

**Educational Policy and Technology Committee and Student Government Association
Joint Recommendation on GW's Excused Absence Policy
May 2, 2025**

Background

In June 2024, Student Government Association (SGA) President Ethan Fitzgerald approached the co-chairs of the Educational Policy and Technology Committee with a proposal for a university-wide Mental Health Days policy and asked whether the committee would be willing to collaborate on the matter. In August 2024, EPT co-chairs invited Ethan to provide a brief explanation of the proposal to the full committee during its August 23rd meeting. In his introduction, Ethan explained that the proposed policy, one of several priorities for his administration, would require instructors to offer “excused mental health absences” to not compound mental stress/trauma already being experienced by a student. The proposal was then formally discussed during multiple meetings over the next several months, as detailed below.

Timeline and Summary of EPT Deliberations

August 23, 2024

SGA President Ethan Fitzgerald presents SGA’s Blackboard Ally and Mental Health Days proposal to EPT.

October 18, 2024

The committee revisits the SGA’s Mental Health Days proposal with SGA President Ethan Fitzgerald. The committee co-chairs recommend that an ad hoc subcommittee (as part of the Student Success subcommittee) be formed to discuss the proposal in greater depth. The ad-hoc committee included SGA President Ethan Fitzgerald, CAPS Director Laura Finkelstein, DSS Director Rochelle Mills, Associate Provost for Undergraduate Affairs and Special Programs Jeff Brand and EPT members Ben Bronner, Irene Foster, and Meg Ulfers.

December 13, 2024

The committee receives an update that the subcommittee has begun to discuss the Mental Health Days proposal and will report back to EPT at the January 2025 meeting.

January 10, 2025

The committee receives an update on the mental health days proposal from SGA and members of the ad hoc subcommittee. Among other points of discussion, the committee agreed that the term “well-being” better captured the intent of the proposed policy (i.e., “well-being days” versus “mental health days”). There was no consensus to recommend a specific number of “well-being days” that could be considered excused absences. There was also concern expressed that such a policy might inadvertently increase student stress by causing students to fall behind on material covered in class.

February 14, 2025

The committee receives an update on the well-being days proposal from SGA and members of the ad hoc subcommittee. Associate Provost for Undergraduate Affairs & Special Programs Jeff Brand noted that any guidance must be consistent with the existing policy in the GW Bulletin. Ad hoc subcommittee member Meg Ulfers requested a mechanism to assess effects on the number of student absences and student stress levels.

March 21, 2025

The committee receives an update from EPT co-chair Irene Foster and SGA President Ethan Fitzgerald regarding the well-being days proposal. They report that the ad hoc subcommittee is continuing to develop a proposal with input from the administration, Disability Support Services (DSS), GW Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS), and other stakeholders to amend the policy to permit some unexcused absences.

April 11, 2025

The committee receives an update from co-chair Irene Foster and SGA President Ethan Fitzgerald regarding the well-being days proposal. The ad-hoc subcommittee reviewed existing policies in the [University Bulletin](#):

Attendance

Students can attend only those courses for which they are officially registered. Regular attendance is expected. Students can be dropped from any course for undue absence. A student suspended for any cause cannot attend classes during the period of suspension. Students are held responsible for all of the work of the courses in which they are registered, and all absences must be excused by the instructor before provision is made to make up the work missed.

in the [Faculty Handbook](#) (2015):

2.7.3.9 Students in Distress

Faculty can refer students who appear to be in distress to the University Counseling Center and/or to the CARE Network, a university-wide network designed to connect students with needed resources. Distress can be manifested through sudden changes in behavior, demeanor, or academic performance, drop in class attendance, comments made that allude to self-harm or harm to others, or any other actions that seem atypical for the student. Filing a CARE report can be very helpful in determining if the changes are more pervasive, since other reports may have also been filed on behalf of that student.

and on the website of the [Office of the Registrar](#):

Class Attendance

Attending regularly scheduled and scheduled make up classes, discussions and recitations, laboratory sessions and other course meetings is a fundamental student responsibility. Faculty may use class attendance and participation as factors in determining course grades. The contributions of class attendance and participation toward course grades should be explicitly stated on course syllabi as should all factors used in determining these grades.

While it is expected that students will make every effort to attend classes, it is recognized that personal circumstances (e.g., religious observances, documented family and medical emergencies) and University-scheduled events (e.g., varsity athletic competitions, performances) will arise which preclude class attendance. In such circumstances, faculty and other instructors are expected to make appropriate accommodations (e.g., make up tests, adjusted due dates for papers and projects), such accommodations to be determined by the faculty member. The student is responsible for obtaining the materials presented in missed classes and for making up missed tests and other assignments. No academic penalty shall be imposed for class absences which are permissible in accordance with University policy.

It is expected that students will schedule classes in order to minimize the number of classes that may be missed.

Further, it is expected that whenever possible, students will inform course instructors in advance of any absences related to scheduled events.

After review of the policies, the group recommended that the provost's office establish a committee to update and modernize GW's excused absence policy for undergraduate and graduate students, allowing for some additional flexibility for students. The group further recommends that such a committee include representatives from EPT, SGA, DSS, and CAPS among other stakeholders. This recommendation was unanimously approved by the full EPT committee at its regular meeting on May 2nd 2025.

Summary: What the Ad Hoc Subcommittee Learned

Issue #1 – Confusion regarding the current policy on excused absences and required documentation

As noted above in the University Bulletin, the university's current policy on undergraduate (and graduate) attendance states "*Students are held responsible for all of the work of the courses in which they are registered, and all absences must be excused by the instructor before provision is made to make up the work missed.*" This policy was established before 2020—that is, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon returning to in-person instruction in Fall 2021, faculty were informed that they were not allowed to request documentation if a student notified them that they were ill. There has been no update provided to faculty regarding undergraduate and graduate attendance since Fall 2021. Confusion regarding this point of the policy raises the following questions:

- 1) Does there have to be an "emergency" for the student to receive an excused absence? What constitutes an emergency (e.g., a migraine, food poisoning, surgery), who makes that determination, what documentation suffices, and where do students seek such documentation?
- 2) What are instructors allowed to require of students in terms of documentation to receive an "excused" absence?
- 3) Should instructors specify in their syllabi that students must provide "excuse notes" and/or documentation if they miss class for family or medical emergencies?

Issue #2: Mental health within the excused absence policy

While some students come to campus with diagnosed mental health issues and related treatment plans, SGA President Ethan Fitzgerald explained to the committee that there may be students who just need a "mental health break" mid-semester. This was corroborated by CAPS Director Laura Finkelstein's presentation to EPT on student mental health at GW. Is there any provision in the university's absence policy for such situations?

SGA has also noted that students experiencing a need for such breaks may not want to divulge private information to faculty due to the stigma involved. It may add to a student's trauma to discuss their mental health issue with professors who may or may not understand what they are going through, and who may or may not be willing to excuse them.

Issue #3: Need for course-specific guidance on application

One excused absence policy will not fit all. Issues faced in large introductory classes are very different from those faced in small seminars, a humanities class versus a science class, classes that meet once a week versus three times a week etc. The Center for Teaching Excellence and the Office of Student Success can serve as important resources to help faculty articulate how the university's excused absence policy may be applied to their class.

Issue #4: Accreditation and student success considerations

Attendance is important for accreditation, student success and retention, and any excused absence policy/guidance must balance encouraging students to attend class with offering them the flexibility to miss a class if needed (with or without an excuse as the situation warrants). Therefore, designing and implementing an absence policy successfully necessarily requires attention to course design as well.¹

Recommendation

After careful consideration and sustained deliberation of the Student Government Association's (SGA) Mental Health Days proposal, the Educational Policy and Technology Committee (EPT) recommends that GW establish a committee (formed out of the provost's office) to revise and update its **current excused absence policy** to be more comprehensive and to provide more clarity for both faculty and students. Further, we recommend that this committee include representatives from the SGA, EPT, Disability and Support Services (DSS), Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), the Student Health Center's Health Promotion Office, the GW Center for Teaching Excellence, and the Office of Student Success, among other stakeholders.

Specifically, EPT and SGA recommend the following:

- 1) Provide guidance on how an excused absence policy may cover undergraduate and graduate student absences for reasons of physical or mental health, family emergencies (e.g., students helping their single parents care for siblings), as well as longer absences for religious reasons such as Ramadan, addressing which absences will require documentation and of what type, and whether students may be allowed absences without requiring any evidence of an excusable circumstance, etc. This guidance should be uniform across the University Bulletin, the Faculty Handbook and the Registrar's website;
- 2) Provide examples/suggestions to faculty on how to design class attendance policies with some built-in flexibility (e.g., dropping a few attendance scores at the end of the semester; counting only 4 out of 5 quizzes towards the course grade; or other possibilities suitable for a particular course);
- 3) Provide faculty with a possible example script for the first day of class, clearly describing their attendance policy as well as instructions on how students can make up material missed during class absences (to be developed by DSS, CAPS and the GW Center for Teaching Excellence).
- 4) Provide examples/suggestions to students on how to make up missed classes without burdening the instructor.
- 5) Ensure that the revised policy is available to faculty and students not only in the [University Bulletin](#), [Faculty Handbook](#), and the website of the [Office of the Registrar](#) but also in the Faculty FAQs on Blackboard and in the syllabus template.

¹<https://www.chronicle.com/article/students-say-mental-health-breaks-from-class-help-them-succeed-heres-how-colleges-are-responding>

- 6) Ensure that the revised policy has been approved by all stakeholders by May 1 2026, so that it is available to faculty and students for implementation in AY 2026-2027.

Continuing Business (submitted to the Faculty Senate) for EPT and SGA for AY2025-2026

Faculty request to the Provost's Office regarding the establishment of a committee to comprehensively update and modernize GW's excused absence policy for undergraduate and graduate students, allowing for some additional flexibility for students. Faculty request that such a committee include representatives from EPT, SGA, DSS, CAPS, the Student Health Center's Health Promotion Office, the Center for Teaching Excellence and the Office of Student Success among other stakeholders, and that the committee present the revised policy to EPT before April 30, 2026.