

**From:** [Jonathan Eldridge](#)  
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**Attachments:** [The Deadline Dilemma.pdf](#)

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Dear College of Marin Faculty:

On the cusp of a much needed long weekend, this week I want to remind you again to complete that 20 minute cybersecurity training in Pro-Learning (topics below). I am also sharing the attached piece on deadlines. As with most things, deadlines for assignments, how much flexibility to build in, and the impact on students actually learning the material you need them to understand is more complicated than it might seem at first blush. This article thoughtfully approaches the subject and offers some good considerations to ponder.

All my best,

Jonathan

Ransomware attacks are common threats to our educational institutions. College of Marin's cybersecurity insurance policy requires all employees to receive training yearly. Please login into your ProLearning site through the MyCOM [portal](#). Search for the following courses.

- Browser Security Basics
- Copyright Infringement
- Cybersecurity Overview
- Email and Messaging Safety
- Password Security Basics
- Protection Against Malware

You are required to complete at least ONE of them no later than December 16.



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# The Deadline Dilemma

## When it comes to course assignments, how much flexibility is too much?

By [Carolyn Kuimelis](#)  
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Constance Kassor thought she was helping her students. Like many professors, she's been more lenient about accepting late work since the pandemic hit. But last year, she tried something new: She did away with point deductions entirely. She still had deadlines, but she didn't penalize her students for missing them.

"I thought that was the more equitable and inclusive kind of policy," says Kassor, an associate professor of religious studies at Lawrence University, in Wisconsin. She hoped the flexibility would give much-needed breathing room to students who were dealing with challenges outside the classroom. But she found that too many students were waiting until the last day of the term to turn in eight weeks' worth of work, and she couldn't tell which of them were struggling along the way. "Learning wasn't happening as I intended for it to happen," Kassor says.

Deadlines are a building block of college courses — they help students stay on track, and they ensure instructors aren't overwhelmed with a slew of work to grade at the end of a term. And many professors have long been sticklers about deadlines, arguing it's part of preparing students for their postcollege lives. But late-work policies were a natural point of adjustment for professors during the pandemic: Many swung the opposite direction, replacing punitive policies like point deductions with broad flexibility.

Most professors are back in the physical classroom this academic year, but the context they're teaching in has changed. The pandemic made student stressors — from mental-health challenges to financial and family obligations — more widespread and harder to ignore. It also made professors [more open](#) to different approaches to teaching. As instructors are thinking about which pandemic-era accommodations to keep, a new question has emerged: When it comes to assignment deadlines, what is the right amount of flexibility to offer students?

Morgan Halstead, an associate professor of English and literature at Malcolm X College, part of the City Colleges of Chicago, says she doesn't see herself returning to her pre-pandemic late-work policy any time soon.

She'd always been fairly lenient about granting extensions. But when she saw how severely her students were affected by the pandemic, she decided to make explicit in her syllabus that she would not deduct points for late work. "It just seemed like one less trauma to give them," she says.

For the most part, she's found that students still turn their work in on time. And those who do take advantage of her policy are often the students whose skills improve a great deal over the course of the semester, she says. Most of her students come from vulnerable populations, and Halstead figures that "they just needed a little extra time."

"I keep waiting for the semester where I regret it," she says. "And I haven't come across that yet."

Professors who make the case for total leniency say flexible policies for late work acknowledge that students are human, and that balancing nonacademic obligations and personal challenges with coursework requires some level of grace from the instructor. Some faculty argue, too, that traditional ways of dealing with late work are fundamentally inequitable.

Time-honored policies, like grade penalties for every day an assignment is late, are meant to motivate students to stay on top of their work. But some professors are uneasy at the idea of deducting points on an otherwise high-quality assignment; they worry that it unfairly punishes students for life circumstances that make it harder to complete assignments on time.

That includes the student who's struggling with housing or food needs, or who's taking care of a sick family member. It also includes neurodivergent students, says Rua Williams, an assistant professor of computer-graphics technology at Purdue University who uses they/them pronouns.

**Too often, it's been the student who is empowered or confident or socialized enough to know they can ask for an extension who gets it.**

Williams doesn't penalize students for missing deadlines. Getting official accommodations through a university's disability-services office can be costly and inaccessible, Williams says — especially for students with neurocognitive disabilities.

Williams would rather “treat everybody as if they are technically disabled in some way.” They instead use due dates as a way of tracking which students are falling behind so they can offer them individualized support.

“You can't just be flexible,” Williams says. “You also have to be engaged.”

Research suggests that a highly structured course is a big part of inclusive teaching, according to Regan A.R. Gurung, associate vice provost and executive director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at Oregon State University. While flexibility and compassion are part of creating a supportive learning environment, there's a problem with how many professors — himself included — have historically approached granting extensions.

Gurung, who also teaches psychology courses at Oregon State, says he was “implicitly flexible” before the pandemic. While flexible policies may not have been specifically outlined in the course syllabus, he and many of his colleagues were understanding when students requested leniency — and they assumed that if a student needed an extension, they'd ask for one. The problem with this approach, he notes, is that “far too often, it's been the student who is empowered or confident or socialized enough to know they can ask for an extension who gets it.”

This puts first-generation students and other students from marginalized groups at a disadvantage. Sarah Craig, a senior at Georgetown University, says she didn't ask for an extension until her junior year of college. “As a first-gen student,” Craig says, “I didn't feel like I had enough credibility or understanding of how to navigate higher education to feel OK doing that.”

Gurung says he was broadly flexible in the early stages of the pandemic. Now, he's trying to find ways to bake deadline flexibility into his 400-person introductory course. For example, he recently built in a 24-hour buffer to all of his assignment deadlines. And if students need extra time, they can fill out a Google

form for a two-day extension. This kind of “circumscribed flexibility” is intended to be an “equalizer between students who have had great high-school educations and are well-socialized for college and those who haven’t,” Gurung says. That’s why structure is an important piece of the inclusive-teaching puzzle.

But highly structured, he notes, isn’t the same as rigid. Arguments in favor of rigidity have long centered around the idea that strict policies teach time management and personal responsibility, preparing students for their professional lives. Instructors who advocate for modified flexibility point out that in the real world, some deadlines matter, but others don’t. The best thing they can do, they argue, is communicate to their students which due dates are firm and which are flexible.

Structure can be especially helpful for instructors who teach large classes, where the administrative consequences of broadly flexible late-work policies are significant, says [Viji Sathy](#), an associate dean for evaluation and assessment in the office of undergraduate education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she is also a professor of psychology and neuroscience. Late work piles up, extension requests flood instructors’ inboxes, and the difficulty of keeping tabs on 40 or 50 students’ progress can be burdensome.

Moving out of Covid, Sathy and her colleagues are developing resources for instructors to think about how they can balance accountability and compassion. “We don’t want people to swing too hard back to rigid policies,” she says. But at the same time, “you can’t give students full flexibility and then still be able to feel like you have some gas in the tank for yourself.”

While research may indicate that a structured approach to work turned in late fosters inclusivity, Sathy says there’s been little research done on which policies in particular are more equitable or effective. “There is a middle ground, but in this case, the middle ground is very diverse and really not very well understood about the impacts,” she says.

There’s no one right way to handle late work. Underlying the debate are considerations of class size and subject, as well as questions about how to formulate policies to meet course goals and accommodate student needs, which vary from institution to institution. Conversations about late work also come as professors are thinking about how to deal with their students being [disengaged](#) and unprepared for college-level work after Covid-era disruptions.

Sathy decided it wouldn’t make sense to throw due dates out the window in her own courses; she’s often teaching more than 400 students a semester, and most assignments consist of weekly problem sets that build on one another. In her class, deadlines have pedagogical value.

“We need to give you timely feedback in order to meet the goals of the course,” Sathy says. “And the best way that happens is if we are exchanging things on a regular schedule.”

Still, she wanted to provide her students with some level of flexibility, so she offers a 24-hour deadline buffer for her weekly assignments. She also drops her students’ lowest assignment grade and changed her point system to encourage timeliness over perfection.

Steven D. Krause, a professor of English at Eastern Michigan University, used to be a stickler about deadlines. He was one of the “older-white-guy holdouts for being really strict,” as he puts it. But he says the pandemic humanized him, and he’s more lenient with extensions now. That’s partly because he’s

had to contend with the pandemic's lingering effects on student preparedness and well-being. He noticed that a handful of students in his first-year writing course — which he's teaching in person for the first time since 2018 — needed to adjust to the demands of an in-person college course. He had to lower his expectations around things like due dates and attendance, especially at the beginning of the semester.

Kassor thinks this is partly why so many of her students waited until the last minute to turn in their work when she did away with deadline-related point deductions. While some were dealing with acute challenges, she suspected that others — especially those who had just finished high school online — just didn't know how to manage their time.

After her semester-long experiment with broad flexibility, Kassor decided to radically change her policy: She wouldn't accept late work for any reason, she told her students.

Instead, she restructured her course so all of the assignments were low stakes; rather than turning in a paper worth 20 percent of their grade, students would turn in an outline for 5 percent, a first draft for another 5 percent, and so on. She also built 10 points of extra credit into the course. Both of these changes were meant to ensure that students could miss an assignment or two and still succeed in the course.

Now, Kassor says, she can better identify which students are struggling with the material and intervene as necessary. She also doesn't have to be in the business of determining what is a valid excuse for an extension.

"Is somebody helping a family member who's sick with Covid, or did somebody just sleep through their alarm and not come to class? Often, I don't know the whole story, and that's not my job," she said.