examining values, and solving problems creatively. A way a student may follow this path to find using laptops acceptable is by asking whether they do best with a laptop, examining if grades are their top and only values, and finding ways to take notes on their computer in a way that best benefits them.

Mandating attendance and banning laptop use also does not teach personal and social responsibility. With teachers having these rules, it doesn't allow students to become responsible for their actions. This puts students at a disadvantage after college, as they are now further behind what they are expected to be at the work force.

### Section 3

There are many arguments and studies that show that policies that require attendance or ban laptop use are helpful to students. These are shown to be difficult to dispute. Even so, these policies should not be implemented by moral and ethical standards.

It may be argued that these actions are acceptable because college students have not yet been in the 'real' world and do not know enough to be considered responsible adults. This argument may be true, but it leaves out non-traditional students who are coming back to college after an extended break. These students don't match the above argument, which would mean that applying these actions to them is paternalistic and should not be done.

This argument also places students who do fit the argument in an awkward situation. While legally they are adults, many see them as adults in training. It makes it harder for students to know where exactly they stand, and what is expected of them. All college students are able and expected to pick the major that they believe will help them in the future, so it would make

sense that they are able to take responsibility for how they learn and perform in said major and classes.

Requiring certain ways to take notes or perform in classes is unacceptable to non-traditional students and harmful to traditional students. Requiring these actions also makes assumptions about values that students may not share. The assumption made by those enforcing these rules is that the priority should be grades. It is possible, even likely, that students do prioritize their grades. However, there are other ways to prioritize grades that are less paternalistic, although they are not likely to be accepted by colleges on a wide scale.

The first option that is less paternalistic but would also prioritize grades is to offer a percentage off of the cost of tuition based on the grade a student makes. For example, if a student gets a 92% in their class, they should only pay 8%. This way, scholarships and loans would not have to be the primary way students finance their educations. Colleges would still make money from students failing classes, and it's possible that these would outweigh the amount of money they wouldn't receive from better performing students. This option is unlikely to occur on a wide scale, as it means that colleges would have to find other ways to finance themselves.

This option was also briefly mentioned during the Discussion portion of Patterson and Patterson's experiment. They found that eliminating classroom computers and providing full-tuition incentives to maintain a 3.0 GPA would have similar impacts on grades. This option is unlikely to occur due to the possibility of causing financial problems with the university. While this option is unlikely, it would be a less harmful way of influencing students, as instead of using direct paternalistic actions, it uses nudging. Nudging is still paternalistic, but does not take away autonomy from those affected, in this case students.



The next option is paying students who receive high grades a stipend every month for educational purposes. This would allow students money to purchase books or pay off tuition loans faster, without allowing them to use the money for non-education purposes. This would help students overall, while also keeping the colleges' money spent low. This option is also unlikely, as it means that colleges would have to spend more on students.

Putting grades as the top priority also sends the wrong message. While grades are no doubt a priority, it should be neither the top or only priority. Other priorities students may hold include mental health, physical health, work, friendships, family, and extra-curricular activities. Priorities colleges seem to promote are physical and mental health. Bowling Green State University has a Student Recreation Center and Counseling Services to help promote these priorities, yet prioritizing grades more than anything else puts these in conflict with each other.

Requiring students to go to classes with minimal absences could easily be a reason that winter makes such a large number of students sick, as they are more likely to be put in an environment with a sick student. If it was expected and accepted that sick students could stay home, it's likely that flu season would not hit as hard as it does every year.

By requiring attendance and ways students can perform in class, this can harm their mental health as well. For students who are diagnosed with depression or similar disorders, there are days that it is difficult if not impossible for them to go to class. While this can be fixed for students registered with the college, this puts students in a place where they have to receive and disclose their diagnoses, which may not be possible for monetary or personal reason.

Instead of micromanaging students and what they are allowed to do, it would be better to allow all students to take the days they need off. It is preferable that some students take advantage of this system than any who need it not be able to access it.

Not allowing students to use computers in class to take notes puts students at a disadvantage. It is highly likely that students will work with computers in their future career. If they do, they should have the chance to learn how to use that technology for the better, as well as paying attention while using laptops.

By mandating attendance and class performances, colleges are assuming study habits of students. While it is likely that some or many students will not look back at their notes or write them out by hand after class, there are students who do this. These students should have the right to study in the way that best suits them, just as the other students who would benefit from these policies benefit.

While higher rates of attendance often lead to higher grades, it does not by virtue lead to increased knowledge and comprehension of the material. Students often cram all of the material into the day or week before the test, then forget everything after the test is over. While this technically does improve grades, long term learning suffers. While this cramming is likely to happen no matter what colleges attempt to do, it is likely that students would be less prone to cramming if they are able to take notes in ways that best suit them, as well as studying on their own time, even if it means missing class.

The final thing that these paternalistic actions create is cognitive dissonance. In nearly every case, students are paying to go to college. It would be unacceptable if an employee told a boss how to do their work, so it should be unacceptable that colleges are able to tell students how to do their work. Students pay the college, and by extension, teachers for their labor and service. Even if one does not see students and teachers in a boss and employee type of situation, it is still generally unacceptable. If the situation changes to that of any other service profession, take working in retail for example, nearly all requests by workers that do not include a customer

being in immediate danger would likely result in a call for the manager. It is clear that this society does not enjoy having freedoms being taken away, which would of course translate over to colleges as well.

While there are arguments that could be made to support these and similar actions, it is made apparent that they are not in line with society's values. Therefore, while these actions can be beneficial in some cases, they should not be implemented on students against their will.

There are many benefits for students to not use laptops during class, as well as attending class. Even though there are many benefits, policies like this violate the autonomy of all students and harms a minority of students. Since the rights of students are violated and students are harmed, colleges and teachers should not implement laptop ban and mandatory attendance policies, even if it does help some students.

Many groups of students, as well as teachers, are harmed by laptop ban and mandatory attendance policies. These policies harm the autonomy of all students, even if some students may appreciate the policies. While these policies are beneficial to some students, disabled students, non-traditional students, and students who learn better outside of class are harmed by these policies.

There are many objections and responses to not using these policies, such as that students are not 'real' adults. There are also other ways for universities to promote grades that are not currently being taken.

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