



Considering Flexible Due Date Policies

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Creating and sharing firm due dates for assignments and assessments have often been fundamental features of effective instruction. Conventional wisdom suggests that creating (and enforcing) clear due dates for major assignments can help students learn to manage their time more effectively; incorporating due dates with their [corresponding assignment links in Blackboard](#) can help students stay on track and manage their workload (as those due dates will populate the student's Blackboard calendar and course stream).

Students will likely be employed in future careers which will include tasks that have deadlines. To prepare students for such scenarios, many instructors often adhered to a firm due date policy which include penalties such as grade reductions or no credit for late work.

Such policies were often the norm until the COVID-19 pandemic. Like so many other facets of our teaching, conditions resulting from COVID-19 also forced us to shift our thinking about due dates. Throughout the pandemic, many educators had to enact more flexible policies because of student illness, caretaking duties, and a host of other issues. Penalties or deductions for late work were not necessarily a viable option at this time.

Many teaching and learning experts, however, have been advocating for a more liberal understanding of due dates for some time. Ellen Boucher, writing for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, suggested back in 2016 that it was time to give students “the same respect and flexibility that we demand in our own careers. We have it in our power to change the culture of the academy, one course at a time. It’s time to ditch the deadlines.”

Citing that many students from underprivileged backgrounds may have difficulty negotiating the “hidden curriculum” in college courses relating to rules about deadlines and such, Boucher noted that flexible deadlines do mirror professional practice. It is, after all, relatively common to ask for an extension on a work project.

Foregoing the use of due dates **altogether** may not be practical for instructors or students. Rather than negating all due dates, it can be beneficial to create unit dates to allow students to work at their own pace as they complete individual assignments.

A flexible due date policy in the college classroom suggests that the instructor allows students to request extensions or alternative due dates for their assignments based on individual circumstances. Such a policy acknowledges that students may face challenges that can make it difficult for them to meet the original deadline and aims to provide students with a supportive learning environment by allowing them some flexibility in completing their coursework.



In this framework, assignments (such as essays, presentations, and other major projects) are still assigned due dates, but students have the option to request an extension on an assignment due to circumstances like illness, emergencies, conflicting academic obligations, or other issues.

One particularly effective technique to manage these requests can be to create a Microsoft Form for extensions. Students can state the reason for the extension, and provide an amended due date, and instructors can approve the request as well as keep track of them in one area. (Managing requests in this can be more effective than attempting to recall and record verbal requests made during or after class).

After the instructor is alerted that a request for an extension has been made, the instructor can approve the adjusted due date. The main goal of a flexible due date policy is to recognize that students have diverse needs and challenges and to promote fairness, equity, and understanding within the learning environment.

Such a policy encourages open communication between students and professors and acknowledges that personal circumstances can sometimes affect academic performance. By implementing a flexible due date policy, professors aim to create an environment that



supports student success while maintaining academic standards. Creating the form and sharing the policy also means that due date extension rules will be applied consistently to all students which is also a critical concern.

How have you been negotiating deadlines and due dates before and after the pandemic? We would love to hear from you. Contact Erin Bell at bellee@udmercy.edu to share your best practices.

References:

Boucher, E. (2016). It's Time to Ditch Our Deadlines. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 22. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/its-time-to-ditch-our-deadlines/>.