

Equality Is Not Equity: The Argument For Academic Accommodations

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Written by Maya Venters on August 30, 2017

Student requests for academic accommodations are increasing across university campuses, and Bruce Pardy, Professor of Law at Queen's University, [believes students are taking advantage of available accommodations](#), such as extra time on exams, to get ahead of their peers.

Pardy argues against providing accommodation with this analogy: that if Andre De Grasse asked for a 20-metre head start in the recent World Track and Field Championships to accommodate for his injury, no one would take him seriously. This comparison assumes that academic accommodations give disabled students an advantage over others. The difference, however, between De Grasse and students with a mental illness, is that students are not asking for a 20-metre head start; mental illness and other disabilities are setbacks which have students starting the race from 20-meters *behind* the starting blocks. The purpose of accommodation is not to give them an edge over other students, but to bring them forward to the starting line with everyone else.

In Pardy's analogy, the runner is assessed based on his speed. Pardy's argument suggests that a student's success on an examination is based on their ability to complete it in the allotted time. This narrow illustration fails to recognize that exams are much more complex methods of evaluation than a race. Exams assess comprehension, thinking, communication skills and understanding of course material. They are designed to be completed in a certain timeframe by the average student. A student with a mental disability is not in the same headspace as the "average" student, as it may take them longer to read, write, focus, or formulate their thoughts when writing an exam. When a student walks into an exam, they know that the speed or the method in which they convey their thoughts do not indicate their understanding of the course.

If extra time requests are increasing from students, this may be an indicator of a pedagogical flaw in the examination, rather than student competency. The article also ignores a huge demographic of students who require accommodations based on extenuating circumstances that can have major impact on mental wellness, such as the death or severe illness of a family member, or victims of sexual and physical violence. These major turns in a student's life can create temporary mental barriers and interfere with students' ability to concentrate, focus and retain information. Providing such students an extra hour to convey and write their thoughts down on paper does not advantage them (nor disadvantage others) in any way.

Pardy states that "typically, only a medical note is required to get accommodation"; however, most institutions require verification of illness forms signed by a medical professional. These forms and processes can take weeks and often have attached fees which are not covered by the university. If anything, it is a discouragement and a barrier to students who need accommodations and support from their university, and can prevent student success in pursuing a post-secondary education.

Pardy's argument is rooted in an archaic view of examinations and pedagogy that universities are increasingly turning away from. Providing struggling students with the accommodations they need at the expense of others taking advantage of the system is worth the risk. Faculty, staff and administrators need to be educated on the importance of providing accommodations so they may participate in supporting their students rather than further disadvantaging them.

The fundamental difference between equality and equity is lost in Pardy's argument. Equality means having everyone start the race in the same place, or giving them the same amount of time on an exam. Equity is allowing everyone the resources they need to finish the race, regardless of what place they come in. The marathon that is

post-secondary education is not a competition for first place, but a journey of learning and growth. Our institutions provide opportunity and the tools students need for individual success to meet their personal goals, a process and outcome that looks different and is achieved differently for everyone.

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