

**Warmest wishes from all of us at the  
Yale Center for Dyslexia & Creativity.  
2019 is off to a busy and very exciting start.**

## **THE TRUTH ABOUT ACCOMMODATIONS**

The recent unsettling scandal around college admissions has cast a shadow on an innocent, hard-working, group of students who had nothing at all to do with the cheating but may suffer repercussions from the slimy behavior of others. The scandal reflected the actions of parents who had their non-learning disabled children claim to have a learning disability so that they could cheat -- have someone else fill out the answers to their child's exam. Here double damage was done--not only violating any sense of honesty but also doing potential great harm to a large group of innocent students -- those who have true learning disabilities such as dyslexia and are highly dependent on accommodations to display their knowledge on tests such as the ACT and SAT.

Dyslexia is real -- powerful neurobiological evidence indicates that people who are dyslexic, no matter how bright, read by a different pathway, one that takes them more time. The fast-paced automatic neural circuit is not available to dyslexics so they must take a secondary, slower pathway that will eventually allow them to decipher the printed word but at a cost of additional time. Of course, dyslexics themselves would strongly prefer not to have to take this route but they have no choice. Although often still feeling rushed, the accommodation of extra time allows the dyslexic reader to compensate for having to rely on these slower, non-automatic neural pathways.

Having accommodations doesn't give a test-taker the answer, but it allows his/her brain the time it needs to read the question and access the higher-level thinking and reasoning systems that help the dyslexic use the context to figure out a word. And while people who are dyslexic have trouble decoding and reading rapidly, they often have an excellent vocabulary and strong comprehension. This is in accordance with our Sea of Strengths model, which recognizes the paradox that is dyslexia -- a weakness in decoding words surrounded by strengths in higher level thinking. It takes time to access these strengths and so just as a diabetic requires insulin, a dyslexic requires extra time so that the test is a true measure of his or her ability and knowledge rather than a reflection of their disability.

Accommodations are not meant to give dyslexic students a leg up on their

classmates, but rather to level the playing field. The most critical accommodation for a dyslexic reader or test taker is simply allowing extra time. And contrary to the popular myth that extra test time would help all students, the evidence clearly indicates that only those with dyslexia benefit significantly from additional time.

As Dr. Sally Shaywitz has said in *Overcoming Dyslexia*, "Dyslexia robs a person of time; accommodations return it."

In fact, the most significant barrier to fairness is the difficulty students with disabilities have in obtaining the accommodations they are rightfully entitled to by law.

Indeed, many students do not request accommodations because of the stigma still attached to the issue. As Aditi Juneja wrote in *Vox*, "Through my academic career, I was in the privileged situation of being able to pay for test prep, having time to study for these tests, having access to medical care, being able to afford to take tests multiple times. I had teachers and professors who respected my self-advocacy and didn't try to deny me access to my education. Yet still, the shame surrounding my condition prevented me from seeking accommodations later in my schooling."

YCDC sees very many bright dyslexic students. It is difficult to describe the agony these young men and women go through in deciding if they are going to apply for accommodations -- they do not want to be viewed as different and would prefer to be with everyone else when they take a test. These students are faced with a painful choice -- do they request accommodations (and risk being viewed as either not very smart or using the system) or do they not request accommodations and have the test fail to measure their true ability and serve instead as a reflection of their disability.

Accommodations are provided as a matter of federal law. The Americans with Disabilities Act, first enacted in 1990 and then updated in 2008, prohibits unjustified discrimination based on disability. It is meant to level the playing field for people with disabilities, including those 20% of the population who are dyslexic. The law reflects the strong scientific knowledge of the impact of dyslexia on bright people who can think very well but whose neural systems for reading do not permit fast, automatic reading.

Dyslexia has been known for over 100 years, and an updated and accurate definition (an "unexpected difficulty in reading") has now been codified into federal law. We understand it better because the science has progressed, and we now know that dyslexia is accompanied by its own powerful strengths. We must not allow the bad actions of a few people trying to cheat

the system to stall or reverse our progress. That would be the deepest and longest-lasting damage resulting from this scandal.

It is also an opportunity to consider an important question: Are standardized tests the best indicator of a student's potential? Perhaps not. There is a growing recognition among experts that the standardized tests themselves are not the best and most appropriate measure of a student's academic potential. According to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, half of the *U.S. News and World Report* "Top 100" liberal arts colleges are considered "test optional," meaning that they no longer require SAT or ACT scores to be considered for admission.

There is increasing evidence that schools can choose to make standardized test scores optional without sacrificing high standards or academic achievement. Bates College in Maine, for example, dropped the requirement for test scores in 1984 with no significant drop in student grade point average between test "submitters" and "non-submitters."

The impact of students being able to select test optional schools has now been carefully examined. Now one more reason for both students and schools to avoid these tests -- students who did not submit test scores, as quoted by Inside Higher Education, "ended up highly successful, graduating at equivalent rates or -- at some institutions --slightly higher rates than did those who submitted test scores... This is the ultimate proof of success."

"For us, we've come to realize that three and a half years -- almost four years -- tells us a whole heck of a lot more on a transcript versus three and a half, maybe four hours on a Saturday morning when a student might be taking X given standardized test," says Leigh Weisenburger, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Bates.

As YCDC Co-Directors Sally and Bennett Shaywitz wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, "colleges and professional schools which, rather than focus on the whole candidate rely primarily on standardized test scores, will miss out on having extraordinary graduates who are both dyslexic and brilliant and who score poorly on standardized tests."