In Their Own Time: Reflections on Inclusive Extension Policies and Student Autonomy

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"Dear Professor, I was wondering if I could possibly have a little more time to complete my assignment." For instructors, such requests to extend due dates for homework, papers, projects frequently flood our inboxes. They are often accompanied by elaborate personal details and profuse apologies. Many students seem to have learned that getting an extension involves an elaborate performance of shame justifying the request. Others hold back, either out of unfamiliarity with these rhetorical conventions or a genuine feeling that asking for an extension represents some kind of moral failing. Some react to this feeling by never submitting their work. Alternatively, they may turn in late assignments without communicating at all, perhaps hoping to avoid our potential judgment. In repeatedly observing such student behaviors, we wanted to know where these expectations came from and what kind of extension policy could be crafted to address them.

The pandemic, and the toll it took on our students' mental and physical health—to say nothing about our own exhausted resources—pushed us to rethink our extension policies. Our pre-Covid syllabi clearly allowed for extension requests, listing various acceptable reasons such as illness for which students could request extra time. This process seemed utterly inadequate to the public health emergency surrounding us. Beyond the pandemic, we came to question whether asking students to formally request an extension represented a kind of gatekeeping. For one, we wondered if we had unwittingly privileged students whose backgrounds made them

more willing to approach their instructors, even if this approach involved an apologetic performance. We had potentially also given an advantage to students who had already absorbed the rhetorical conventions around extension seeking. We began to suspect that not all students faced the same barriers when asking instructors for an extension.

So, we dove into the literature—and found it sparse. It turns out that help-seeking behaviors inside the classroom specifically have barely been studied. The research that does exist predominantly focuses on how students utilize on-campus support services. For instance, Stewart and Gonzalez (2023) show that students historically marginalized in higher education are less likely to access mental health resources on campus despite the prevalence of personal and historical trauma in their communities. Glickman et. al. (2021) confirm this observation for queer students. Consequently, we hypothesized that help-seeking in a classroom setting, such as requesting an extension, would reflect similar dynamics for historically marginalized students. As we increasingly thought about extensions in the context of social justice, we felt uneasy about being in the business of judging the legitimacy of students' excuses. We realized that our approach to extensions contradicted our self-image as inclusive and compassionate educators.

Extension Logs and Student Autonomy

What followed was a search for alternatives. We interviewed colleagues and brainstormed together on how to address extension requests in a more holistic and inclusive way. We gathered ideas that ranged from a 24-hour grace period for each assignment to readily shifting deadlines for the entire class. While these sorts of things did help, we still struggled to address the problem of student agency. We wanted a way for students to determine their own deadlines for projects. Inspired by a mentor, Irene Tucker, who grants students 24 hours of automatic extension time on any one assignment during the semester, we shifted towards a more expansive policy that could be applied consistently across our classes. Ideally, this policy would put students in charge of their time, while also being mindful of the increasing demand on instructors to perform care. In fact, we followed Abery and Gunson's (2016) view that extension requests involve *both* instructor and student well-being.

This is when we came upon the notion of an extension log. The idea is simple: we grant students a substantial extension hour pool (say, 100+ hours) per semester to freely distribute as they see fit. To use this extension pool, students need only record the number of hours they want to use on any given assignment and submit this log in lieu of the original assignment. They then turn in that assignment by their self-revised deadline or, if even more time is needed, submit another log pulling from their remaining extension hours. By granting students the pool hours, we intended to communicate to students that there is no shame in needing extra time. Beyond normalizing extension seeking, we also assumed that this policy would engage time management skills crucial in the workplace and other social contexts. Finally, we wanted to remove ourselves as the arbiters of legitimacy: there would be no need for students to approach us with a formal extension request, freeing us from the need to reply to the flood of individual student email requests.

Logging Possibilities and Limitations

Appropriately, this is just the first draft: in our own conversations and those with other instructors interested in using such a policy, we still have a number of questions to consider. First, are we correct that shame and fears of punishment motivate student behaviors around seeking extensions? Would students be therefore inclined to use too few extension hours or too many at once? For example, some instructors might assume that an expansive extension policy would incentivize students to hoard hours or use them all at the end of the semester, causing potential headaches both for them and our own capacity as instructors to meet institutional grading deadlines. In our experience, however, students tend to request the shortest extension time possible, often shorter than pedagogically appropriate—or even healthy. With an extension log policy, would students grant themselves 3am deadlines when they should take longer and get some sleep? Most importantly, do these behaviors and assumptions differ between students from different educational, cultural, and economic backgrounds, particularly those from historically marginalized groups, and how can our policy be specifically framed to empower these students?

To answer such questions more concretely, we are embarking on a quantitative and qualitative study as we pilot the extension log policy in our and other pilot participants' fall classes. A pool of around 200 students will be invited to share their experience working with the log and its effect on their feelings around asking for extensions. We hope that our findings will not only help us refine the policy, but also shed light on how to undermine the shame and avoidance that so often surrounds help seeking in academia.

References

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