

## Sarah Anderegg

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**From:** Jonathan Eldridge  
**Sent:** Tuesday, February 28, 2023 9:38 AM  
**To:** Jonathan Eldridge  
**Subject:** Spring 2023 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume VIII  
**Attachments:** Procrastination And Deadlines.pdf

Dear College of Marin Faculty:

This week I'm sharing a short article on finding the right balance between flexibility and deadlines—and how it's not an either/or approach that may be most effective. I hope you enjoy the cognitive psychology behind the finding that numerous short-term deadlines (chunking course content and student deliverables) with some degree of flexibility may help students both personally and academically.

Also, each Spring Semester PRAC (Planning & Resource Allocation Committee) hears presentations from each academic and administrative division of the College. These presentations provide an overview of the area, a look at how program review and the strategic plan are informing initiatives and activities, and what additional resources may be needed to achieve set goals. PRAC then makes recommendations to the President for consideration. Presentations from previous years, along with PRAC's charge, membership, meeting summaries, and other documents, can be found at: <https://gov.marin.edu/prac> . If you would like to listen in to this year's presentations, you may do so via Zoom at: <https://marin-edu.zoom.us/j/84360249206> .

Here is the schedule of presentations (*all meetings begin at 2p.m.*):

**Tuesday, February 28<sup>th</sup>**

Instructional Support (PRIE/DE/Counseling/Transfer/CDP/ECE/OIM)  
Arts & Humanities/Library  
Kinesiology & Athletics/Student Health

**Tuesday, March 14<sup>th</sup>**

Nursing  
Career Education/Workforce Development  
Educational Support Programs (ESL/Tutoring/RWL/Learning Communities)

**Tuesday, March 28<sup>th</sup>**

Math, Science, & Business  
Student Services (Enrollment Services/Welcome Center/Outreach/EOPS/SAS/Psychological Services/Student Activities & Advocacy)

**Tuesday, April 11<sup>th</sup>**

Administrative Services (Fiscal/M&O/Capital Projects/College Services/Police/Community Programs/IT)  
President (HR/Advancement/Marketing/General Counsel)

Thank you for all you do.

Jonathan



**Jonathan Eldridge, Ed.D**

*Assistant Superintendent/*

*Vice President of Student Learning & Success*

College of Marin

Office: 415-485-9618

[jeldridge@marin.edu](mailto:jeldridge@marin.edu)

## ‘Procrastination-Friendly’ Academe Needs More Deadlines

Some faculty members believe eliminating deadlines optimizes flexibility for students. But cognitive psychology research suggests that students fare better academically and personally under numerous short-term deadlines.

Susan D'Agostino February 10, 2023

When Hannah Snyder, assistant professor of psychology at Brandeis University, first began teaching, she did not set multiple midsemester deadlines for students to report progress on their end-of-semester papers. As the weeks passed, she offered her students gentle reminders to begin early and pace themselves, given the approaching course end. But many students nonetheless procrastinated. As the final deadline drew close, many scrambled in a stressful, last-minute burst of work that produced underwhelming results.

“I’ve never had so many incompletes,” Snyder said of the missed opportunity to support the students throughout the term and ensure that all completed the course. “You’d think with all my research on the development of executive function and mental health and stress in emerging adulthood, I would have put together from the get-go that part of our job as faculty is to help students develop those skills.” (Executive function is a set of skills that underlie a human’s ability to plan and achieve goals.)

Some equity-minded professors may believe that a single long-term deadline is better than numerous short-term deadlines, especially for students whose schedules lack flexibility due to significant work or family responsibilities. Others argue that professors should set boundaries *with* students, not *for* them. Still others offer anecdotal reports that optional attendance policies, flexible deadlines and ungrading *increase* student engagement. Yet another faculty contingent resists structuring courses with short-term assignments that build to a large project out of concern that doing so coddles students.

But the science says that a single, far-off deadline for a substantial assignment undermines traditional-aged students’ success, as their self-monitoring and self-regulation skills are still developing.

“Most graduate programs provide very little instruction in teaching” for Ph.D.s who join the faculty ranks, Snyder said. “Professors are doing all sorts of things—sometimes with the best of intentions—that are actually not helpful based on a solid body of cognitive psych research.”

## **Productivity and Procrastination**

Students procrastinate at rates that may be two to three times those observed in working populations, according to a *Frontiers in Psychology* [study](#). The college environment is one that sometimes affords ample unstructured time, distractions and far-off deadlines—situational characteristics that contribute to what Frode Svartdal, professor of psychology at the Arctic University of Norway and co-author of the *Frontiers* study, has dubbed a “procrastination-friendly environment.”

At the same time, traditional-aged college students are in a developmental stage in which their executive function skills are often works in progress, Svartdal said. This means that they may, at times, be impulsive, distracted or challenged by efforts to follow through on planned activities. For example, an impulsive person may give up on a boring or difficult task in favor of an activity they prefer, even when doing so is not in their best interest.

When students’ still-developing executive function skills are paired with academe’s procrastination-friendly environment, the result can create a perfect storm. But speeding up students’ developmental growth rarely happens in an instant. That’s why addressing the situational piece of this equation offers more immediate promise. To minimize negative impacts on students’ intellectual growth, Svartdal offers a succinct message. “Long-term deadlines should be avoided,” Svartdal wrote in an email.

Short-term deadlines serve as motivators for accomplishing accessible tasks. They also imbue each step in the process of completing a longer-term project with more meaning, according to Svartdal. When professors steer clear of single, far-off deadlines, they keep the focus on the course content.

“Presumably, our classes should be assessing students’ mastery of the material and not their executive function skills,” Snyder said. Numerous short-term deadlines “help all students but are critical for those who would otherwise flounder for reasons that have nothing to do with their understanding of the material.” This group includes those with mental health concerns, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety or depression.

Students with significant work or family responsibilities also benefit from more—not fewer—deadlines.

“Those students are more likely to find a particular task aversive. They’re tired, and they’re stressed,” said Akira Miyake, professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Miyake’s research considers holistic classroom interventions that aim to reduce academic procrastination. “To help students, provide scaffolding. Break down the [long-term] task into smaller deadlines.”

Still, students are often vocal about a desire for more independence, including on work for substantial projects. But Snyder knows from her research that students’ perceptions of their learning are often overestimates. Also, when a student submits an outline for a far-off paper, she is able to offer early corrective feedback that bolsters their success. And so, she has a ready response for students who protest.

“‘Current you’ might feel like I’m being annoying, but ‘future you’ is going to be glad not to have a mad scramble at the end, and you’ll get a better grade,” Snyder said. Besides, student procrastinators may gain short-term benefits early in a semester in the form of, for example, more free time. But the long-term academic and personal costs can be more significant.

“Procrastination is associated with psychological distress,” Miyake said. Students who procrastinate suffer from reduced well-being, stress and mental and physical health problems, according to a *Psychological Science* study. But small changes to

assignment-submission protocols can minimize this distress and help students stay focused on course content. “It’s easy to say that college students should be able to manage long-term deadlines on their own, but that’s not the case.”

## **Caveats**

In between the options of “deadlines” and “no deadlines” lies the option of “flexible deadlines.” In recognition that today’s students are studying—and often also juggling work and family—during a global pandemic, among other significant societal concerns, some argue that structure and flexibility must be viewed as compatible.

“I’m all for being flexible about deadlines if a student asks for or needs accommodations,” Miyake said. Even when a request for accommodation is granted, the near-term deadline provides a professor with advance notice of a problem the student is facing. That heads-up offers the professor an opportunity to intervene early with help.

Also, students’ executive function skills, like most other human attributes, are variable. Managing long-term deadlines without supervision can be a skill that is honed over time. “Some students can do it already, and some of them will never be able to do it,” Snyder said. “Both of those are OK.”

Many employers for whom students may work following graduation often rely on structured, short-term deadlines in the workplace, according to the researchers contacted for this article. That’s because employers also realize that multiple short-term deadlines keep teams on track and increase productivity.

“Not everyone has to be ready for a future where they’re let loose with months of unstructured time and expected to produce something big at the end,” Snyder said. Some students, of course, work well when afforded autonomy. They may be innovative, prone to taking risks and proactive in their work. Such students might consider an independent path, as research has correlated these traits with entrepreneurial intention.