

May 2024

“It’s Pedagogical and It’s Selfish”: How Classroom Policies Promote Inclusive Pedagogy, Student Success, and Faculty Legitimacy

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Recommended Citation

Whitehead, Ellen M. and Holtzman, Mellisa (2024) “It’s Pedagogical and It’s Selfish”: How Classroom Policies Promote Inclusive Pedagogy, Student Success, and Faculty Legitimacy,” *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 18: No. 1, Article 8.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.20429/ijstl.2024.180108>

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Abstract

Course policies around attendance and submission deadlines have documented impacts on student outcomes within college courses, yet our understanding remains limited of instructors’ own motivations behind the policies they adopt. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 43 college instructors, we find that faculty emphasize both student-centered and instructor-focused considerations. Pedagogically, they create policies they believe will enhance student success, promote equity and inclusion, and enable students to account for the realities of life. But they also design policies they believe will make their job easier, positively impact students’ perceptions of them, and align with gender role and tenure expectations. These findings have implications for faculty development and university efforts to support student success.

Keywords

Classroom policies, Inclusive pedagogy, Student success, Faculty success, Attendance policies, Assignment deadlines

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Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgments: This article was generously supported by the Scholarship Support Program within Ball State’s Office of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. We wish to thank Ayrilia Welch for her valuable research assistance with this project, as well as the study participants for donating their time and making this research possible.

“It’s Pedagogical and It’s Selfish”: How Classroom Policies Promote Inclusive Pedagogy, Student Success, and Faculty Legitimacy

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Received: 12 December 2023; Accepted: 18 January 2024

Course policies around attendance and submission deadlines have documented impacts on student outcomes within college courses, yet our understanding remains limited of instructors’ own motivations behind the policies they adopt. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 43 college instructors, we find that faculty emphasize both student-centered and instructor-focused considerations. Pedagogically, they create policies they believe will enhance student success, promote equity and inclusion, and enable students to account for the realities of life. But they also design policies they believe will make their job easier, positively impact students’ perceptions of them, and align with gender role and tenure expectations. These findings have implications for faculty development and university efforts to support student success.

INTRODUCTION

University faculty have considerable freedom when developing their classroom policies. The level of flexibility and/or degree of stringency built into attendance expectations, submission deadlines, and late work policies are largely at their discretion. Importantly, however, flexibility and rigidity in classroom policies has implications for inclusivity and diversity in the college classroom (Dickson & Tennant, 2018). For instance, research demonstrates that working class students are less likely to ask for accommodations than are middle class students (Calarco, 2011). Consequently, if course syllabi do not explicitly outline the existence of flexible policies, economically disadvantaged students are less likely to ask for assistance when they need it. Research also suggests that students who are juggling numerous responsibilities, including employment and parenting demands, are more apt to achieve educational success when faculty offer flexible and empathic course policies (Cook & Krupar, 2010). The same is true for first generation students (Cilliers et al., 2018). In short, the intersection between competing life demands and characteristics, such as first-generation status, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and age (Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Institute, 2018), implicates instructors’ course policies in discussions of inclusive pedagogy.

While prior work has investigated whether implementation of stringent or lenient policies is associated with student grades and learning, we know relatively little about instructors’ own motivations for the policies they adopt. Faculty may consider a variety of factors when crafting policies, only some of which are directly related to promoting student success and the attainment of learning objectives. For instance, instructors may choose particular policies to facilitate faculty-student rapport, ensure the smooth functioning of their courses, lessen their grading workload, or emulate the policies used by their own mentors. Without a more holistic understanding of why faculty adopt specific course policies, it is difficult to design instructor training programs that can effectively speak to faculty motivations while simultaneously promoting student success. Thus, this study uses in-depth interviews with 43 college instructors throughout the U.S. and from a variety of disciplines to explore how and why faculty incorporate flexibility or rigidity into their classroom policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Attendance policies and late submission practices represent key strategies for incorporating flexibility or stringency into college courses (Holtzman et al., 2023). Given that the development and implementation of these policies is often up to the discretion of instructors, expectations around late submissions and attendance vary from classroom to classroom. For example, some faculty accept late work with a standard point deduction, some determine deductions based on how many hours or days late an assignment is submitted, and others refrain from accepting late work at all (Bosch, 2020; Meyers et al., 2019; Tyler et al., 2017). Similarly, with respect to attendance policies, some instructors count attendance in students’ grades, while others communicate an expectation for attendance without making it mandatory (Macfarlane, 2013; St. Clair, 1999). Among faculty who do include attendance in course grades, some allow a set number of absences before deducting points while others only allow excused absences (Rendleman, 2017; Snyder & Frank, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019). While these examples are by no means comprehensive, they highlight the range of approaches used by faculty—approaches that may be motivated by both student-focused considerations and faculty-focused considerations.

Student-Focused Motivations

Research consistently suggests course policies impact students’ grades and learning outcomes (Credé et al., 2010; Pollak & Parnell, 2018; Snyder & Frank, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019). For instance, strict attendance policies are positively associated with class attendance and student performance in college classes (Chenneville & Jordan, 2008; Snyder et al., 2014; Zhu et al., 2019). Likewise, firm assignment deadlines can help reduce procrastination among students, thereby increasing their success in class (Nordby et al., 2017). Faculty may also use stringent course policies to foster career preparedness skills among students, particularly given that “career readiness” is an increasingly prominent feature of debates about the utility of a college degree (Green et al., 2023; Stebleton et al., 2020).

Flexible policies can benefit students as well. Allowing late submissions with a penalty attached, permitting a specified

number of extensions, and implementing “rolling deadlines” for assignments are associated with enhanced student outcomes (Bosch, 2020; Tyler et al., 2017; Withington & Schroeder, 2017). Relatedly, tracking late submissions (as opposed to disallowing them entirely) can be used to identify and offer support to at-risk students, and early interventions can positively influence student retention (Villano et al., 2018).

In addition to affecting student learning, classroom policies also connect to conversations around equity and inclusion within pedagogical practices. For instance, attendance expectations and submission deadlines often affect students’ perceptions of fairness within the classroom (Duplaga & Astani, 2010), and this was especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic when students found themselves struggling with transitions to remote learning, access to reliable technology, and challenges with mental health (Gillis & Krull, 2020; Jaggars et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2021). Moreover, since almost 70 percent of college students are employed (Carnevale & Smith, 2018) and more than one in five are parents (Institute, 2018), flexible course policies not only provide faculty with a way to offer students compassion and support (Gelles, 2020), they can be crucial for students’ own efforts to juggle their numerous competing obligations (Cook & Krupar, 2010; Fuentes et al., 2020).

Thus, while the relationship between classroom policies, student learning outcomes, and inclusive pedagogy is well documented in research and it seems reasonable to assume faculty adopt course policies with student success in mind, research has not actually examined this assumption. Scholars do not yet know *why* instructors adopt specific policies. To that end, it is possible that faculty are motivated not only by student-focused considerations, but also by their own needs.

Faculty-Focused Motivations

Faculty members’ own identities may inform and constrain the types of policies they implement in their courses. Race, gender, and tenure status have been shown to impact students’ and colleagues’ perceptions of an instructor’s professional legitimacy (Bavishi et al., 2010; Gourley & Madonia, 2021; Miller & Chamberlin, 2000; Murray et al., 2020; O’Meara et al., 2018). Likewise, tenure status has been shown to impact instructors’ pedagogical practices—faculty with more tenuous employment positions tend to grade more leniently (Chen et al., 2021; Keng, 2018), but they may also worry that incorporating flexibility will harm how they are evaluated by students and peers, especially if their lenience is viewed as evidence of lowered standards (Calarco, 2020). It is, therefore, possible that underrepresented, female, and/or untenured/adjunct faculty adopt particular policies in an attempt to enhance their legitimacy and encourage positive evaluations from students and peers. Whether this translates into relatively more lenient or stringent policies remains unclear.

In addition to identity considerations, faculty may also design their classroom policies to address work pressures. Occupational stress is a challenge for many college faculty (Sabagh et al., 2018), with workload and student numbers representing key dimensions of burnout (Lackritz, 2004). Further, many faculty have reported high levels of stress and fatigue in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brandau et al., 2022). As such, reducing instructional burden may serve as a priority for faculty, thereby encouraging policies that can be automatically applied within learning management systems (see Tyler et al., 2017) and discouraging policies

that require more one-on-one interactions with and emotional support for students (Dickson & Tennant, 2018).

Thus, this research examines the degree to which student- and faculty-focused considerations impact instructors’ decisions about course policies. Having a better understanding of this issue will help universities orient new faculty in ways that address their own needs and motivations while also promoting student success and inclusivity.

METHODS

Sampling Procedures

This study utilizes interview data from university faculty throughout the United States that was generated using convenience and snowball sampling techniques. We recruited participants through personal contacts, via recruitment flyers posted on social media, and by asking respondents to share information about the study with other potential participants. Interview respondents received a \$20 Tango gift card for participating. In total, 43 instructors completed an interview, including 24 recruited from the authors’ personal contacts and 19 who were reached through social media or snowball sampling. This study received approval from the Ball State University Institutional Review Board.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted between June and November of 2020, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that the pandemic represented a key moment for investigating how faculty use classroom policies to address challenges and resource gaps that can affect student learning. Further, given the emphasis on empathy and leniency during the pandemic (Calarco 2020; Sawchuck, 2020), data from this time period offer unique insights into whether instructors view flexibility in course policies as aligned with or opposed to promoting student grades and learning outcomes.

Interviews were conducted by one of the study’s authors and a trained graduate assistant using a semi-structured interview guide. Faculty were asked to discuss their policies around late work, alternative assignments, attendance, the purpose of their policies, how the policies were developed, how the policies compared with those of their colleagues, how they altered their policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and what messages they received from university administration regarding curriculum and modality changes. The data specifically about COVID-19 are reported on in a previously published study and thus will not be discussed here (Holtzman et al., 2023).

Data were collected remotely, with participants given the option to complete the interview over Zoom or by telephone. Interviews lasted an average of 46 minutes (median=43 minutes). All participants agreed to the interview being audio recorded, and interviews were transcribed verbatim. Otter AI was used to produce initial transcripts, and trained graduate assistants listened to each recording and corrected errors within these initial transcripts prior to data analysis.

Participants

Although a random or statistically representative sample of faculty was not an objective within this qualitative study, we emphasized analytical generalizability within our data collection. During recruitment, we specifically focused on variation across gender, race/ethnicity, age, academic rank, school type, and discipline, with

the goal of capturing a range of perspectives and experiences within the interviews. As such, our participants represent a diverse set of demographic and academic characteristics, as shown in Table 1. However, given the reliance on convenience and snowball sampling, certain categories have a higher representation than others. Out of the 43 faculty members, around two-thirds of the sample identify as women, and a similar proportion racially identify as White. The mean age of the sample was 41 at the time of data collection. In terms of faculty status, around 65 percent of the sample reported occupying a tenure-line position at their university (including a combination of untenured and tenured professors), and roughly a third were contingent faculty. Around 53 percent reported being at a university with an equal emphasis on both teaching and research, and just under half were in the social sciences.

Table 1. Demographics (n=43)		
	%	n
Gender		
Women	67%	29
Men	30%	13
Unknown	2%	1
Race		
White	65%	28
Asian American	16%	7
Hispanic/Latinx	9%	4
Black	7%	3
Biracial	2%	1
Age (mean)	41	43
Faculty Position		
Tenure-line faculty	65%	29
Assistant professor	28%	12
Associate professor	19%	8
Full professor	19%	8
Contingent faculty	35%	15
Instructor	7%	3
Adjunct	9%	4
Lecturer	9%	4
Teaching professor	9%	4
University Type		
Equal focus on teaching and research	53%	23
Research-intensive	30%	13
Liberal arts or teaching-focused	9%	4
Community college	7%	3
Discipline		
Social sciences	49%	21
Humanities	21%	9
Natural sciences	14%	6
Formal sciences	12%	5
Unknown	5%	2

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

The qualitative data collected for this study allow for the identification of patterns within respondents' interviews (Charmaz, 2014). To better understanding instructors' own motivations around the course policies they design and implement, the data was analyzed using grounded theory techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). One of the study's authors read each transcript three times to identify and refine a set of codes that could be applied to the interview data. Following the initial development of these codes, a graduate assistant also independently applied these codes to the data. Coding efforts were compared, discrepancies discussed, and the final application of codes settled. This approach helped to facilitate dialog about interpretations of codes and explore nuances identified by both coders. Emerging themes were identified and

further developed through the creation of coding tables and research memos.

Codes were informed by past theory and research within the scholarship of teaching and learning. For example, past research has captured policy approaches that provide a degree of flexibility for students (e.g., Bosch, 2020; Tyler et al., 2017; Withington & Schroeder, 2017), and indeed, many faculty within the study reported incorporating a degree of leniency (coded as "lenient"). However, the coding process also allowed for the creation of codes that emerged within the transcripts but were not expected based on the existing literature. For example, several faculty noted that while they try to motivate students to complete tasks on time by initially sharing that they will not accept late work, they will make exceptions if extenuating circumstances arise. While this practice was not expected based on existing literature, it was identified and coded in the data as "mislead to motivate."

In total, 52 individual-level codes were created for the full set of interviews. These codes were then categorized by theme. For instance, the individual-level codes "flexible," "strict," and "contingent," were part of the broader theme "typical classroom policies," while "student agency," "perceptions of professor," and "fairness/equality" were part of the broader theme "purpose of policies." These two themes are central to the analysis presented in this article. Other broad themes from the data included "COVID policy responses," "comparisons with colleagues," and "change/aspirations." These themes are less integral to the findings presented here.

RESULTS

As the title of this article suggests, faculty said they design their classroom policies to help students and to help themselves. Pedagogically, they create policies that they believe will promote fairness and equality, ensure students' success, and account for the realities of life. They also design policies they believe will make their job easier, positively impact students' perceptions of them, and align with gender role and tenure expectations. Interestingly, the stated *purpose* of classroom policies was quite consistent across faculty, but they were divided on whether that purpose was best achieved using flexible or strict policies. Table 2 summarizes their perspectives on classroom policies.

CLASSROOM POLICIES ARE PEDAGOGICAL

The faculty we interviewed reported that their classroom policies were designed to promote student learning in three important ways.

Promoting Fairness and Equality

First, faculty said course policies are critical for ensuring fairness, equity, and inclusion in the classroom. Specifically, faculty were attuned to the fact that student learning is impacted by "social backgrounds," "systems of oppression," and "social and cultural capital." Consequently, they believed it imperative to account for these issues when designing course policies.

Flexible Policies

Many faculty accomplished this by incorporating flexibility into their class policies: "I focus on trying to make sure that my classes are equitable and fair to students from any social background," "Flexibility evens the playing field a little bit [so students with many

Table 2. Summary of Primary Themes and Subthemes			
Classroom Policies are Pedagogical		Classroom Policies are Selfish	
Flexible Policies	Strict Policies	Flexible Policies	Strict Policies
Promote Fairness and Equality	Promote Fairness and Equality	Protecting Faculty	Protecting Faculty
account for DEI issues (re: SES, race, disability)	account for DEI issues (re: requests for help) ensure consistency for all students	save professor time (re: student requests/tedious tasks) protect professor from being an arbiter for excuses/requests	save professor time (re: tedious tasks/limiting grading) protect professor as part of a contract obligation
Ensure Students' Success	Ensure Students' Success	Impact Perceptions of the Professor	Impact Perceptions of the Professor
promote student-centered approaches	promote engagement with the classroom & other students	promote positive relationships & rapport with students	promote professor's legitimacy among students
promote engagement with material & producing best work	promote engagement with homework assignments	influence professor's reputation as nice, easy-going	influence professor's reputation as fair, consistent
Account for Realities of Life	Account for Realities of Life	Meet Identity Expectations	Meet Identity Expectations
give students decision-making power over their lives & education	prepare students to face the consequences of life	ensure women are consistent with their gender role & receive positive evals	enable men to be consistent with their gender role & face no sanctions on evals
adjust for things outside of students' control	teach students job & life skills (reliability, time management)	ensure contingent & tenure-track faculty receive positive evals & keep their jobs	enable tenured faculty to be strict without worrying if/how it impacts evals

obligations can] keep up with the students who are only students," and "I try to have a socially aware and empathetic perspective. . . so [I embrace] the idea of meeting students where they are and then recognizing progress." Sentiments tying flexibility to "equitability and access and inclusivity" were summarized by a philosophy professor:

My general posture is that maximal flexibility with regard to course policies is a requirement . . . because you don't know who you're dealing with and what they're doing. The more that your policies are inflexible, the more students with different backgrounds and ways of living are going to be excluded from success in your course.

Strict Policies

In contrast, other faculty suggested flexible submission standards, lax attendance policies, and granting students deadline extensions "reproduce some levels of inequality" because "not every student is going to ask" for an extension. These faculty worried that if they did not establish and follow clear guidelines for their classes, they would end up "systematically privileging" some students over others. According to one faculty member:

People who come from working-class backgrounds . . . read the rules and they're like, "No, those are the rules. I can't ask for an exception to the rule." And people who come from upper-class backgrounds are like, "Rules shmules." So, I want to make sure that the "rules shmules" kids don't get the exception just because they know to ask for the exception, when the working-class kids didn't know they could even ask.

Faculty also suggested strict class policies ensure everyone is "treated fairly." A French professor noted that although she sometimes wants to make exceptions for students with extreme situations, it is unfair to do so: "I have to remind myself that there are probably a lot of others who also have problems, but I'm not finding out about them. So, if I make allowances for one student, it is not fair to the others." Similarly, a history professor said, "you have to have a set deadline so that all students are judged

according to the same timeframe." To do otherwise would thwart "justice and equity."

Thus, regardless of whether faculty believed in offering students a lot of policy flexibility or almost none, they often designed their policies to promote fairness and equity among students.

Ensuring Students' Success

The second subtheme to emerge highlighted how class policies can help students "do well," submit "their best work," and "be successful."

Flexible Policies

Faculty who adopted flexible policies did so because they are "more inclusive of students' strengths and abilities," "allow [students] to learn the material in ways that make sense to them," and ensure students are "given the space they need to learn." To that end, faculty advocated avoiding "professor-centric" and "oppressive" policies in favor of "student-centered" policies that offer "multiple paths to the learning objectives." As one instructor noted:

I want to engage students where they are and find their love of learning and inspire it and help it grow. So, I think being open about individual variation in terms of how people complete things, the time at which they complete things, the pace at which they complete things, just fits kind of neatly into that.

These faculty also asserted flexible policies focus on engagement with course material rather than arbitrary deadlines that "are not terribly relevant to [students] having acquired the knowledge" the course is supposed to impart. A psychology professor said, "learning the material is most important and so whatever pace that happens at is fine," and an education professor said, "sometimes the rules we put in place inhibit learning as opposed to encouraging it." Flexible deadlines, therefore, "give [students] enough time to develop their arguments well" and "produce the best possible work." A history professor summed up this sentiment:

I value process over product. And so in that regard, I try to be as flexible as I can to allow late work and to allow students to modify requirements in order to create growth. I'm more interested in improvements from where students are at than taking all students and making sure they meet a certain kind of disembodied metric of achievement.

Strict Policies

Proponents of strict policies emphasized student learning is maximized through consistent engagement in the classroom, with peers, and on homework assignments. They said “if [students] don’t go to class, [they] don’t learn as much,” “students get more out of class if they actually come,” “participation and engagement matter,” and “student to student interaction is essential to the learning.” Faculty also felt strict policies, especially around assignment deadlines, were critical because students need “structure and routine.” They said, “for some students, flexibility means they just keep putting it off” and “there’s actually a drawback to providing [flexibility] because it makes it harder for some of the students to complete the class.” As one sociology professor said:

Too much leniency actually creates a mental barrier for students to complete work. They need deadlines and they need something concrete and written out that can help them get to that goal. I kind of think that I’m disadvantaging my students if I am not helping them actually complete the work that needs to get done.

Faculty also asserted that “keeping weekly deadlines” and “submitting assignments according to a schedule” helps students come to class “prepared” and ready to “contribute and discuss” and that promotes “maximal learning.” Moreover, homework deadlines ensure class content can build on itself over time. As one criminal justice professor explained:

I don’t think it’s fair to students [to submit late work]—which I get sounds weird: Why is this zero more fair for them?—but I think it is for their own learning. If they’re still stressed about what happened in week two and now we’re in week six, they’re constantly trying to play catch up. I’m worried that they’re not going to be listening to what’s happening now. So, they need to be staying up to date.

Once again, then, regardless of whether faculty adopted flexibility or stringent course policies, their goal was to enhance student success.

Accounting for the Realities of Life

The last subtheme to emerge with respect to the pedagogical purposes of classroom policies centers on accounting for the realities of life by using strict policies to help foster life skills (e.g., time management, work ethic) and prepare students for the responsibilities of the workforce.

Flexible Policies

Flexible policies were used to give students control over their educational journey. Faculty said it is important to give students “agency,” “the freedom to decide when [they] can and can’t do something” and the ability to “engage in a way that is productive for [them].” They also asserted policies should “recognize students as people with complex lives who are making decisions about what they want to prioritize.” In fact, the acknowledgment that “life is crazy,” “stuff comes up,” “life gets in the way,” “shit happens,” and students need “a little bit of space” and some “wiggle room” to deal with “life circumstances,” was strongly

emphasized by faculty who had flexible classroom policies. A business professor said, “when life happens . . . it can be hard to keep up,” and a molecular biology professor asserted that flexible policies are “respectful of students” because they are “people with lives; they aren’t robots.”

Several professors also argued for flexibility by acknowledging that they, too, are “late to things once in a while,” need to “ask for grace from [their] students when [they] make a mistake,” and occasionally require “extensions on papers for journals.” One instructor went so far as to say:

It’s very standard in academia [for scholars to submit things late], and not just in research, but also in the university administration. If I submit something one day late, nobody is going to penalize me, so why do we do this to the students? [Giving late deductions] just seems to me a little hypocritical. We don’t live in that kind of world.

This statement is particularly interesting because it stands in sharp contrast to the many faculty who asserted strict policies are necessary to help prepare students for a working world where they will not receive extensions.

Strict Policies

Thus, strict classroom policies were justified as “preparatory for life” because bosses, bill collectors, and the government will have expectations that cannot be missed without repercussions: “If you turn your taxes in late, the penalty is high; the government doesn’t care that you ran out of time.” Similarly, a sociology professor noted:

My grading policies [reflect those of] an adult businesswoman. Outside of the academy I work in a consulting world, and if I email a client two days in advance and say, “I recognize we had a major deadline, but unfortunately, I’m having oral surgery and will not be able to complete it until Friday,” then [I must] accept the consequences of maybe getting fired. It might mean that they say: “Well, then we have to go with someone else. You simply won’t work.” In other words, I get a zero, as in zero money in my bank account.

Thus, strict policies served as “a teaching tool” because “in life, that’s how things work—there’s certain tasks you have to get done. If you’re a grown up and you’re supposed to take out the trash but you don’t get it done, you just dropped the ball. That’s the life skill I’m trying to teach with my policies.” Relatedly, strict policies are used to “professionalize” students and provide them with job-related skills. An education professor explained:

There’s just no make-up work in my senior level professional methods course because that class is meant to prepare [students] for the context of teaching in a public school environment. If [they] don’t show up prepared to do [their] job, the kids are the ones who suffer. So, in that senior methods course there are no make-up assignments.

Overall, faculty wanted to account for the realities of life, either by providing students with leeway when life complexities arose or by preparing students for the fact that their jobs still need to be completed even in the face of those complexities.

CLASSROOM POLICIES ARE SELFISH

Faculty also reported that their classroom policies were designed to help *them*. Once again, however, they were divided on whether this was best achieved via flexible or strict course policies.

Protecting Faculty

First, policies were designed to save faculty time and protect them from excessive emotional labor.

Flexible Policies

Instructors often reported that the strict application of policies is both "very tedious" and "a huge pain in the butt." Thus, they use flexible policies to "reduce the burden" of keeping track of absences and missing assignments. Several even noted they used to apply strict attendance and submission policies but no longer do because they "don't have time to care about this" and "don't want to deal with it."

In addition to saving time, flexible policies also reduce the emotional labor associated with determining when absences and late submissions are warranted. An American history professor said, "I don't want to be a cop. Every moment where I feel like I'm being more of a cop than a teacher, I just feel uncomfortable." Similarly, a sociology professor said:

I want to minimize the number of times I'm having to make a moral decision about if this counts for an exception and so I try to build in enough flexibility in the schedule that life can happen. Your life can be crazy but I don't have to be the arbitrator of whose excuse is worthy.

Strict Policies

In contrast, some faculty said flexibility benefits students but "puts more work on [faculty]" and creates time pressures for them that are a "heavy burden," "not very fun," and "just not necessary." They, thus, advocated for treating syllabi and course policies as a "contract of obligations" between themselves and the students. Doing so protects them from "having to use any intellectual time making decisions about [absences and extensions]." One faculty member even said:

I really use the syllabus and the course policies ... as something to hide behind so that I can email a student back when they're asking for an exception and say, "Unfortunately, I'm bound by this law," (as though I'm not the one who made up the law); "I'm bound by this." I use the policies to shield me. That's why I made them so strict—so that I could have the strongest shields possible.

It seems, then, that one of the primary functions of course policies—whether flexible or rigid—is to protect faculty, both in terms of time and emotional energy.

Impacting Perceptions of the Professor

Faculty also said they use their existing policies to influence students' perceptions of them as either "nice" and "easy-going" or "fair" and "consistent."

Flexible Policies

Rapport-building stood out as a rationale for flexible policies. Faculty said such policies help them build "a learning community" and foster "a relationship with [students]" because they make it more likely students will view them positively. One professor said, "My goal is to develop a long term mentor relationship with these students [and] my currency is favor with them," while another said, "I have no interest in making [the professor-student] relationship adversarial." Most interestingly, several faculty members said they tell students they have strict policies even though they have no intention of enforcing them. The resulting flexibility endears them to the students:

I feel that the best way to [establish faculty-student rapport] is to have the world's strictest policies. It helps when the syllabus says, "Absolutely not," and then they come to your office and you say, "Well, for you, I'll give you a discount." That is a great way to establish rapport with these kids. So, it's pedagogical and it's selfish.

Faculty appreciate the positive effects these kinds of actions have on their reputation. Because students talk to one another and "word gets around," they are able to avoid being labeled the "crappy professor" and instead are considered "approachable" and "accommodating." One faculty member happily reported that because of her flexibility, students say "she'll listen and she'll work with you."

Strict Policies

Faculty with strict policies use them to ensure their legitimacy as instructors. They want students to "respect them" and that means not being "too nice" or "too flexible," otherwise "students will try to get away with more stuff than they should." As one professor noted, "I try to be hip and cool but also very strict. Otherwise, it's not gonna work, it's gonna fall apart, and [students are] not going to respect me."

Strict enforcement of policies also impacted the reputations of these faculty. Instead of being seen as "nice" and "accommodating," though, they were seen as "fair," "consistent," and "tough." They said, "Among my students, my reputation is that I'm tough but fair and that's what I'm aiming for;" "I don't want to be their best friend—I think the biggest compliment that I could wish for is that I'm not an easy teacher," and "I don't want to get the reputation or be listed as the class that's an easy A."

Thus, faculty designed classroom policies they felt would have the most beneficial impact on students' perceptions of them. In some instances, that meant trying to ensure students liked them; in others, it meant trying to ensure students respected them.

Meeting Identity Expectations

Lastly, faculty talked about designing policies to be consistent with expectations that they viewed as tied to their gender, race, and faculty status. Contingent, early career, and female faculty generally felt compelled to embrace flexibility in order to ensure they received positive evaluations and tenure recommendations, while tenured and male faculty believed they were expected to—and had the freedom to—design stricter policies.

Flexible Policies

Both male and female faculty asserted that "gender affects policies." A female sociology professor said, "I don't have a really strict attendance policy because then I'm a bitch, whereas my husband has a wildly strict attendance policy and he doesn't get as much flack about that. If I did that, I would have much worse reviews," and a male professor said, "students see a fem, young professor, and they're like, 'Oh, I can negotiate. I can negotiate the hell of out this.' I think that's what happens with women." Relatedly, faculty said students expect female instructors to be "nurturing" and be like their "mom."

Though less common than discussions of gender, instructors similarly referenced race as a component of identity that factors into the development of course policies. Notably, these discussions typically highlighted the intersection of race and gender, with flexible policies viewed as especially expected among women of color. One Asian American woman said, "I'm also a person of color...I'm across multiple categories of a person who could

be seen as less authoritative.” A Black female professor said, “I have to be a little nicer because I am not a White male instructor. They can be very mean. Students respect them,” and a White male instructor stated, “Black women in particular get negotiated with all the time.”

The same sentiments were shared among untenured and contingent faculty. They said they have to be “way more lenient” in order to “stay safe” and keep their job: “I can’t risk the grievance so I will take anything; I will do anything; I will work triple overtime making a makeup assignment for [students].” In short, given their “more tenuous circumstances,” untenured and contingent faculty said they have to be “super attentive” to “undergrads’ expectations for flexibility.” In contrast, they said tenured faculty “are not held as strictly accountable to student evaluations or student opinion.”

Strict Policies

Male professors, however, were expected to be “really harsh” and “display [less] flexibility” than women, while tenured faculty were expected to “never have to say [they’re] sorry” and be free to “not care about student reviews.” Importantly, because those expectations exist, faculty suggested that male and/or tenured faculty have an easier time in the classroom and don’t have to worry about fallout from being strict. To that end, a male instructor reported, “I think 50% of my teaching success is due to the fact that I’m a man—it’s not due to my skill,” and a female professor said, “I don’t know if the guys even think about this stuff—they just blow up and go home and it’s done. I’m not sure [female instructors] could get away with that.”

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that faculty design their classroom policies with two goals in mind. Pedagogically, and in line with prior work that has demonstrated the impact of course policies on student outcomes (Chenneyville & Jordan, 2008; Nordby et al., 2017), they want to promote student learning. Selfishly, they want to enhance their own professional outcomes and make their job easier.

With respect to pedagogical considerations, instructors believe that flexible policies promote student attainment of learning objectives, facilitate faculty-student rapport, and ensure fairness for students dealing with various life stressors and demographic disadvantages. Somewhat paradoxically, they also believe strict policies teach students how to juggle life’s demands and help foster their professionalization skills. With respect to more self-serving goals, faculty use flexibility or rigidity to protect their own time and well-being, to impact others’ perceptions of them, and to help them deal with the pressures and expectations of gender roles, racial identity, and tenure status. All of this suggests that faculty are motivated by somewhat competing desires when they design their course policies. They want to build rapport and accommodate students in need while simultaneously establishing their own legitimacy and lessening their workload.

Although these are not entirely incongruent goals, they do present challenges where inclusive pedagogy and student success are concerned. For instance, it may not always be feasible to expect students who are employed or acting as caregivers to prioritize schooling over competing life events. Such students may benefit from more flexible attendance and late submission policies that enable them to stay on track within a course (Dickson & Tennant, 2018). In fact, the COVID-19 pandemic strengthened

calls for compassion and empathy in addressing students’ requests for flexibility (Calarco, 2020; Sawchuk, 2020), and some research suggests students and faculty want to maintain that emphasis (Holtzman et al., 2023). However, our findings also highlight the role of faculty-centered issues in shaping the development of course policies. Notably, while incorporating a degree of flexibility into course assignments can help keep students on track (Bosch, 2020; Withington & Schroeder, 2017), faculty often experience these accommodations as a burden. Some even feel flexibility undermines their legitimacy, while others feel they have no option but to be flexible. In either situation, social role expectations may be inhibiting the use of policies that are more aligned with course learning outcomes.

These findings have several implications. First, they further scholarly insight into instructors’ motivations for adopting specific course policies. By expanding our understanding of faculty-centered considerations, this study broadens existing literature, which predominantly emphasizes how course policies impact student outcomes (Credé et al., 2010; Cook & Krupar, 2010; Pollak & Parnell, 2018; Snyder & Frank, 2016; Zhu et al., 2019). Second, and relatedly, these enhanced understandings can inform faculty professional development seminars on policy design and inclusive pedagogy. Appeals for faculty to apply specific attendance or late submission policies should recognize the workload required of certain approaches, particularly within a professional context where many faculty already report stress and burnout (Lackritz, 2004; Sabagh et al., 2018). Further, our results lend caution to the idea of a “one size fits all” approach for developing policies. Calls for leniency in course policies should consider the potentially disparate implications for instructors based on gender and faculty status. Third, this research provides a foundation for further examining the impact of course policies on instructors and students. Given the complex and multifaceted factors faculty consider during course policy development, it is important to ask whether the approaches they ultimately adopt help them strike a balance between their own needs and fostering student success.

While these results add insight into how college instructors design their course policies, this study has limitations. Specifically, we relied on convenience and snowball sampling techniques to generate our sample. Though we sought to incorporate diversity across gender, race/ethnicity, school type, discipline, and academic rank, certain instructor characteristics are relatively less represented within our study. For example, the majority of our respondents identified as White and as women, and a large proportion worked in the social sciences. Future research should more fully explore the unique considerations that may emerge among male instructors, faculty of color, and those within the formal and natural sciences. In addition, our results capture faculty reflections on course policies at a distinctive moment in time: the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. We argue that this timeframe represents a strength of the study, as this was a period in which many instructors were carefully rethinking their course policies and the motivations behind them. However, given the distinctive challenges presented by the pandemic for both students and faculty (Brandau et al., 2022; Gillis & Krull, 2020; Jaggars et al., 2021; Son et al., 2020), future research should consider if and how historical moments affect the development of course policies.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to our understanding of course policies. Faculty use their policies to promote student success and inclusivity while also attempting to

manage their own work loads and enhance their legitimacy. Thus, classroom policies do seem to be both pedagogical and selfish.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was generously supported by the Scholarship Support Program within Ball State's Office of the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs. We wish to thank Ayrilia Welch for her valuable research assistance with this project, as well as the study participants for donating their time and making this research possible.

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