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## **'Procrastination-Friendly' Academe Needs More Deadlines**

Some faculty members believe eliminating deadlines optimizes flexibility for students. But cognitive psychology research suggests that students fare better academically and personally under numerous short-term deadlines.

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When Hannah Snyder, assistant professor of psychology at Brandeis University, first began teaching, she did not set multiple midsemester deadlines for students to report progress on their end-of-semester papers. As the weeks passed, she offered her students gentle reminders to begin early and pace themselves, given the approaching course end. But many students nonetheless procrastinated. As the final deadline drew close, many scrambled in a stressful, last-minute burst of work that produced underwhelming results.

"I've never had so many incompletes," Snyder said of the missed opportunity to support the students throughout the term and ensure that all completed the course. "You'd think with all my research on the development of executive function and mental health and stress in emerging adulthood, I would have put together from the get-go that part of our job as faculty is to help students develop those skills." (Executive function is a set of skills that underlie a human's ability to plan and achieve goals.)

Some equity-minded professors may believe that a single long-term deadline is better than numerous short-term deadlines.

But the science says that a single, far-off deadline undermines traditional-aged students' success, as their self-monitoring and self-regulation skills are still developing.

## Productivity and Procrastination

Students procrastinate at rates that may be two to three times those observed in working populations, according to a *Frontiers in Psychology* study (<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.540910/full>) . The college environment is one that sometimes affords ample unstructured time, distractions and far-off deadlines—situational characteristics that contribute to what Frode Svartdal, professor of psychology at the Arctic University of Norway and co-author of the *Frontiers* study, has dubbed a “procrastination-friendly environment.”

At the same time, traditional-aged college students are in a developmental stage in which their executive function skills are often works in progress, Svartdal said. This means that they may, at times, be impulsive, distracted or challenged by efforts to follow through on planned activities. For example, an impulsive person may give up on a boring or difficult task in favor of an activity they prefer, even when doing so is not in their best interest.

When students’ still-developing executive function skills are paired with academe’s procrastination-friendly environment, the result can create a perfect storm. But speeding up students’ developmental growth rarely happens in an instant. That’s why addressing the situational piece of this equation offers more immediate promise.

Short-term deadlines serve as motivators for accomplishing accessible tasks. They also imbue each step in the process of completing a longer-term project with more meaning, according to Svartdal. When professors steer clear of single, far-off deadlines, they keep the focus on the course content.

“Presumably, our classes should be assessing students’ mastery of the material and not their executive function skills,” Snyder said. Numerous short-term deadlines “help all students but are critical for those who would otherwise flounder for reasons that have nothing to do with their understanding of the material.” This group includes those with mental health concerns, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, anxiety or depression.

Students with significant work or family responsibilities also benefit from more—not fewer—deadlines.

Many employers for whom students may work following graduation often rely on structured, short-term deadlines in the workplace, according to the researchers contacted for this article. That’s because employers also realize that multiple short-term deadlines keep teams on track and increase productivity.