Comments on the Student Accommodation Scene
from a Random Set of 18 Big-Course Instructors

February 2019

The focus is on exam-related accommodations. Three questions were asked:

I. Are you seeing a marked increase in requests over the last few years?

II. How hard is it logistically for you and your course staff to process accommodation requests?

III. Is there anything we can do to help with this aspect of your teaching life?

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EPC Discussion

How to offload the find-a-room problem.

Develop rules to allow for the safe use of ugrad proctors

Make effective using the teach-free zone

Not enough guidance on (a) last minute mental health issues (b) reduced distraction

More detail from Cornell Health.
I. Are you seeing a marked increase in requests over the last few years?

1. For athletics and religious observances, it’s proportionately about the same as 20 (or even 30-40) years ago. For disabilities, I notice an increase.

2. SDS not so much. Injury and mental health problems, yes. People taking incompletes has gone WAY UP.

3. No, if anything, a decrease...

   Fall 2014 -- 11 students out of 230 = 4.8%
   Fall 2015 -- 12 students out of 214 = 5.6%
   Fall 2016 -- 6 students out of 205 = 2.9%
   Fall 2017 -- 7 students out of 245 = 2.9%
   Fall 2018 -- 9 students out of 270 = 3.3%

4. The % is about the same as it has been over the last several years. I anticipate about 5% needing something different (SDS-based or crisis-- family, trauma) for each exam and assignment. I’m doing a prelim on Tuesday and have 25 so far (more will ask on Monday) out of the class of 550. These are the people who need extra time, different room, and other considerations. The daily non-exam related problems of this group during lecture and section. That is far more difficult than arranging a room and time.

5. No. It’s been steady at 2-3 a year for a while now.

6. Yes, a significant increase over the past 4-5 years. Also, many more "crises" during the semester (mental breakdowns, depression, concussions, etc.)

7. No

8. Yes, there has been a marked increase over the last half-dozen years.

9. Yes, I’ve seen significant growth in the number of undergrads who qualify for accommodations.

10. I don’t have data to support my answer, but maybe double or triple the percentage of requests now vs. 2014. It used to be maybe 1% of students in the class, now it’s maybe 3%. But I might be overestimating because of including students who are lumped in with the accommodations because of conflicting exam times.

11. SDS/Conflict exams. We have seen an increase in the number of students with accommodations and conflicts taking math prelims and exams. For example, in last Spring, we had 450 students. For prelim I, there were about 40 conflicts, and around 12-15 students with SDS accommodations.

12. Definitely – In my class is around 250 students, in the past I would have 1 or 2 students in this situation. Now it is typically around 8 –10 students.

13. Not sure if I would say marked... but definitely an increase year upon year. So maybe I would say comparing this past academic year to 10 years ago – probably a marked increase. I would guess that the Student Disabilities Office would have records and keep stats. Maybe best to check with them. I am
also seeing an uptick in the number of medical accommodation requests. Especially for concussion and mono, and mental health. Sports/music/club stuff stays about the same.

14. No. Still about 10 annual per my large class of ~135.

15. I think we have seen an increase, and I would call it marked. The number of students has increased but so has the types of accommodations we are asked to make as well. The simplest is extra time, but then there are "reduced distractions", a table required to work on, sometimes a special table lamp in the room for that one student, etc.

16. No change over the last 5 years in the number of requests. I have about 12-15 students who receive extra time and take the exams in a different room. And then maybe 20-30 who offer a legitimate (to me) reason why they can’t take an exam. The most common reason is a direct conflict with another exam on a Tuesday or Thursday at 7:30pm. Then 3 in 24, then an ad hoc crucial med school interview or religious observation. Athletics rarely comes up, but I do teach Tues/Thur so avoid weekend issues largely.

17. Requests have been slowly creeping up over the years

18. I haven’t compiled data about trends in these requests, but I’m not aware of an obvious trend. In my undergrad course with an enrollment of about 650 we get many such requests. The main one is from Student Disability Services asking for extra time on exams, and occasionally other concessions. I had 16 of these this year with extra time running from 50% to 100%. I try to avoid having exams or major assignments due on religious holidays that affect a significant number of students so I have only a few of these. There are some requests for extension on assignments due to varsity sports, but not many.

19. No change over the last 5 years in the number of requests. I have about 12-15 students who receive extra time and take the exams in a different room. And then maybe 20-30 who offer a legitimate (to me) reason why they can’t take an exam. The most common reason is a direct conflict with another exam on a Tuesday or Thursday at 7:30pm. Then 3 in 24, then an ad hoc crucial med school interview or religious observation. Athletics rarely comes up, but I do teach Tues/Thur so avoid weekend issues largely.
II. How hard is it logistically for you and your course staff to process accommodation requests?

1. I have a dozen TAs so it adds some logistical complexity to staff the make-ups (usually 3 different days/times) and makes grading harder because not all exams are ready at once. But it seems like a small price to pay for good “customer service.”

2. Overall these accommodations do take a significant amount of time to deal with. The time is mostly spent in administration: setting up rooms and times for exams and proctoring the exams, negotiating with students about how their request will be handled and then adjusting due date or grades appropriately. It’s a non-trivial burden but I’m not sure how to suggest a better alternative as most of the decisions and direct effort really need involvement from one of the course staff.

3. They aren’t so difficult to process, except that they trickle in slowly over time in various formats.

4. Some accommodations are "easy", meaning we are a large department that deals with thousands of students and my instructional office coordinates these issues. The extra time ones are pretty rote in terms of organizing them, but the financial cost (unreimbursed as I understand it) to our department in terms of extra proctors can be significant for each exam, often in the range of $100-300 per exam. Add up that up over a year with all of the exams we give, and you some real money that literally comes out of our budget. States call that unfunded mandates when the federal government does a similar thing to them. The more exceptional accommodations (beyond 50% extra time) can cost us even more effort. But all of these efforts cost us our instructional office members' time, arranging the accommodations, finding staff, and then paying staff. I cannot fathom how faculty in departments without this staff support even handle these now, as the administration has done nothing to help departments.

5. It can be time consuming b/c I don't task this to TAs. It's mostly challenging around exams (for assignments, students are welcome to email me individually and ask for extensions which I'm happy to give). For exams, I use a google sheet to stay organized. I list each student and his/her/zir accommodation needs. I book rooms that I can use for extended time exams and for those who need reduced distractions --- I try to book the room for nearly the entire day because students with extended time, who have a different class right before/after mine, cannot therefore use extended time before/after my class. Then, two weeks prior to an exam, I email the group using BCC and tell them that I'm offering an extended time/reduced distraction exam and do they want to take it (during original class time + 50%) or do they need an alternative time that day. Sometimes they need an entirely different day. I'm fortunate that I have a few small offices near mine that I can put these students in. I keep track of who is taking which exam where in my google sheet. I do use TAs to proctor makeup exams.

6. I tend to self-manage it with my team of TAs and with the paid help (at times) of the undergrads we hire for the economics tutoring center. The requests come in so many shapes and sizes it is extremely hard to allocate the decision making. I find it impossible to come up with one-size-fits-all policy and I only trust myself in my courses to hear the students out and adjudicate non-standard requests and
accommodations. Since I utilize the evening prelim schedule for the intro classes I teach I am already giving the tests 3 times (early, regular, makeup) and so most of the standard accommodations for extra time and distraction free environment are fairly easily handled if I secure the man-power and space to proctor. I am seeing an increase in requests for the upper level course I’ve been teaching the past 2 fall semesters. That is a 75 minute twice a week course with 2 in-class prelims and no makeups for prelims. It’s getting complicated when students get extra time, but they have the day packed with classes, and no one wants to budge on required attendance and/or extended time exams in other classes on the same day, so it creates a huge problem. The medical issues are an whole other matter. But I promised to be brief.

7. I give night exams. So, once I know the room (or rooms) assigned for the full class I need to schedule a separate small room for these students close to where we will be. If we all fit in one auditorium, it is not too difficult. But, last fall there was a time where my course was scheduled in three classrooms for the full group. Therefore, I had to juggle 4 rooms. I needed 2 TA’s in each of the large rooms, and one to start an hour earlier in the special room. I then go to each of these around every 15 minutes – its a busy night! I also need to be available an hour earlier than the full start time to hand over the exams to the early room proctor. I used to be able to run home for dinner, but now I just stay on campus until 10 pm so I can get everyone started at their various times.

8. Providing support is almost entirely the responsibility of the instructor. For classes with between 400 and 600+ students, this is challenging. (Frequently, there is only one instructor for these courses.) Room availability is more of an issues in the Fall, as most of our rooms on exam night are used for regularly scheduled exams.

One particular source of difficulty is handling students who have conflicts, and additional conflicts with our conflict time. Also, some students have both conflicts and extended time. Sometimes sports teams and Engineering project teams are gone for a week, and the prelim is right in the middle. The project teams don't seem to travel with faculty advisors, or grad students, so there isn't a reasonable proctor.

The diversity of requests has gone up. Students could get 25%, 50%, 75%, 100% extra time, a 15 minute break, reduced distraction testing environment, testing during daytime hours, or use of a computer. A proctor could have from 20-35 students in one room with very different accommodation requirements. Some of these instructions are ambiguous for the proctors. For example, an accommodation stated that students should be given a 15 minute break, if needed and they should be given 15 minutes extra time. These aren't quite the same thing. What does reduced distraction mean?

There have been complaints from students that we aren't providing reduced distraction. What are our obligations? What if we don't have the resources?

Students are taking more credits per semester, which means more conflicts. A student last Fall had extended time, and 3 prelims at the same time, on the same night.

Proctors from the extended time room (including me) have concerns about academic integrity issues due to students taking (sometimes multiple) very long bathrooms breaks during the testing period.
To avoid conflicts, many of our classes have very early first prelims, and very late second prelims. This is not ideal for assessing content.

9. Not too hard, because our department has devoted staff resources to handling it for me.

10. It is not hard to process these. However, what has changed I think, is that there are many different accommodations required now – in the past it seems they were more uniform. This of course entails more work on my part.

11. Not very.

12. Learning disabilities require two things (a) extended time on exams (not really a problem as we have an extended time exams), and extensions on assignments (which does present challenges in grading, timing of assignments, and sometimes giving and incomplete grade that spills over to the next year). A real problem comes when one has to set a completely new exam for students who have mental/health conditions and student disability services says they can’t take the exam at the regular time. - a LOT of extra work for the instructor.

13. It’s not that hard. Someone in our student services office contacts the Registrar to find a separate room in the same building.

14. The requests are not hard to process after the first flurry. We are clear about policies for missing exams and sections which helps keep the requests that are not SDS or crisis-based to a minimum. The teams (athletes, debate, mock trial) are the ones that we have the most difficulty with.

15. Out of 690 students, we probably have 10-20 disability accommodation requests for extended time or a quiet room. We handle them fairly easily.

16. The only challenge is scheduling a room for them to take prelims, which are given 2 times per year, in class (10:10-11:25, so for 75 minutes). A student with an extra time accommodation, as much as 100% extra, might need to start at 8:55 and end at 11:25 or start at 10:10 and end at 12:40. So I have to book a room covering that entire period that can hold 10-12 students plus a proctor. This is sometimes hard to arrange and can lead to various back and forth. The earlier I do it the easier to get a room but the more I’m guessing how big a room I need etc. I staff the room with 1 TA which is fine.

17. If the requests were specific, I would know how to enact them. Instead they range from a vague email about someone going through a hard time (“please accommodate them as you feel is fair” — what does that mean??) to a student emailing me telling me they’ve had another episode and “probably won’t be able to take Prelim 2 this week”. students with mental illness are starting to talk about it, but they’re also starting to feel entitled to special treatment in a way that is hard to know how to respond to.

18. I have a very capable admin who handles this for me in the large course. It often requires hiring a TA to oversee one individual with a unique request, which is an added financial burden to my dept; otherwise we try to group those students.
III. Is there anything we can do to help with this aspect of your teaching life?

1. I doubt it, at this stage in my career, but let me offer an observation. I frequently encounter students who have been granted extra time for prelims, but because they don’t care for to start early or remain late, many opt out of the arrangements they have been given. In an ultra-competitive course like mine, that observation makes me wonder whether some students really need the accommodations they’ve been afforded.

2. I would like more guidelines about what is appropriate and fair. I really don’t like that these things are left to me to figure out. I am not an expert on mental health. If everyone had exactly 2 weeks to do an assignment and a student tells me “I couldn’t get it done, I’m going to need an incomplete.” am I supposed to give them 6 months to finish the 2 week assignment? I’ve got students who have incompletes from the fall in my class this spring asking for me to release the final project because that’s all they need to finish. But of course that is not my timeline.

Also I’ll say that at my previous university I would get an email 10 days before each of my prelims to the extent of “The following 6 students in your class have SDS accommodations and will be taking the exam in our office with 50% extra time. Please email us a pdf of the exam 12 hours prior to the exam starting, let us know if there is a specific time you’d like the exam to start (start early or go late) and whether you’d like to receive the exams back as scans or in original via campus mail (takes 1-2 days).” They had the rooms, they had the proctors, they took care of EVERYTHING. it was awesome. When I came to Cornell and had 4 times as many students and it was my job to reserve a room, find a proctor, collect SDS letters, and verify accommodations, I was appalled. This is something that should be handled in a centralized manner, not a distributed one (esp when faculty are so unreliable). Also in our building, on evenings when there are many prelims, ALL the conference rooms are booked each by a different class for their extended time. It’s a horrible use of precious resources (rooms and our time).

3. A dedicated space where students take exams would be helpful (we had this where I was a grad student).

4. Let me say that over the last several years my large course has attracted upward to 200 students. I have the luxury of 10 well trained undergraduates TAs who do a terrific job of leading the weekly discussion with students. They are very responsive to all of the students regardless of their disability status. In each class I have between 1 and 3 notes asking for accommodation for students. Most of the time students realize they do not really need something special because of the lead time on written projects and the help they get in the weekly sections from the TAs. This semester is the first time a student has asked about having a note taker. We accommodated the student easily with the help of the disability office. Most students get what they need from Blackboard, where we post everything from electronic readings for the week, lecture notes, rubric for grading, etc. The course seeks to make Cornell a Caring Community, underscoring that we enjoy incredible freedom but are responsible to use that freedom responsibly, meaning to succeed individually and collectively as Cornellians. So students are tasked with being their sister’s and brother’s keeper and respond accordingly.

5. YES PLEASE to help verifying from the health care center that health conditions exist and their expected duration. Faculty are put in an untenable position when we have to simply accept what a student tells us about a health condition they have, and meet their demands for accommodations that we cannot verify. Many students are playing this game to get out of deadlines and it creates mistrust between instructor and students. We simply must be given more specific information from the health care center on what
constraints the student's temporary or permanent condition places on their ability to complete work assignments on time, We can't just take the student's word for it all the time.

6. This is working fine, and hasn't changed significantly from my perspective...

7. I handle these myself, and always have. I cannot think of a more efficient way to do it.

8. What I do wonder about is whether the granting of accommodations involving extra time is fair to other students or in the best interests of those who get the accommodations. Regarding the latter, will these people get similar accommodations of extra time when they enter the working world? I doubt it. Perhaps they would benefit more from learning how to deal with time pressures and possibly find ways to cope with or overcome their disability.

9. The new, emerging problem I see is students who claim mental health issues as a reason not to take an exam. For our final in Fall 2018, 2 students did this with essentially no warning and no documentation, and then expected me to arrange a makeup. I could use guidelines as to what reasonable accommodations are in these situations.

10. Things to do:
   Current policy (see below) regarding conflicts does not seem like a workable policy if one has 40 students with evening prelim conflicts. This would require too many emails.

   If a student has conflicting examination schedules, both of which are on the schedule developed at the annual evening prelim scheduling meeting or both of which are not on the schedule, the instructors of the courses involved must consult and agree on how to resolve the conflict. Both instructors must approach this resolution process with a willingness to provide an alternative or early examination.

   Money for proctoring: For the first year ever we have begun paying graduate student proctors for conflict and extended time exams. This has allowed us to improve testing conditions (by better accommodating the reduced distraction accommodation), but by the end of the year it seems we will be spending 3-4k on proctors.

   A Testing center for the difficult to accommodate cases.

11. It would be helpful if the university scheduled large class night exams in one place, so adding this additional room was not so difficult. If that separate room was also scheduled near our full class, that would be even better. Finally, I have typically been able to find a TA who could start proctoring at say 6:30 pm, but since that is a time many sport teams and clubs meet, I have occasionally had to sit with those students until I could hand it off to a TA and then get the rest of the students started. Perhaps there could be assistance with this situation. Finally, I know this is not what you specifically asked, but as a teacher I always wonder if there are other things I could be doing to assist these students. Since we do not get notified of their conditions, which I understand, I worry that they are underserved. Of course I always ask them about this in general, but some may be too embarrassed to bring up anything else. A small packet with a few tips relating to various common conditions (ADHD, anxiety, etc.) would help teachers and students.
12. I guess a pot of money to hire proctors? That is what starts to be a challenge. Lots of time is used up proctoring all the exams. And of course lots of time is used up in the event that different exams need to be written, but only I can really do that. So I try to structure my solutions around minimizing the need to write different exams, as best I can. Having dedicated space to use would also help. Sometimes finding a room for someone, or a small group, to take an exam, even if I have a proctor, is easier said than done. Lastly (to keep it brief), it would be a great help if the health people would confirm sudden onset of illness that generates all the 11th hour petitions to get a makeup from students who fall ill just before a prelim. I know this is an especially hard nut to crack, since no one wants to make these referee calls, but I really get stressed around exam times not knowing what to do with each petition. Who is really sick and who is taking advantage of the situation. I really do not have the wisdom of Solomon.

13. Prior to current renovations, MVR had a room for alternative exams. I could just sign a student up and the system would alert the student of their where/when for their exam. On one hand, this is helpful (automated system) but on the other hand, it does not take into account the schedule needs of students with accommodations (e.g., they can't take an extended time exam at the usual class time if they have another class right after mine).

14. Maybe having SDS automate letters so that faculty get alerts of students with needs electronically that pull all students in the class into a spreadsheet so we don't have to collect SDS letters on multiple days through multiple weeks in a given semester.

15. Provide support. Currently there is none and it comes completely out of our time and financial hides. One thing I have proposed (including to Lisa Nishii and other senior administrators (and thus far nothing has been done that I can tell)), and other schools have had (some for years), is a "testing center" within SDS so that SDS staff themselves can proctor our exams (per our instructions) in their secure facility and we can trust the proctors there and their staff can arrange for the myriad requests for accommodations. That would shift the time and financial burden of these requests from the department back to the university (where it belongs in my opinion).

16. I would LOVE to be notified of which of my students have SDS letters, and their needs. because a) Before the first exam we struggle to accumulate our SDS list. b) My stepson has an anxiety disorder—he struggled through college elsewhere. Requiring him to track down the prof of a large class and discuss a letter sure didn’t work for him!! If we mean to integrate these students, why require them to present themselves with a printed letter? Last year I dealt with both vision and hearing accommodations in Kennedy Hall, but didn’t learn what was needed til we were underway. Many needs were limited by the room itself. Yikes! In haste we bought a lamp to illuminate ASL interpreter, turned up room lights to illuminate stairs, last minute closed captioning of classroom videos! I wore a transmitter for another hearing impaired student. The wheelchair ramp in Kennedy is a nightmare. It’s normally locked. It winds circuitously through the basement without good signage (the auditorium manager, Hope, made a video to help navigate it). A real problem and evacuation bottleneck.

17. I would LOVE to be notified of which of my students have SDS letters, and their needs. Or I’d like a way I can find this info.

18. There is another student related issue that also takes a significant amount of time and I think does not work well. That is dealing with requests for extensions, exemption from assignments and makeups due to illness. I use an honor system and almost always accept any reasonable excuse based on nearly any
type of illness (physical or mental health). I'm confident that the vast majority of the students who ask are truthful, but I'm also confident that some are abusing the system. There is also a degree of unfairness here as students who ask get a break and others who likely have problems just as severe don't or won't ask for help. I'm not qualified to evaluate a student's claims about illness, so I don't try in any but exceptional circumstances, but it would be great if there was a mechanism to do this for me.

19. The one suggestion I have is to educate faculty on policies, or create sensible policies. Students often come to me and say “I have 2 exams at the same time and Professor X says he does not offer make-ups.” That is not acceptable if it’s true; there is no reason the burden should always fall on the other faculty member. If the larger class tries to accommodate the student, that’s fine, but no faculty member should have the right to refuse to offer a make-up out of hand.

20. Things that would help for big classes:

   - expand the SDS portal to include students with medical issues — it is very hard to keep track of all of the concussions particularly

   - use the prior semester's SDS information to populate the upcoming roster (in the same SDS portal); that would help with planning to have rooms for the extended time students that are close in proximity to the main exam space and are adequate in size. For the Tuesday exam we have a room in Uris that has a capacity of 23 and I will fill every chair which is problematic. The options for space in Statler, which would have been ideal logistically, were removed from the available list. Give priority within the room booking system?

   - have the teams understand that the letter from their coach does not give them a one-on-one session every time they are away (this issue has been growing); nor do we have the ability to give them make up assignments or activities.

   - advice on how to handle engaged in class learning, including iClickers and written assignments, for the students needing extra time -- I am trying to figure this out now and there is no easy solution