

The Deep End

When Students Ask for Special Treatment Gary Poole, Former STLHE President

"I just need a short extension on the term assignment. I've been having trouble with my computer, and on top of that, my daughter has just had her wisdom teeth removed."

"The date for the final exam conflicts with a family wedding in England. Is there any way I could write it when I get back?"

"I'm so embarrassed. I got my exam schedule confused and I completely missed your final! Is there anything that can be done? I can't afford to fail this course."

"I need to drop this course. I know that the drop date has passed, but I've been under a great deal of stress and I just can't cope. I have a doctor's note."

Do any of these sound familiar? After 15 years of teaching large classes, I have heard all these and many other pleas for special consideration. Every time I do, I feel that I am in a "no-win" situation. Department chairs often tell us to "be tough." If we give in to these requests, we will be flooded with them, and many will be fabricated. (How many times can the same grandparent die?) The credibility of our program will be undermined. A rule is a rule. Everyone has to live by them. Giving an extension to one student is unfair to the hundreds of others who submitted the assignment on time.

All of these reasons are sound. Still, students' lives do come apart from time to time. There really are such things as "extenuating circumstances." To "be tough" often means being insensitive to these circumstances. In the grand scheme of things, will there really be such negative consequences if we err on the side of compassion?

During a conversation with a senior colleague whose judgement I greatly respect, I asked him how he handles students' requests to drop his course after the drop date. Somewhat to my surprise he said, "I sign them all." Over the years, he has come to the conclusion that no purpose is served by forcing students to stay in courses that, for a host of reasons, are not going well for them. I asked, "But doesn't this create a system in which students can simply drop courses when they don't like their grade on the midterm?" He agreed that it did, but he countered that, at some point, these students have to stay in enough courses to actually generate a transcript. So they can't overuse the strategy.

I want to accept this strategy, I really do. It seems more compassionate and less stressful than hard-line approaches. But something won't let me sign those drop forms without some investigation, even though that investigation rarely turns up anything definitive. I suppose I believe that we live in a world in which we can't simply submit a drop form when things aren't going our way. Then again, does the university have to emulate this world? Or can it be one of the few havens for second chances? Will someone who is having a difficult time with a client expect to be able to submit a "drop form" and stop dealing with the person because she was allowed to do that in university?

And what about this "real world" we are supposedly preparing our students for? Are deadlines written in stone in that world? Is it really the case that managers in business don't deal with the same litany of excuses we deal with?

I don't have clear answers to these questions. I do know, however, that many of my colleagues feel the same frustration that I feel when students ask for special treatment. Say no and you are being cruel, say yes and you are being taken advantage of.