

Why not give some students extra time for exams?

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We have an assessment system that is designed for our convenience as instructors and administrators, rather than for the learning needs of our students.

Currently, 41 percent of exam accommodation requests at the University of Alberta involve some form of extra time and are related to mental health. In an [opinion piece](#) last August in the *National Post*, as well as in an [academic article in the *Education and Law Journal*](#) in 2016, Queen's University law professor Bruce Pardy argues that extra-time accommodations are not legitimate and should not be granted because they tilt the playing field against the best students. He compares tests and exams to sprint races, in which it would be absurd to allow extra time or give a head start to some competitors on the basis of disability. He identifies an important problem, but his solution is the wrong one. Extra time is not the only solution to accommodating mental illness in exams, but for reasons that are very different from those he quotes. In a [very effective response](#) published by the *Huffington Post*, Ontario Human Rights chief commissioner Renu Mandhane covers most of the essentials. Let me add an academic perspective.

In most assessments of student performance, including most tests and exams, the problem is not that some students are afforded extra time on the basis of disability. The problem is rather that, in many cases, students are put under artificial and unnecessary time limitations, thereby imposing barriers to participation on students who would otherwise fulfill the core competencies of a given field. That is the definition of illegitimate discrimination.

There certainly are fields and academic contexts in which making decisions under pressure and with limited time is a crucial attribute which must be tested. One can think of some aspects of nursing, for example. In most fields, speedy completion of a task is simply not a core competency that must be tested, and according to which students must be ranked.

The two- or three-hour block typically allotted for the completion of a final exam in university emerges from a combination of tradition, the format of semesters and the logistics of testing tens of thousands of students within a set time period. In most disciplines, the typical exam format imposes barriers to participation that are unnecessary because they result in tests that measure student attributes that are not at the core of the training. In most cases, the attribute of interest is not the speed with which a student can reach the finish line, but whether the student can reach it at all, and in what manner. In that sense, ski jumping, with its combination of raw performance (distance jumped) and judging (for form), is a much better analogy to exams than sprinting. The speed with which the ski jumper covers the distance is dictated by physics and is irrelevant to the scoring and ranking.

In [their response](#) to Professor Pardy, also in the *National Post*, York University's Benjamin Berger and Lorne Sossin – respectively Osgoode Hall Law School's associate dean of

students and dean – point to the importance of universal design. This is the idea that barriers are not in the individual but rather in the environment, and that appropriately designed environments remove barriers that are unnecessary.

As Professor Pardy correctly argues, some discrimination is perfectly legitimate and, in the academic setting, focuses on the core competencies of a field. It follows that assessments, including tests and exams, must focus on core competencies and must avoid evaluating extraneous attributes, such as speed of completion (or the ability to sit in a large group, or to read 12-point print), when they are not core to the subject.

The solution to this problem is not to deny extra time to some students, but rather to only measure speed of completion when it is a core competency (and we should eventually be discussing the implications of this for all students, not just for accommodated students). Designing assessments that focus on core competencies will require, in most fields, a discussion that has not yet taken place. It will require instructors to get creative about exam design, and it will require administrators to be flexible about logistics and organization. Most of all, it will require academics in their own fields to agree on what core competencies need to be tested.

The extra-time accommodation exists because those conversations have largely been avoided. Are multiple choice tests in three-hour blocks in a gym the best way to evaluate student performance in most fields? They certainly are one of the most convenient for us. Faced with an avalanche of accommodation requests, we have tweaked an assessment system that is designed for our convenience as instructors, administrators and employers, rather than for the learning needs of our students. It's time to start the discussion.

Andre Costopoulos is vice-provost and dean of students at the University of Alberta.