

Test Accommodation Considerations

Question: *What considerations need to be made in providing test accommodations for licensure and certification examinations?*

Answer: When we think of high stakes examinations and the decisions they help to inform, we expect that they have been constructed with care and are delivered with equal care under standardized administration conditions. There are times, however, where exam presentation, administration, or both, may need to deviate from the standard conditions. This issue arises most frequently when a candidate seeks a test accommodation. Legal, measurement and other practical considerations come into play when determining whether and what changes are permissible to standard conditions. Before altering a standardized administration or presentation of material, several important questions should be answered: What knowledge or skills is this test designed to measure? What deviations are permissible? Would an alternate format or administration condition improperly advantage or disadvantage a candidate? Would it change what is being assessed? What security, score reporting and other considerations arise?

Laws in the United States, Canada and elsewhere require programs to make their exams accessible to disabled candidates who are qualified to sit for the exam.¹ Programs need to understand the laws that govern them and consider the nature, purpose and current interpretations of those laws when applying them to the examinations offered, for not all laws espouse the same purpose or intended effect. To start, candidates should be informed of the process for them to request test accommodations. Typically, the candidate will be asked to specify the accommodation being sought and to provide documentation of his/her disability from a qualified professional under the applicable law. Programs will need to review the available information to determine whether an accommodation is appropriate in the contexts of the individual's current functioning and what the examination seeks to assess.

Assuming the accommodation sought is appropriate vis-à-vis the individual's current functioning, an accommodation granted to an individual for one examination may not necessarily be appropriate in all examination contexts-- even where examinations appear to be similar in nature. Take, for example, a request for extra time on a performance examination. One such examination may require all candidates to perform certain tasks within strict time parameter because the ability to do so within that constraint is part of what is being measured and is a simulation of practice, whereas another may allow some degree of extra time as an accommodation because time is not an essential element of the task, while a third may have elements of both.

The measurement inquiry may therefore have to be made at the item level. Consider, for example, a series of multiple choice questions with pictorials requiring interpretation. Depending on the particular item, a candidate may be required to interpret a pictorial visually (such as if a description of it would eliminate the interpretation element or cue the answer), whereas other images may be rendered in an alternate format that still allows the candidate to perform the interpretation. In some cases, an alternate rendition could be used for the entire candidate population, highlighting the point that consideration of these important measurement issues should start with test development.

Other practical concerns, such as the ability to implement the requested accommodation in the testing environment, security considerations, and candidate expectations, also merit thought. Candidates may be accustomed to working with certain assistive devices in their daily lives that may not be appropriate for use in the high stakes testing environment. For example, a device with internet access and multiple applications would raise security and fairness concerns if it allowed the candidate access to information otherwise prohibited in a secure testing environment. Some accommodations that are heavily dependent on technology may not work well within a test center's particular technical environment, increasing the risk

¹ Examples include: The Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended (U.S.) and Human Rights Commissions Acts (Canada).

of a bad testing experience for the candidate. Sometimes a simpler kind of accommodation would work well in the test center, but that may not be the solution the candidate desires. Communication with the candidate about these practical issues is essential to the interactive test accommodations process.

Finally, consideration needs to be given to the potential effect of a non-standard administration on a resulting score. Along the continuum of possible accommodations, some deviations from the standard may be so minor as to not require additional information for the score user, while others may warrant a notation about the non-standard administration. The practice of score reporting for non-standard administration is informed by measurement and testing standards, program policies and legal considerations. These factors should be carefully evaluated when considering requests to deliver a high stakes examination in a manner that deviates from the standardized exam. It is always sound advice to involve legal counsel and disability services personnel in complicated requests.