



## **(IN)FLEXIBLE ASSIGNMENT DEADLINES: IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**

Gail Markle, Professor of Sociology

What is the appropriate level of flexibility to offer students? How can instructors determine when deadline flexibility might improve student assignment outcomes and lessen stress and when it is important to have firm assignment deadlines? What impact might flexible assignment deadlines have on students' post-college lives? How can deadline policies be equitable and effective for students and not burdensome to instructors?

There is no universal set of best practices for policies surrounding late work. Most commonly used:

- Standard deduction: allowing late submissions with a penalty (usually 10 points per day) as long as assignments are submitted within 7 days of the deadline.
- Life Happens Pass or Token: any student can utilize an automatic 72-hour no questions asked extension on one assignment, as long as the student informs the instructor in writing.

Ruesch and Sarvary (2024) experimented with a two-tiered assignment deadline system: 1) ideal dates and 2) EWP date (one-to-two-week extension without penalty). Their syllabus states a primary due date and includes the following statement:

“We understand that there can be circumstances when students need more time to complete their assignments. All assignments have ideal due dates, and they also have extension due dates. We highly recommend that you submit the assignments (if you can) by their suggested ideal due dates, to maintain a good rhythm of learning in the class. You can submit assignments by the extension due date without any penalty. We are providing the extension due dates so you can use them for certain times when you have other exams, sickness or you just simply need a break and you do not want to think about an assignment.”

Results: 41% of students used an EWP once; 37% used an EWP more than once, 22% did not use.

Students who used an EWP reported: reduced stress, increased ability to manage coursework and unexpected events, improved quality of work, better time management, and improved mental health. Even those who didn't use an EWP reported reduced stress.

Ruesch and Sarvary found the EWP system reduced their workload (fewer student emails, less need for problem-solving) and reduced potential instructor bias. They believe that as a result, students put more effort into their assignments and therefore learned more in the course.

Ruesch, Joseph M., and Mark A. Sarvary. 2024. “Structure and Flexibility: Systemic and Explicit Assignment Extensions Foster an Inclusive Learning Environment.” *Frontiers in Education* (9):1324506 <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2024.1324506/full>