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ADVICE

It's Time to Ditch Our Deadlines

Why you should stop penalizing your students for submitting work late



James Yang for The Chronicle Review

By *Ellen Boucher* | AUGUST 22, 2016

Every professor has had one: the incredible disappearing student. Mine was "James," a talented and innovative thinker who had great things to say in class until he vanished, about halfway through the semester. He didn't submit his paper. He didn't show up in office hours. He didn't respond to my emails. He was just gone. Poof.

Students like James are increasingly common at colleges and universities. Report after report has shown that undergraduates today experience more anxiety and stress than ever before. In extreme cases, the "pressure of perfection" can have tragic consequences. Nationally, suicide rates for 15- to 24-year-olds have risen, and suicide remains the second-leading cause of death for college students.

More commonly, struggling students simply burn out. They become overwhelmed by the stacks of books that need to be read, by the papers and exams that pile up at the same time, and by their numerous commitments to sports teams, internships, clubs, or jobs. The burden of multiple obligations can seem insurmountable. James fell behind quickly and feared he would never catch up.

No wonder the percentage of undergraduates who manage to earn a bachelor's degree within six years is only 59 percent nationwide. For low-income and first-generation college students, the rate is even lower.

The academic world has taken notice. Administrators are creating mentoring programs

that target historically underserved students. They are revamping counseling centers and expanding students' access to mental-health services. At Amherst College, where I teach, an outpouring of student-led activism last fall sparked an ongoing conversation about what inclusion means and how we can better support our students.

Those are important efforts. But they are also large and slow-moving. As professors sympathetic to the needs of our students, many of us end up feeling like we are merely reacting to student crises rather than preventing them. There is a simple change, however, that can make a big difference in students' lives: Stop penalizing students for late work. Strict deadlines only serve to reproduce the inequalities of access and inclusion that universities are trying so hard to correct.

Sociologists have shown that students from less-privileged backgrounds often have trouble understanding the unwritten rules of college life — the so-called "hidden curriculum." In a recent commencement speech, Michelle Obama, herself a first-generation college student, spoke movingly about how out of place she felt when she first arrived at Princeton. For students like her, asking a professor for an extension doesn't always come naturally. It might not even occur to them as an option.

I used to have a pretty typical policy on late assignments. Students would lose a third of a grade for each day they handed in a paper late. After a day, an A paper would become an A-; after a week, it would be a C. The problem with a rigid policy on lateness is that it compounds students' stress at a time when they are already overwhelmed. It's tailor-made to produce the sort of behavior that has frustrated professors for generations: shoddy work (submitted just to get something in), panicked cheating, or disappearing students (from the course, or worse, from the university altogether).

So I reworked my lateness policy. Now every student in my courses can elect to take a two-day grace period on any paper — no questions asked. If, at the end of that period, they are still having trouble completing the assignment, they must meet with me in person to go over an outline of their ideas and set a schedule for getting the paper done.

The results have been amazing. Since changing my policy, I've seen higher-quality work,

less anxiety, and fewer cases of burnout. Most of my students do take the grace period occasionally throughout the semester, but the great majority complete their assignments by the end of the two days. And when students are having serious difficulties, there is a support system in place to integrate them back into the classroom.

When James resurfaced, several weeks later, he spoke frankly about the depression that had kept him from turning on his computer for days, let alone coming to class. We worked on a manageable time frame for him to complete the work he had missed, and by the next class he was back and contributing again to the discussion.

The conventional wisdom has long been that punishing students for missing deadlines is good for them. Strict deadlines force students to prioritize their academic work over more frivolous commitments and serve to teach them valuable time-management skills.

Trouble is, that assumes most students are irresponsible or lazy rather than overwhelmed or struggling. It also ignores the fact that most working professionals — including professors — learn early on to distinguish between "hard" and "soft" deadlines, between the grant proposal that must be submitted on time and the book review that can be shelved for a week or two.

It's time we give our 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.

*Ellen Boucher is an assistant professor of history at Amherst College. She is the author of *Empire's Children: Child Emigration, Welfare, and the Decline of the British World, 1869-1967* (May 2014; Cambridge University Press).*

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