Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, Vol. 25, No. 2, June 2025, pp.1-16.
doi: 10.14434/josotl.v25i2.36396

Flexible Deadlines Impact Student Mental Health and Course Engagement: a Mixed Methods Exploratory Study

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Abstract: With the growing number of students at colleges and universities who are considered nontraditional, creating an equitable classroom characterized by Universal Design for Learning has become increasingly important in higher education. In this mixed-methods exploratory study, we assess the impact of implementing flexible deadline policies into our courses on students' learning experience. Across four academic terms, both at the undergraduate and graduate level, at two universities in Canada and the United States, we found that offering students (N = 234) the opportunity to redeem extension coupons resulted in a positive learning experience. Two key themes in our study demonstrate that the extension coupons impacted students' mental health and their level of course engagement. Our study presents implications for teaching practices and policies and provides educators with one way to increase equity in the classroom.

Keywords: Universal Design for Learning, Nontraditional students, Flexible deadlines, Equity in education, and Student engagement.

The number of students in higher education who were at one time considered "non-traditional" (e.g., those older than 24 years of age, working full time, have dependents) is increasing. Given this, coupled with the increasing rate of students' mental health difficulties, and other disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities; Costello-Harris, 2019; Lipson et al., 2018), a reevaluation of how we approach course design is necessary. As institutions strive to adapt to the diverse needs and challenges faced by today's students, the implementation of flexible deadline policies has emerged as a possible intervention.

Across North America, student mental health in particular is a growing concern. Lipson and colleagues (2018) investigated college students' use of mental health treatment services and their prevalence of diagnoses during a 10-year period, across almost 200 campuses in the United States. From 2007 to 2017, students' rates of depression, suicidality, and diagnoses of mental health conditions all increased over time. Students' mental health difficulties have only become exacerbated in recent years due to the COVID-19 pandemic; among a sample of over 2,000 students, Wang and colleagues (2020) found that the majority of their students demonstrated anxiety and mild to severe levels of depression, with 18% disclosing the presence of suicidal thoughts. Over and above mental health difficulties, the number of post-secondary students with other disabilities such as learning disabilities and physical impairments also continue to rise (Costello-Harris, 2019). Despite this, previous research has suggested that 60-80% of students with disabilities do not disclose their disabilities to the university (Schelly et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005) due to various reasons such as fear of stigma and the desire to be self-sufficient (e.g., Francis et al., 2019). This means that many students are not able to receive the appropriate accommodations for their learning and must navigate courses that have varying levels of accessibility built into course design.

Beyond disabilities, it is also important to consider students who have competing demands that would not otherwise meet the criteria for formal academic accommodations. For example, student parents must balance their responsibilities, time, and energy between their role as a student and a parent which results in sleep deprivation, lack of motivation, and distractions (Nikiforidou & Holmes, 2022). There is also a growing number of students who are employed part- and full-time to afford tuition and the rising cost of living (Evans et al., 2014). Research has shown that students who are working part- and full-time have negative mental and physical health outcomes as well as decreased academic performance compared to students who are not employed (Carney et al., 2005). Additionally, one study reported that students noted that work commitments were the number one reason they had to drop courses (Moore & Greenland, 2017). Given the changing demographics of post-secondary students, the question then becomes: how can educators design and teach courses that meet the needs of all learners in the classroom? We argue that the answer is Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

The UDL approach to teaching aims to accommodate all learners in the classroom and reduce barriers in the learning experience (CAST, 2009). In the past decade, UDL has become increasingly important in higher education with the growing need to implement more inclusive and equitable practices in the classroom (CAST, 2019). Guidelines for UDL provide a framework to educators interested in applying UDL in their practice (CAST, 2022). These Guidelines (CAST, 2022) propose three main categories: engagement (i.e., providing students with multiple ways to engage with learning), representation (i.e., conveying content in multiple forms), and action and expression (i.e., allowing students to demonstrate knowledge in various ways). Over the years, researchers have demonstrated the benefits of UDL principles on student learning (Balta et al., 2021; Dean et al., 2017). Research examining perceptions of UDL has shown that faculty (e.g., Dallas et al., 2014; Hills et al., 2022; Lombardi et al., 2011) and students (e.g., Black et al., 2015; Kennette et al., 2019; Schelly et al., 2011) generally have positive perceptions related to implementing UDL principles into the classroom.

Despite its promise, much of the literature on UDL is theoretical in nature and discusses the benefits of implementing UDL principles in the classroom (e.g., Seok et al., 2018). There is less research that describes and examines practical applications of UDL in the classroom. Fovet (2020) proposed that in the next decade, instructors should publish scholarly work that presents a practical description and analysis of UDL being applied in the classroom for other practitioners. The current study aims to contribute to this goal, with a particular focus on the UDL Guideline of Engagement. Within the Engagement guideline, CAST (2022) stated that creating a safe space for all learners is imperative, and one way to do this is by minimizing threats to success and negative distractions that would impact students' learning experiences. Instructors could achieve this goal by creating a supportive classroom climate, varying the pace of work and timing of activities, and adjusting the demands required for learning or performance (CAST, 2022). We argue that policies related to flexibility in assessment deadlines supports the Engagement Guideline in UDL. Flexibility in assessment deadlines can be characterized as those that allow students to take responsibility in when they submit an assignment without any penalty to their grade. Research has found that students who are concerned about meeting assignment deadlines report decreased quality of work (Patton, 2000; Zarick & Stonebraker, 2009), increased procrastination, and more risk for academic dishonesty (Hensley, 2013). Moreover, more students than ever are registered with campus disability services (Toutain, 2019), where deadline flexibility is a common accommodation provided (Sarrett, 2018).

There are a handful of studies that have examined the impact of providing flexibility with assessment deadlines in higher education. Important to note, these studies vary in the level of flexibility offered to students. For example, Kumar and Wideman (2014) offered their students a high level of flexibility, allowing their students to choose their own deadline for an assignment; they

found that by doing this, the majority (88%) of students believed this flexibility reduced their levels of stress and overall positively impacted their learning experience. Similarly, another study examined the impact of allowing students to choose a deadline based on a list of dates and found that this flexibility increased the student pass rate in a first-year by up to 22% (Withington & Schroeder, 2017). Others have examined the impact of instructors offering more structured flexible deadlines; for instance, Nickels and Uddin (2003) offered students a two-day extension on any assignment, which they found reduced stress and increased attention to the course homework. Along the same lines, Schroeder and colleagues (2019) offered students a five-day extension on one assignment and found that students perceived this extension as useful, and reported the extension reduced their level of stress, and improved the quality of their assessments.

In practice, however, flexible deadline policies are not communicated in similar ways. For example, Hills and colleagues (2022) found that half of their sample of faculty implemented flexible deadlines in their teaching practice; however, there was a difference between instructors who are flexible with their assessment deadlines and instructors who have explicit policies related to this flexibility. As noted earlier, if 60-80% of students do not disclose disabilities to their university to receive accommodations (Schelly et al., 2011; Wagner et al., 2005), it is also likely that many students similarly do not disclose personal difficulties to their professors to receive flexibility with assessment deadlines. Explicit policies related to flexibility in assessment deadlines would grant flexibility to *all* students, rather than *some* students who feel comfortable disclosing or requesting extensions (Hills & Peacock, 2022), therefore fulfilling the goals of UDL and meeting the needs of the growing number of diverse learners in higher education today.

Current Study

Across the existing studies, findings are consistent that flexible deadline policies are beneficial to students' learning experiences for various reasons, such as reducing stress, improving the quality of submitted work, and increasing the pass rate (e.g., Hills & Peacock, 2022; Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Withington & Schroeder, 2017). These studies are limited, however, by a few factors. Specifically, these studies typically have smaller sample sizes, examine students from one year of study or one course, do not collect demographic information such as race and first-generation student status, and are quantitative in nature.

The current study sought to contribute to previous research demonstrating that flexible deadline policies are beneficial to students. We also sought to extend previous research by assessing both undergraduate and graduate students, in different courses, across different terms, at different institutions in both Canada and the United States to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of flexible deadlines on students. We were interested in 1) What factors influence students' decisions to use or abstain from using flexible deadline policies; 2) What makes them comfortable and uncomfortable about requesting extensions in courses; and 3) What impact do these extension coupons have on students' learning experiences?

Method

Course description

We collected data from our four undergraduate and four graduate psychology courses across four terms from 2021 to 2022 at two universities, one in Canada (anomymized for peer review) and one in the United States (anomymized for peer review). Our courses were offered in-person and online

in an asynchronous format. Course assessments varied by course but included both low- and high-stake (i.e., according to weight in final grade) assignments.

In each course at (anomymized for peer review) at the beginning of the term, students were provided with three 24-hour extension coupons. Students could use these extensions on any assignment in the course, and they could use more than one coupon in a row for one single assignment. Redeeming these coupons required no documentation or justification needed. Students who used these extensions were not penalized in any way and students who did not use these extensions were not rewarded in any way.

In each course at (anomymized for peer review), at the beginning of the term, students were provided with one five-day extension coupon that they could use for one out of two higher-stakes (i.e., essay-style) assignments. Students could not use the extension pass for their final higher-stakes assignment, because a one-week extension was automatically provided for all students. Redeeming these coupons required no documentation or justification needed. Students who used these extensions were not penalized in any way and students who did not use these extensions were not rewarded in any way.

Recruitment and procedure

Both the (anomymized for peer review) Research Ethics Board and the (anomymized for peer review) Institutional Review Board granted ethical approval. Following course completion and final grades being submitted, the researchers emailed students via their respective learning management systems with information about the study and an invitation to participate. Students interested in participating were invited to click the URL for the study and indicate consent to participate. The questionnaire was administered using Qualtrics. To reduce any conflicts of interest associated with administering a survey to our own students, each author had a unique Qualtrics URL and invited students to participate in the other author's link. Specifically, the first author administered the second author's URL link and vice versa to ensure that all data was truly anonymous and confidential. All students were aware that each author did not have access to their own students' data while it was being collected.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was created by the researchers and included 14 questions that were both multiple choice and open-ended (see Appendix). We asked students about the number of extension coupons they redeemed in the course, the reasons for redeeming extension coupons, their comfort level in requesting extensions, and their perceptions about the impact of these extensions on their learning. We also asked students demographic questions such as their age, gender identity, ethnicity, their student status (i.e., undergraduate/graduate student) and whether they were a first-generation (i.e., first in their family to go to post-secondary education) student.

Participants

Students (anonymized for peer review) in Canada (n = 35) and (anomyized for peer review) the United States (n = 198) who participated in this study (N = 234) were predominantly female (85.3%; 10.2% male; 2.3% non-binary; 2.3% prefer not to disclose). Our sample was comprised of both undergraduate (n = 111; 47.4%) and graduate (n = 102; 43.6%) students (n = 21 participants did not answer this question) ranging in age from 18 to 76 (M = 28.24; SD = 9.21). The majority of participants identified as Caucasian (62.7%) or Hispanic (23.7%) with a lower proportion identifying

as Black (4.5%), Asian (2.3%) and Other (5.1%). Just less than half of our sample (43.8%) identified as a first-generation student. We did not ask students their major, because students were recruited from specialized psychology courses that required students to be in a psychology major program.

Results

Analytic Strategy

The current study is a mixed-methods design, and most of the questions in our questionnaire were open-ended. For questions that were quantitative, we reported the descriptives, and in cases where appropriate, conducted a paired samples t-test. For our open-ended questions, we conducted an inductive content analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) of students' responses. The first and second author independently coded students' responses, and if necessary, discussed any discrepancies until agreement was reached. Because we were interested in the collective impact of flexible course deadline policies on students' learning experience, as opposed to the specific policy, we combined our data sets between the two universities, and qualitative coded the responses as a whole. The data necessary to reproduce the findings reported in this manuscript are available at https://osf.io/txnr4/.

Extensions coupons redeemed in the course

For students (anonymized for peer review) in Canada (n = 35), of the possible one extension coupon that students could redeem, 31.4% (N = 11) redeemed zero coupons and 68.6% (N = 24) redeemed one coupon. For students from (anonymized peer review) in the United States (n = 198), of the three possible extension coupons that students could redeem, 42.4% of our sample (N = 84) used zero coupons, 14.6% used one coupon (N = 29), 14.1% used two coupons (N = 28), and 28.8% used all three coupons (N = 57).

Reasons for redeeming extension coupons

Students (N = 234) were provided a list of categories to indicate their reasons for redeeming extension coupons throughout the course, from which they could select more than one category. Job commitments (N = 63; 58.3%) and mental health difficulties (N = 73; 67.5%) were among the most selected reasons. Other selected reasons included family commitments (N = 46; 42.5%), time management issues (N = 56; 51.8%), physical health issues (N = 27; 25%), and school commitments (N = 29; 26.8%).

Reasons for *not* redeeming extension coupons

Students who did not redeem extension coupons were asked for their reasoning using an open-ended question. We received 113 responses. In total, we had 95 participants not redeem any coupons, but some students who did not redeem *all* their possible coupons answered this question as well. We identified four themes to explain why students did not redeem extension coupons. In the first theme, *not needed,* the majority of students (N = 76; 67.2%) indicated that they did not need to use any coupons for various reasons such as finishing the assignments on time or acknowledging that there were not any unexpected events or emergencies that happened that term. For example, one student noted "I expected to use my coupon at some point during the course but surprisingly I was able to stay on top of my assignment due dates. I feel like knowing I had an extension coupon

gave me a sense of relief that I could use it if a difficulty arose." In the second theme, *falling behind,* students (*N* = 7; 6.8%) expressed concern that by using the extension coupons, they either get in the habit of postponing assignments, or would have double the work the following week. For example, one student stated "I felt that if I used one, I would start pushing the assignments off more often. I think they were a great idea for emergencies, I just didn't want to get in the habit of using them." In the third theme, *save them,* students (*N* = 6; 5.8%) expressed that they did not use the coupons because they wanted to save them in case they needed them. For instance, one student wrote "I held on to them in case of an emergency. I wanted to save them for a time when I would really need it. While I did not use any, it was reassuring to know they were there if I needed it and it helped with my anxiety." In the last theme, *unaware,* students (*N* = 7; 6.1%) noted that they did not redeem any extension coupons because they were either unaware or forgot they had the option to do so. One student expressed they were "not aware of extension coupons until now," after being invited to participate in the study. Importantly, extension coupons were highlighted in the course syllabi, on the learning management systems, and reminders by the professors throughout the term.

Requesting an extension

Students were asked about requesting extensions in other courses *without* extension coupons. Most students (79.3%) did not request any extensions in their other courses, and indicated they (67%) did not have the required documentation (e.g., disability accommodations, doctors note) that would typically permit an extension.

Students were asked how comfortable they felt requesting extensions in courses with and without extension coupons on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely uncomfortable) to 4 (extremely comfortable). A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare students' level of comfort requesting extensions in courses with and without extension coupons. There was a significant difference in the reported comfort for courses without (M = 1.62, SD = 0.80) and with extension coupons (M = 3.49, SD = 0.75), t (188) = -25.43, $p < .001$.

Students were also asked open-ended questions about what makes them comfortable and uncomfortable about requesting extensions in courses. See Table 1 for descriptives about each open-ended question.

Table 1. Open-ended content analyses.

Question	Themes	
		N (%)
What makes students comfortable requesting extensions?	Nothing	62 (33.2%)
	Understanding professor	52 (27.8%)
	Emergencies	39 (20.8%)
	Flexible course policies	23 (12.29%)
	Documentation	20 (10.7%)
	Ask and see	9 (4.8%)
What makes students uncomfortable requesting extensions?	Embarrassed	64 (30.7%)
	Fear of denial	51 (24.5%)
	Strict course policies	40 (19.2%)
	Unapproachable professor	31 (14.9%)
	Documentation and disclosure	31 (14.9%)
	Special treatment	15 (7.2%)
	Assignment engagement	95 (64.6%)

What is the overall impact on students' learning experience?	Focus on their mental health	52 (35.3%)
	Focus on the situation	17 (11.5%)
	Grade improvement	17 (11.5%)
What are students' overall thoughts about extension coupons?	Focus on their mental health	81 (41.5%)
	Other responsibilities	58 (29.7%)
	Life happens	38 (19.2%)

Comfortable

We received 187 responses about what makes students comfortable requesting extensions in courses without extension coupons. We identified six themes. In the first theme, *nothing,* 62 students (33.2%) indicated that nothing would make them feel comfortable to request an extension. For instance, one student noted "Nothing makes me feel comfortable requesting extensions without extension coupons; I do everything I can, even at the harm of social life and school life balance to avoid an extension request." In the second theme, *understanding professor,* students (*N* = 52; 27.8%) expressed that if they perceive the instructor as understanding, they feel more comfortable requesting an extension. For example, one student stated "I am more comfortable when professors state that although the deadlines hard deadlines, they are open to be flexible if something were to come up. It also makes me more comfortable when a professor acknowledges that we all have lives and jobs that can sometimes get in the way." In the third theme, *emergencies,* students (*N* = 39; 20.8%) indicated that if they had a legitimate reason or an emergency occur, that they would feel more comfortable requesting an extension. Interestingly, some students explicitly noted that this would be related to physical health or death in the family rather than mental health (e.g., "When I have a socially acceptable reason [physical health, family event]," "It feels more uncomfortable to ask for extensions when I'm struggling with mental health.")

In the fourth theme, *flexible course policies*, students (*N* = 23*;* 12.29%) noted they felt more comfortable if there was some kind of late policy or extension policy stated in the syllabus. For example, one student wrote "Unless I have a legitimate excuse (such as surgery or family emergency) I do not feel comfortable requesting extensions. I have had a lot of professors say they do not accept late work at all, so I have always made it a priority to turn all of my assignments in on time. If a professor states they have a 'grace period' in their syllabus then I feel more comfortable asking for an extension on an assignment." In the fifth theme, *documentation,* students (*N* = 20*;* 10.7%) noted they would only feel comfortable requesting an extension if they had the appropriate documentation; for example, one student wrote, "unless I have a doctor's note or something to prove that I need the extra time, but all reasons for extensions cannot be proven. Sometimes things build up in life and consume your brain power, leaving you with more work than you can handle." In the last theme, *ask and see,* a small proportion of students (*N* = 9; 4.8%) indicated that they have no problems requesting an extension, or submitting something late, and hoping it is granted or accepted. For example, one student noted "Life happens and it happens to all of us. If I am in a position to need an extension I have no problem asking, even when the syllabus states no late work is accepted. The worst that could happen is the instructor can say no."

Uncomfortable

We received 208 responses about what makes students uncomfortable requesting extensions in courses without extension coupons. We identified six themes. In the first theme, *embarrassed,* students (*N* = 64; 30.7%) expressed feeling embarrassed or worried about being perceived as a poor student if they requested an extension. For example, one student wrote, "I don't feel comfortable

because I worry the professor might judge my time management, even though life circumstances just get in the way of due dates sometimes. I'm a people pleaser and I generally just don't like inconveniencing professors and bothering them." In the second theme, *fear of denial,* students (*N* = 51; 24.5%) expressed discomfort in requesting extensions due to the possibility the instructor would deny the request. For example, one student noted "I feel that when reaching out to task for an extension I may be met with push back or will not be allowed the extension so why bother asking for it. This puts more stress on myself." In the third theme, *strict course policies,* students (*N* = 40; 19.2%) noted that they felt uncomfortable requesting extensions if the professor had explicit policies in their syllabus noting that late work would not be accepted or if the professor had no policies on the syllabus related to late assignment submissions. For example, one student wrote "I hold myself up to a very high standard with school which makes me not ever reach out for an extension to begin with. Regardless, professors often make it very clear and bolded that they do not offer extensions. Sometimes that is the only form of communication you get from a professor, that they don't accept late assignments so don't ask."

In the fourth theme, *unapproachable professor,* students (*N* = 31; 14.9%) stated that they feel uncomfortable reaching out and requesting extensions from professors who they perceive as strict or unapproachable. For example, one student wrote they are uncomfortable if "the instructor is harsh or not as involved in the course" and another stated "I feel that most instructors show students little to no mercy when they ask for an extension even with a good reason so without a coupon it makes me feel rather uneasy." In the fifth theme, *documentation and disclosure,* students (*N* = 31; 14.9%) expressed that they felt uncomfortable requesting an extension if they did not have proper documentation to justify an extension; in addition to that, some students noted that they did not want to disclose their personal information to their professors. For example, one student said "You have to explain why you need the extension which in most cases is not an uncomfortable thing, but in some cases it does not feel right inviting a stranger into your personal life and then hoping that they understand why you need the extension. Also there is a 50% chance that they will deny the extension no matter how that affects you" and another stated that extension coupons remove this barrier (e.g., "The coupons are great because I don't feel the need to overstate my personal situation with my professor"). I the sixth theme, *special treatment,* a small proportion of students (*N* = 15; 7.2%) explained that they feel uncomfortable requesting and being granted extensions because they do not want to receive any special treatment and acknowledge the extra work this gives professors. For instance, one student said "The dates are set for assignments and I would feel uncomfortable asking for that to change just for me," while another noted "I also feel uncomfortable because I may be creating more work for my professors."

Impact on learning experience

Students were asked whether they believe the extension coupons had a positive impact on their learning experience. Most of the students (80.7%) indicated the coupons had a positive experience with 19.3% indicating the extension coupons did not impact their learning experience. Importantly, of the students who indicated the coupons did not impact their learning, 100% also reported they did not redeem any extension coupons.

We asked students to explain the impact these extension coupons had on their learning. We received 147 responses to this question, and we identified four themes. The first theme, *assignment engagement,* represented students (*N* = 95; 64.6%) who expressed that the extension coupons allowed them to spend more time on the assignment, and engage with the content on a deeper level rather than rushing it to submit the assignment on time. For example, one student noted "I was more thoughtful about my work and took more time to absorb the material. I felt less pressure to just

submit anything." The second theme, *focus on their mental health,* represented students (*N* = 52; 35.3%) who disclosed that having the option to redeem extension coupons throughout the term improved their mental health such as reducing stress and anxiety. This was true for students who did not redeem any coupons, but were aware they had the option if necessary. For example, one student wrote "As I stated I did not end up using my extension coupon but having them definitely took the pressure off ensuring the assignments are done and cramping everything in. My schedule is very hectic and I like to put a lot of effort into my assignments. Knowing that I could use the coupons allowed me to do my best to get the assignments done by the due date but also I wasn't stressed because if I felt like I wasn't going to get an assignment done, I could have asked for extra time to make sure the assignment was done correctly." For other students, redeeming the coupons and having extra time to complete the assignments improved their mental health. For example, one student noted "The first assignment, I was really sick and was also struggling mentally so having that ability to just let you all know that I was using my extension without having to go into why was a real life saver."

The third theme, *focus on the situation,* represented students (*N* = 17; 11.5%) who explained that redeeming the extension coupons allowed them to dedicate time and energy to the situations that required the extension rather than their school work. For instance, one student said "with the extension coupons, I was able to spend time with my brother instead of turning the assignment in on time. Had I not done this, I feel my head would've not been in the right place. I would've been focused on trying to get the assignment done as fast as possible to spend as much time with him as I could. Instead of actually turning in quality work." The last theme, *grade improvement,* represented students (*N* = 17; 11.5%) who believed that redeeming the extensions coupons improved their grade (e.g., "I believe they help a lot because some professor [sic] do not accept late work period, so when you use an extension it totally eliminates you receiving a zero on the assignment").

Overall thoughts

Students were asked to indicate their overall thoughts about professors providing extension coupons in their courses. We received 201 responses to this question. The majority of students (*N* = 195; 97%) stated that extension coupons were a good idea, and that other instructors and courses should also implement these coupons (*N* = 100; 48.07%). For instance, one student wrote, "I thought the extension coupons were extremely helpful. I normally wouldn't use them just because I don't always need an extension, but I truly did like the fact that they were there just in case something arose, or whatever the case may be, I also enjoyed the fact that there were no questions asked. It really was just emailing your CA [course assistant]/Instructor redeeming the amount of coupons you wanted on whatever assignment, and that was that. I 100% believe that other instructors should use them. I believe it raises the morale amount [sic] us students, just knowing if things get unbearable we have a sort of 'pause' to give us that time to rest and recuperate." A small proportion of students (*N* = 6; 3.4%) indicated they believe the extension coupons are a bad idea. Of the students who explained why they believed they were a bad idea, the reasoning was due to promoting procrastination (e.g., "I think that it is good to have the option to extend one assignment for emergency situations, but I think that when they are given, people just use them when they procrastinate and don't want to do the assignment").

Of the students who believed extension coupons were a good idea, we identified three themes. The first theme, *focus on their mental health,* represented students (*N* = 81; 41.5%) who believed that overall, having the option to redeem extension coupons increased their level of comfort and reduced levels of stress and anxiety. For example, one student noted "I think all instructors should use them. Allowing a set number of extensions relieves pressure on students for

some assignments while still holding accountability in that they cannot use them indefinitely and that the work still has to be done." In the second theme, *other responsibilities,* students (*N* = 58; 29.7%) acknowledged that the option to redeem extension coupons was valuable due to the other responsibilities they have in their lives such as work, children, and family members to take care of. For example, one student wrote, "I think extension coupons are life-saving for students who have a lot of things to balance other than their studies. It helped take a lot of mental stress off knowing that they can be used on practically any assignment and used when truly needed. I wish that more instructors used them, I can not see any negative backlash that would come from them." In the third theme, *life happens,* students (*N* = 38; 19.2%) noted that overall, the opportunity to redeem extension coupons demonstrated to them that they had a professor who was flexible in their teaching and acknowledged that emergencies happen and that students have lives outside of the classroom. For instance, one student stated, "I believe that extension coupons can definitely be helpful for students and that they should be implemented in more courses. While I only used one coupon due to a health problem, the knowledge that the option was available for situations where life got in the way was extremely beneficial for my mental health throughout the course. Knowing that a professor understands that life can't always be planned for allowed for more security and made the entire course seem less stressful."

Discussion

With a shifting demographic in higher education, the student population is increasingly diverse, requiring the use of Universal Design for Learning as a framework to facilitate an equitable learning environment (CAST, 2022). This study contributes to the limited research demonstrating practical support for UDL in the classroom (e.g., Fovet, 2020). In particular, the goals of this study were to contribute to and extend previous research examining flexible deadline policies in higher education (e.g., Hills & Peacock, 2022; Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Withington & Schroeder, 2017). Although prior studies have shown that flexible deadline policies benefit students in various ways, these studies employ various levels of flexibility and examine one course, or one year of study. We extended these findings by employing a larger, more diverse sample, implementing flexible learning policies across two years, two universities in Canada and the United States, and two populations of students (i.e., graduate and undergraduate). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Kumar & Wideman, 2014; Nickels & Uddin, 2003; Schroeder et al., 2019; Withington & Schroeder, 2017), students in our sample indicated that the flexible deadline policies positively impacted their learning experience.

Across our open-ended qualitative responses, our data suggest that students believed extension coupons impacted their learning in two key ways: 1) they were able to meaningfully engage with the course content; and 2) they were able to focus on their mental health.

Engagement with course content

Student engagement has been a topic of interest for decades related to enhancing students' learning experiences in higher education (Groccia, 2018). Although student engagement has been widely defined and can be integrated into a variety of aspects within the learning environment, Conrad and Donaldson (2012) stated that student engagement is related to participation and interaction, allowing students to be supported in their learning and take accountability for their own learning. Providing students with the opportunity to decide whether to redeem extension coupons, how many coupons to redeem, and when to redeem them, provides them the opportunity to take accountability of their learning, and increases their engagement in the course. Students indicated redeeming extension

coupons for various reasons such as job, family, and school commitments as well as physical and mental health difficulties. By reducing these barriers and providing a more equitable learning environment aligned with UDL, many of our students in this study stated that the extension coupons provided them more time to focus on their assignments, engage with the content more, and submit something they were proud of rather than rushing their work. A small proportion of our students mentioned that these extension coupons improved their grades, in the sense that submitting assignments late often results in large grade reductions, or in some cases, a zero on an assignment. Having said that, a large proportion focused on the fact that the extension coupons provided them more time to engage with the assignment, suggesting students do not request extensions because they want a higher grade in the course, but that they want to do the work and engage with content. These findings demonstrate that implementing UDL principles, in this case flexible deadlines, removed barriers for students, created an equal opportunity to learn, and allowed them to achieve their learning potential (Navaitiene & Stasiunaitiene, 2021).

Though some instructors believe that flexible deadline policies promote procrastination (e.g., Warner, 2019), our findings demonstrate that only a small proportion of our participants believed this. In fact, almost 7% of our participants noted the opposite - that they did *not* redeem extension coupons because they did not want to fall behind in the course. Because over 40% of our sample did not redeem any extension coupons, coupled with the qualitative responses throughout our study, procrastination and not wanting to do the work does not appear to be the reason that students request extensions. Instead, the findings demonstrate that students do in fact want to do the work – as evidenced by the majority of our sample explaining the extension coupons gave them an opportunity to complete an assignment. Further, procrastination is itself a common behaviour in several mental health and neurodevelopmental disorders, including Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (e.g. Bolden & Fillauer, 2020; Niermann & Scheres, 2014) and anxiety (e.g. Haycock et al., 1998), and is often not reflective of disinterest or laziness (Steel, 2007). Thus, even if students wished to use extension coupons exclusively for procrastination purposes, they may in fact still be serving their accommodation-related purposes, fulfilling the guidelines of UDL (CAST, 2022).

Instructors who support strict deadline policies (e.g., no extensions, large grade reductions as a penalty for late assignments) often provide the justification of "because in the real world, there are no extensions." Our experience as academics, and the reported experience of other academics (e.g., Warner, 2019) is that in the "real world," we do in fact receive extensions in our work such as submitting revisions on a manuscript, completing a peer-review for a journal, or putting forward a book proposal. It is possible that the only hard deadlines we have as academics are the classes that we teach which have a set meeting schedule or perhaps grant or award deadlines. Why do we request these extensions? Often, we have competing demands; perhaps we have children or other dependents to care for, or maybe we have other deadlines that need to be met first. In any case, we request extensions because we cannot produce the quality of work we believe is acceptable with the current deadline. Along these lines, if we expect this flexibility from others in our work, is it time to offer that same flexibility to our students? In an opinion blog for *Inside Higher Ed,* Warner (2019) argues that providing students with flexible deadlines allows them to have some autonomy, and practice the skills needed to learn how to *manage* deadlines rather than *meet* deadlines which is more beneficial for their "real world" skillset. Flexible deadlines do not require instructors to allow unlimited flexibility; much like academics experience some hard deadlines with no flexibility (e.g. class meetings, grants) but many soft deadlines, it seems reasonable to build in similar submission expectations in course designs that are appropriate to the level, content, and learning objectives of the class. For example, some courses are designed with coursework that is highly sequential. It may not be appropriate to allow coupons to be used on any assignment in the course, but perhaps

flexibility can be offered on one or two assignments where the instructor believes it is more appropriate.

Focus on their mental health

University students' mental health is of critical importance and concern as recent years have demonstrated that college students are a high risk population for mental health difficulties, with women and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds at particular risk (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2013). These difficulties are relevant in the classroom as psychological distress impacts students' ability to process information, attention, memory, motivation, and decision-making (Pascoe et al., 2020). Universities have developed initiatives and resources dedicated to supporting student mental health, but our findings demonstrate that course design may be an additional path to improve student mental health. That is, our students specifically noted that the flexible deadline policies impacted their mental health in a variety of ways such as reducing anxiety and stress and allowing them to focus their energy on emergent situations outside of the classroom. For students who did not redeem any coupons, they indicated that although they did not need any flexibility in their deadlines and were able to submit assignments on time, the knowledge that they had the option to redeem coupons alleviated stress and anxiety. Moreover, students reported that having access to this policy provided them evidence that their professor was flexible, fair, and caring of their success. This is consistent with Baik et al.'s (2019) study, where students reported that having a teacher who was approachable, empathetic, and understanding of diverse circumstances would improve their mental health.

An argument that is sometimes provided to justify strict deadline policies is related to the increased grading workload and burnout that would accompany providing students with flexible deadlines (e.g, Warner, 2019). Some of our students acknowledged this as well, noting they did not feel comfortable requesting flexible deadlines as they acknowledge the extra work this can provide to professors. Though empirical research examining faculty burnout in higher education is limited (e.g, Hogan & McKnight, 2007), a systematic review of 36 studies investigating sources of faculty burnout (Sabagh et al., 2018) reported that job demands (e.g., workload, role ambiguity, pressure to produce), job resources (e.g., support from colleagues, job control), and personal factors (e.g., emotional labour, optimism) were all deemed predictors of faculty burnout. Though accommodation-related demands were not explicitly noted, anecdotally, instructors have reported through personal communication with us that in recent years there has been a steady increase of students requesting accommodations or flexibility for various reasons which has contributed to faculty burnout. In a qualitative survey, 136 college instructors reported experiencing burnout due to a variety of behaviors displayed by students, most notably requests for non-registered accommodations (40.47%) which included asking for a higher grade, an exception to a class rule, and requesting the instructor's time and extra effort to meet a student need (Jiang et al., 2016). As this study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible these rates would be higher now. We argue that by providing *all* students with the same flexibility in deadlines, this would alleviate some of the burnout related to student requests for accommodation (e.g., reducing email) and increase equity in the classroom as instructors would no longer need to make decisions about who should or should not receive an extension on their assignment.

These decisions – whether to grant an extension request or not– can impact student satisfaction in the course. That is, professors need to make decisions about whether an extension request is reasonable, and if yes, then what length of time is appropriate, and what, if any, evidence is required (e.g., documentation). With the growing popularity of message board platforms that allow students to chat outside of a course (e.g., Discord; McNamara & Zachmeier, 2021), it may become

apparent that some students are receiving more flexibility from their professors than others, leading to dissatisfaction from students. This dissatisfaction has the potential to negatively impact instructor evaluations (e.g., Chory et al., 2017), which can then limit the opportunity for contract renewals or promotions. Previous research has shown that instructor transparency and flexibility has been associated with higher levels of student satisfaction (Horan et al., 2010; Howell & Buck, 2012), and that students were significantly more likely to characterize effective teaching as professors who were flexible in their approach and understanding of difficult situations (Delaney et al., 2010). Given the students in our sample noted that the use of extension coupons in a course demonstrated to them that their professor was understanding that life happens and was flexible in their approach, we hypothesize that the use of flexible deadline policies that are uniformly provided to all students could increase perceptions of instructor fairness, and therefore positively impact course evaluations.

This study is of course not without limitations. The first limitation is that our participants are all from the same discipline (psychology), which may limit the generalizability of our findings to other disciplines. Despite this, our participants were both undergraduate and graduate students from Canada and the United States, from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, representing a diverse sample. Our second limitation is that we did not collect data on which assessments students redeemed extension coupons for and so we are limited in concluding whether extensions redeemed at the beginning, middle, or end of the term, or whether the type of assessment (discussion with peers, reflection assignment, final project) played a role in the impact of flexibility. Our third limitation is related to self-selection in two key ways. First, our participants were self-selected in that we invited students to participate in an anonymous survey at the end of the course which could increase the likelihood for bias; however, because almost half our sample did not redeem any extension coupons, we believe our data is a strong representation of both students who needed flexibility and students who did not. Second, we as instructors are self-selected to already be intentional and careful in our course design approaches. It is likely we communicate to our students, in multiple ways beyond the availability of extension coupons, that we are invested in their success.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that the students in our sample had very positive perceptions of implementing flexible deadlines in the classroom. Students reported that job commitments and mental health difficulties were the largest reasons contributing to their need for flexibility. Moreover, students explained that these flexible deadlines allowed them to engage in the course more meaningfully while also being able to focus on their mental health. We argue providing flexible deadline policies increase equity in the classroom as they level out the playing field between students who feel comfortable and uncomfortable asking for help. For decades, we have considered *what* and *how* we are teaching; we argue that now is the time for educators to consider *who* we are teaching, and design and teach courses that include *all* learners in the classroom.

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