

In defense of late papers

UA universityaffairs.ca/opinion/in-my-opinion/defense-late-papers

While we want to instil discipline and responsibility in our students, there is also pedagogical value in compassion.

It's that time of year again, when panicked students start asking for extensions. They will send desperate emails and come knocking with trepidation on our office doors. They will arrive with excuses and cite extenuating circumstances, and faculty far and wide will have to make tough decisions about whether or not to accept late work.

Most professors find this ritual frustrating. We want to enforce the rules and maintain high standards, but how are we to stand fast against this tidal wave of human drama? One student is recovering from the flu, another has been struggling with panic attacks. A senior student writing his thesis is going through an existential crisis, and a bright first year student hasn't been able to concentrate since learning that her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Every year, the high-minded rules and regulations laid out in our syllabi are tested by the sheer plurality of the student experience.

At the risk of seeming "soft," I want to make a case here for academic mercy. Professors can't grant every extension request, that is clear. But, when confronted by overwhelmed students, we should not be ashamed to lighten their burdens. While we want to instil discipline and responsibility in our students, there is also pedagogical value in compassion.

Many professors will find this idea laughable. Haven't millennial students already been coddled enough? What they really need to learn is resilience! That may be true. Though it also seems like the sort of thing older people are always saying about younger people – too lazy, no work-ethic, etc. Nevertheless, I think as professors we can be too fixated on punctuality. Our reasons for upholding unalterable deadlines aren't even very good.

The most common argument deployed by deadline hardliners is that students need to prepare themselves for the "real world," where – reputedly – all deadlines are non-negotiable, and every professional commitment is rigid and inflexible. In truth, any working professional will tell you that meetings and presentations get rescheduled all the time. Organizational objectives change and new opportunities arise unexpectedly. Of course, in some fields, like law and journalism, deadlines are more strict. But, if we are honest, the most we can say is that *some* deadlines in the working world are non-negotiable, while many other deadlines are fluid.

Nowhere is this more true than in academia. Every professor I know asks for extensions from publishers, editors and conference organizers. Academic writers are routinely late with their own work. We fall behind in our marking. We forget to respond to emails from students and administrators. We cancel class when we are sick. Are we being hypocritical, then, when we refuse to grant students the same consideration we expect for ourselves?

Fairness, of course, is the other principle most often cited in defense of immovable deadlines. We need to measure everyone by the same standard: equality before the law. But equity is also an element of justice. The student who is able to meet every deadline may live at home with two parents who cook her meals and drive her to campus; she may have a scholarship that covers the costs of her education and pays for her books. Another student in the same course might be a single parent, whose support network lives in another city. In addition to her course load, she may have to work a full-time job to pay for rent, child care and tuition. If I assign these two students an essay, due in three weeks, can we honestly say that they both have the same amount of time to write the paper?

Perhaps drawing lines in the sand and refusing to accept late work teaches students a lesson about time management. Maybe they learn that rules are rules, and that the world doesn't revolve around them. I suggest, however, that there may be other lessons worth teaching.

We should remember that our students learn something by observing our conduct. It is good, no doubt, to model preparedness, and discipline, and consistency. But I also hope that my students learn to be charitable and to show forgiveness. There will likely come a day when they are in positions of authority and have to decide how to treat people who have been battered by misfortune or who have made bad choices. When they are confronted with a choice between adhering to policy and helping a person, I guess I hope they prioritize the person.

I am not advocating the abolition of deadlines. They're useful, they help students and faculty organize their time, and they encourage us to distribute our workload over the course of the term. They are part of our pedagogical toolbox. What I am advocating for is a sort of professorial grace. When it is within our power to extend a deadline on compassionate grounds, I think we ought to incline towards kindness and understanding.

Andrew Moore is an associate professor and director of the Great Books program at St. Thomas University. He is the author of Shakespeare between Machiavelli and Hobbes.