Late Policies that Emphasize Professionalism

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Balancing Flexibility and Accountability: Implementing Late Work Policies in Civil Engineering Courses (Work in Progress)

Introduction

In civil engineering education, assignment deadlines are traditionally rigid to simulate the high-stakes timelines of real-world projects, such as infrastructure development where delays can have significant safety and financial implications. However, early-career civil engineers often encounter less critical tasks with flexible internal deadlines, where the emphasis can shift to communication with supervisors about extensions and understanding the ripple effects on team workflows. This discrepancy highlights a potential need to reevaluate late work policies in undergraduate courses to better prepare students for professional norms while addressing post-pandemic challenges like increased student stress and equity concerns.

Rigid deadlines, while promoting accountability, have been shown to increase anxiety and disproportionately affect underrepresented students, potentially hindering retention in demanding fields like civil engineering. Recent shifts in higher education toward flexible policies aim to balance structure with empathy, fostering inclusive environments without compromising learning objectives. This study explores the extent to which civil engineering students utilize flexible late work policies and how utilization patterns vary depending on the specific approach implemented.

Two distinct policies were introduced across multiple courses to balance the need for timely practice of key concepts—essential in engineering where later material often builds on earlier work—with the kind of professional flexibility students will encounter in early-career roles, such as negotiating internal deadlines and understanding their downstream effects on design teams and other parties associated with the work.

The first policy, a communication-based extension approach, requires students to proactively email the instructor at least 24 hours before the due date to request additional time, propose a reasonable new deadline, and briefly explain the need. The second policy, a tiered deadline system, provides each assignment with an initial due date (offering full eligibility for partial credit on the rubric) and a final due date one class period later (with a stricter rubric that limits partial credit, e.g., binary scoring on some sections and a reduced maximum).

The results from this work in progress focus on describing implementation and observed usage patterns of two flexible late work policies across multiple semesters. While flexible policies are often associated with reduced stress, increased equity, and improved professional skill development, this study does not directly measure these outcomes. Instead, it examines how frequently students utilize available flexibility under different policy structures. Evaluation of student perceptions, stress, and performance outcomes is the focus of ongoing data collection in future phases of this work.

Background

Historically, late work policies in higher education are often punitive, involving point deductions or no credit to instill responsibility and mimic professional accountability. These policies are meant to help students understand the implications of late submissions that could cause a design team to miss a crucial deadline and potentially fall behind schedule.

In STEM fields, including civil engineering, such policies align with time-critical tasks but have notable drawbacks. Punitive measures increase student stress and reduce motivation,

disproportionately impacting first-generation, neurodivergent, or underrepresented students (Dennis, 2018; Kruger, 2023). Studies like Bodamer (2019) and Grimshaw (2012) link strict policies to lower retention and grades, without improving long-term time management. In engineering contexts, rigid deadlines prepare students for high-pressure environments but overlook the negotiation skills needed for internal project adjustments. These policies may also limit students' confidence in approaching supervisors to request additional time or support.

Late work policies that balance rigid deadlines with flexibility have been researched for some time and most instructors tend to offer ways to accommodate students. For instance, Bailey (1993) describes a "no late work" policy with limited exceptions via coupons, arguing it balances consistency with compassion. Other approaches include communication-based extensions using online tools or a simple course specific form that requires advance requests, building professional skills like confidence and communication (Schwartz et al., 2024). No-penalty grace periods focus on learning outcomes over behavior (Orttel, 2023). Benefits include reduced procrastination and better equity, as seen in Kennette & Rivers (2024) and Santelli et al. (2020), where students perceive instructors as caring which enhances the student experience and potentially improves their confidence when approaching their instructor.

Most recently, post-COVID educators have increasingly adopted more flexible policies to support mental health and equity. Ruesch & Sarvary (2024) introduced "extensions without penalty" (EWP) systems with dual deadlines (ideal and extended), finding reduced stress and no grade impact. Similar research found that tiered late polices offer incentives for early submission or mild consequences for delays (Korpusik et al., 2022; Wang & Lawrence, 2023). All these policies still require timely submissions but with some added flexibility that encourages students to take accountability for their progress and their ability to communicate that to their superiors.

Evidence shows flexible policies are used by a relatively small proportion of students (Korpusik et al., 2022; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024). Student perceptions are positive, associating flexibility with reduced stress and professional preparation. In STEM, flexible policies support retention with (Leal, 2019), finding that they improve success without increasing workload. However, literature lacks engineering-specific comparative studies, particularly in classes where tracking extensions is challenging. Additional gaps include limited focus on civil engineering, where policies could simulate supervisor communications and deadline impacts. This study compares two flexible late work policies by examining how frequently students use each policy across multiple semesters.

Methods

Study Design and Participants

This quasi-experimental action research study implemented two flexible late policies in undergraduate civil engineering courses (e.g., statics, materials, and project management) at a mid-sized U.S. university. Over five semesters (Fall 2021–Fall 2025), data were collected from 3066 assignment submissions under Policy 1 and 1058 under Policy 2.

Policy 1: Communication-Based Extensions

Students must email the professor at least 24 hours before the due date, proposing a reasonable new deadline (e.g., within 48 hours) and briefly explaining the need (no documentation required). Syllabus statement:

> Please submit your coursework on time for full credit. Prior arrangements must be made for late work. ***I can be VERY accommodating, but you must reach out to me.***
>
> Each late assignment without prior arrangements or a reasonable excuse (**I know life happens!**), will receive **a one-time 10% reduction from the total Professionalism score**. This equates to approximately 1% of your overall course grade. For example, 6 late assignments would result in a 6% reduction of your overall course grade. **Late work must be submitted within 1 week** of the original due date to receive credit.
>
> *In short… reach out to me. I will work with you. I don't want you to lose points for completing homework late or not. This policy is in place to ensure that concepts are being practiced in a timely manner. Missing out on the practice by not doing the homework could cause confusion as some concepts build upon previous concepts. This also ensures you will be ready for the exams.*

Policy 2: Tiered Deadlines

Each assignment has an initial deadline (full rubric credit) and a final deadline (one class period later, graded with reduced partial credit). Syllabus statement:

> Homework assignments will have an initial due date one week after they are assigned and a final due date the following class period after the initial due date. Submissions on the initial due date may receive partial credit for incorrect answers. There is no immediate penalty for submitting at the final due date, but partial credit will not be given for incorrect answers. Submissions will not be accepted after the final due date.

Rubric example for an engineering calculation assignment requiring numerical work, free-body diagrams (where applicable), and full solution paths for partial credit eligibility.

Problem X [3 points possible]						
Answer	3	Correct (3 pts)	2	One mistake (2 pts)	1	Two or more non-cascading mistakes w/ full attempt (1 pt.)
Problem Y [3 points possible]						
Answer	3	Correct (3 pts)	2	One mistake (2 pts)	1	Two or more non-cascading mistakes w/ full attempt (1 pt.)
Formatting [4 points possible]						
-1 point for each format guideline not followed. • Header Format (1 point) • Final answer boxed, 3 sig figs, and units (1 point) • Engineering paper, one-sided, pencil, Given/Find/Solution (1 point) • All problems completed (1 point)						

Total Assignment Score: _____

Policies were introduced via syllabus and discussed in class. The learning management system (LMS) tracked submissions and timeliness while requests for late submissions were tracked through email communication with the course instructor. This phase of the study focuses on behavioral usage data (i.e., frequency of extension requests and late submissions within structured policy windows). No direct measures of student stress, perceptions, or academic performance were collected during this phase.

Results

Overall results showed lower than expected requests for late work submissions. For the communication-based extension, 49 extension requests were received across 3,066 assignment submissions over five semesters. This represents approximately 2% of all submissions. The pattern held consistently each semester with a large majority of students completing and submitting their work by the original due date without needing to reach out in advance for additional time. Requests were isolated and infrequent rather than a common or recurring behavior among the class or individual students.

A similar trend emerged with the tiered-deadline policy. Across four semesters and 1,058 total assignment submissions, students submitted their work on the final deadline (the one-class-period-later grace window) 126 times. This means that less than 12% of all submissions arrived during the extended window, leaving the majority submitted by the initial deadline. The data show no indication of widespread reliance on the grace period with most students choosing to meet the initial deadline even though a short, structured extension was explicitly available with only a modest impact on partial-credit opportunities.

These low utilization rates were consistent across different course sizes, assignment types, and semesters, suggesting that the flexibility provided did not prompt habitual late submissions. Rather, the policies appeared to function primarily as reassuring safety nets—available when genuinely needed but rarely invoked in practice. This outcome stood in contrast to the initial expectation that students might frequently take advantage of the options, and it highlights how clear expectations, combined with a professional rationale, can encourage timely submission without the need for strict punitive measures.

Discussion

The low utilization of both policies aligns with emerging patterns in higher education literature and suggests that providing structured flexibility does not inherently lead to widespread delays in submission behavior (Korpusik et al., 2022; Ruesch & Sarvary, 2024). In the context of civil engineering education, this outcome is particularly encouraging. Students demonstrated a strong inclination toward timely submission even when given minimally impactful avenues for adjustment—behavior that mirrors the accountability many will need in early-career roles, where internal deadlines are often negotiable but communication about delays is non-negotiable.

A notable difference emerged between the two policies, with the communication-based extension used in approximately 2% of submissions, compared to 12% for the tiered deadline policy. One possible explanation is that the advance-notice requirement in Policy 1 introduces a planning constraint. Students who begin assignments close to the deadline may perceive the policy as inaccessible, even if flexibility is available. This suggests that while communication-based policies may better simulate professional expectations, they may also unintentionally exclude students who struggle with time management.

The communication-based extension policy appeared effective at reinforcing professional habits. Requiring advance outreach encouraged students to treat the instructor as they would a supervisor, practicing proactive notification that reduces downstream disruption on teams. The tiered-deadline approach, by contrast, provided a low-friction buffer that signaled consequences through reduced partial credit, helping maintain momentum in larger classes while allowing timely solution distribution.

Both policies were designed to reduce barriers by removing the need for formal excuses or documentation. While this approach is often associated with increased equity and reduced stress in the literature, these outcomes were not directly measured in this phase of the study. Informal student feedback reinforced that the policies felt supportive rather than permissive, helping sustain motivation and potentially reducing anxiety during the demanding periods of a semester. However, these perceptions will be evaluated more rigorously in future work.

These findings suggest that engineering educators can incorporate structured flexibility without compromising the emphasis on timely practice—a critical component when concepts build sequentially. The minimal administrative burden (few extension emails, straightforward tracking of final-deadline submissions) further supports scalability across course sizes.

Limitations

This work is limited to descriptive usage data and does not include direct measures of student outcomes such as stress, perceptions, or academic performance. Additionally, comparisons to pre-policy semesters with rigid deadlines were not conducted in this phase, limiting the ability to assess changes in the overall submission behavior. The study also does not capture why students chose to use or not use each policy, which may provide important insight into student decision-making. These limitations are being addressed in ongoing work through survey deployment, expanded data collection, and comparisons to historical course data.

Future Work

Future work will expand implementation across a broader range of instructors to examine generalizability and potential instructor-specific effects. The next phase will incorporate quantitative and survey-based measures to assess the impacts on student stress, motivation, and professional skill development, along with comparisons to pre-2021 semesters to evaluate changes in submission patterns and overall homework completion. Longitudinal efforts may include following up with alumni to examine whether exposure to these policies influenced early-career behaviors, such as effectively communicating delays in professional settings. Expanding the study to additional disciplines and institutions will further strengthen understanding of structured flexibility in STEM assessment.

Conclusion

This work in progress provides initial evidence that carefully structured flexible late work policies can be offered in civil engineering courses with low utilization and positive student experiences based on informal feedback. The combination of a communication-based extension option and a short tiered-deadline buffer appears to support timely engagement with course material while encouraging professional behaviors such as proactive communication and awareness of deadline impacts.

The limited use of these policies suggests that students respond well to clear expectations paired with reasonable flexibility and empathy. These findings suggest that structured flexibility may support accountability rather than diminish it, though additional data is needed to confirm this relationship. Future work will further examine impacts on student outcomes and perceptions. These approaches offer a practical framework for instructors seeking to align course policies with both learning goals and early-career professional practice. Engineering educators are encouraged to consider similar approaches by adapting the provided syllabus language and rubric examples.

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