

Flexible due dates lower student stress without loss of rigor

March 25 2024, by Tom Fleischman



Mark Sarvary, right, observes students at work in the Investigative Biology Teaching Laboratories in 2019. Credit: Serge Petchenyi/Cornell University

Mark Sarvary, Ph.D. '06, found that when life began returning to a "new normal" after three online semesters during the COVID pandemic, students' expectations regarding assignment flexibility had changed.

"We needed to adjust to that," said Sarvary, senior lecturer and director

of the Investigative Biology Teaching Laboratories in the Department of Neurobiology and Behavior, in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. He teaches a large introductory biology course that can accommodate more than 400 students.

"In a small course, I think flexibility is easier to deal with," he said, "but with one like ours, it's like trying to steer a cruise ship. It's not a quick sailboat, and things need to be planned well in advance."

Instead of resisting, Sarvary and postdoctoral associate Joseph Ruesch, M.S. '16, Ph.D. '22, leaned into students' requests for more flexibility. They created an "[extension](#) without penalty" (EWP) system that features two assignment deadlines—an "ideal" and an EWP—and charted how the penalty-free extensions were used by students, as well as outcomes.

The system resulted in numerous benefits to students in terms of stress-reduction, and no impact on grades.

"It's a creative systemic solution that's applicable to everybody—it's inclusive, explicit and unbiased," said Sarvary, who along with Ruesch authored the [study](#) "Structure and flexibility: systemic and explicit assignment extensions foster an inclusive learning environment," which was published March 21 in *Frontiers in Education*.

Although met with skepticism by some colleagues, Ruesch thinks the system addresses a major issue regarding flexibility—fairness—while not sacrificing academic rigor.

"Pushback that we got included things like, 'This just lets students procrastinate' or, 'My students are just going to do all the work the last possible moment—why not just give one due date?'" said Ruesch, a member of Sarvary's Investigative Biology Teaching Labs. "We've seen in some studies that if you give students no structure and no deadlines,

they will all hand it in at the end of the semester. This doesn't align with the goals you have—students learning and retaining that information throughout the semester."

Sarvary and Ruesch found that while more than three-fourths of the students took advantage of the EWP, more than half of those who did used it just once, and most students—even those who didn't use the EWP—reported benefits in stress reduction and time management.

In the fall 2022 and spring 2023 semesters, Sarvary and Ruesch surveyed 563 students regarding their preference regarding assignments: no due date; one due date; or a dual due date (ideal plus extension) system. More than 80% preferred the third option.

Sarvary instituted the EWP system in fall 2022 in his Investigative Biology class, the largest intro bio course at Cornell. Of the 347 enrolled students that semester, 41% used the EWP for one assignment, 37% used it more than once, and 22% did not use it.

"When we set up this system, I expected to see a large percentage of students waiting until the last moment to turn assignments in," Ruesch said. "But that's not what happened, which was great."

In surveying students afterward regarding the perceived benefits of the EWP system, 94% reported stress reduction as a top benefit, while 82% said it helped manage other coursework and 73% said it helped in handling emergencies. The survey also indicated significant benefits for first-generation students, and no impact on students' grades.

The researchers purposely used the term "ideal" in characterizing the first deadline to highlight the importance of pacing throughout the semester.

"We explicitly explained that this is how the structure works, and that it's important that they submit by the ideal [due date](#)," Sarvary said, "but in some situations, when they needed a few extra days, they had this built-in extension that was applicable to everybody."

Sarvary said some skeptics thought it would result in more work for the professors because of having to handle two assignment deadlines, but he said the opposite was true. Since students could opt for the EWP without having to contact the instructor, it was seamless and did not raise the potential of inserting bias into granting extensions.

"They don't know how much time is spent responding to students' emails requesting an extension, so it decreased the amount of work for us tremendously," Sarvary said. "It also eliminates potential instructor bias in determining which situations are eligible for an extension."

More information: Joseph M. Ruesch et al, Structure and flexibility: systemic and explicit assignment extensions foster an inclusive learning environment, *Frontiers in Education* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/educ.2024.1324506](#)

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