



# Creating an Anxiety-Free Proctored Exam Experience

**In the fall of 2020,  
college students  
reported their  
highest levels of  
depression and  
anxiety of any prior  
semester.<sup>1</sup>**



Certainly, much of this was spurred by the pandemic and stress-related to health, finances and online learning. But even before the pandemic, researchers were tracking a slow uptick in anxiety among college students.

College life can be challenging, even for the best students. And for those who experience test anxiety, simply participating in normal classroom activities can impact mental health, grades and the entire college experience.

The recent increase in remote assessments has heightened anxiety even further due to student concerns about the technology, the process and the presence of live proctors.

But proctoring doesn't need to add to the stress of test-taking. When educational institutions create the proper environment and prepare students for online assessments, students report that having a live proctor can actually reduce anxiety. Further, effective proctor training can build student confidence.

## Honorlock and the University of North Alabama conducted a detailed study to learn about:

- ▶ What causes student test anxiety
- ▶ How schools and proctoring service providers can reduce anxiety
- ▶ The ways instructors can better support student success

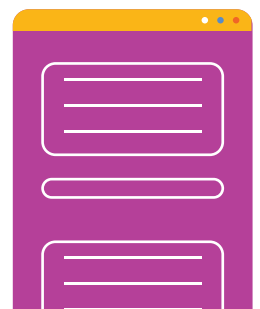
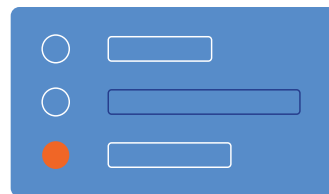
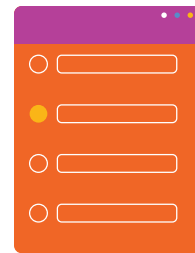
# Testing is Inherently Anxiety-Inducing

During a three-month period in 2020, students across a variety of disciplines were surveyed to understand their baseline anxiety regarding proctored exams. These students were participating in high-stakes mid-term and final exams from the summer and fall semesters for two different classes.

The findings indicated that even well-prepared students are likely to feel anxious heading into a proctored assessment, **with 64% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement “taking an online test makes me nervous.”**

Students were surveyed before and after assessments. What we found was that students who interacted with proctors during their exam had a marked decrease in anxiety for future exams.

**In fact, all of the students interviewed experienced a reduction in anxiety after they experienced a chat with a proctor. This experience had a lasting impact on anxiety.**



## Creating an Anxiety-Free Proctored Exam Experience

**Students experienced a 6% decrease in overall test anxiety between their first and second exams, with a 15% decrease in anxiety associated with the statement: “Thoughts about the proctor interfered with my concentration.”**

Just by being able to interact with a proctor, students felt more confident. The conversation allowed them to identify different triggers for live support and experience a positive, supportive interaction.

Students typically think that live proctors are there just to “catch students cheating.”

In reality, effective proctors are designed to help students understand best practices for remote assessments, provide technical support, provide tips and advice and reassure students that they are set up properly and can focus on the assessment.



## Three key drivers of anxiety are associated with online proctoring:

**01** Technology concerns (worried their device won't work or they'll have internet issues)

**02** Students don't understand what can be flagged by the AI or live proctor

**03** Students don't know how interactions with a proctor will play out

**"The proctor popping in was different than I expected - in a positive way. I imagined them being more strict. I felt that the proctor was helpful and a lot less intimidating than I thought."**

- Student quote in a post exam interview

# Proctor Training Is Essential

With the role of the proctor essential to reducing student anxiety, it's important to properly train proctors. During our study, we looked at whether or not better proctor training could result in an improved experience for students.

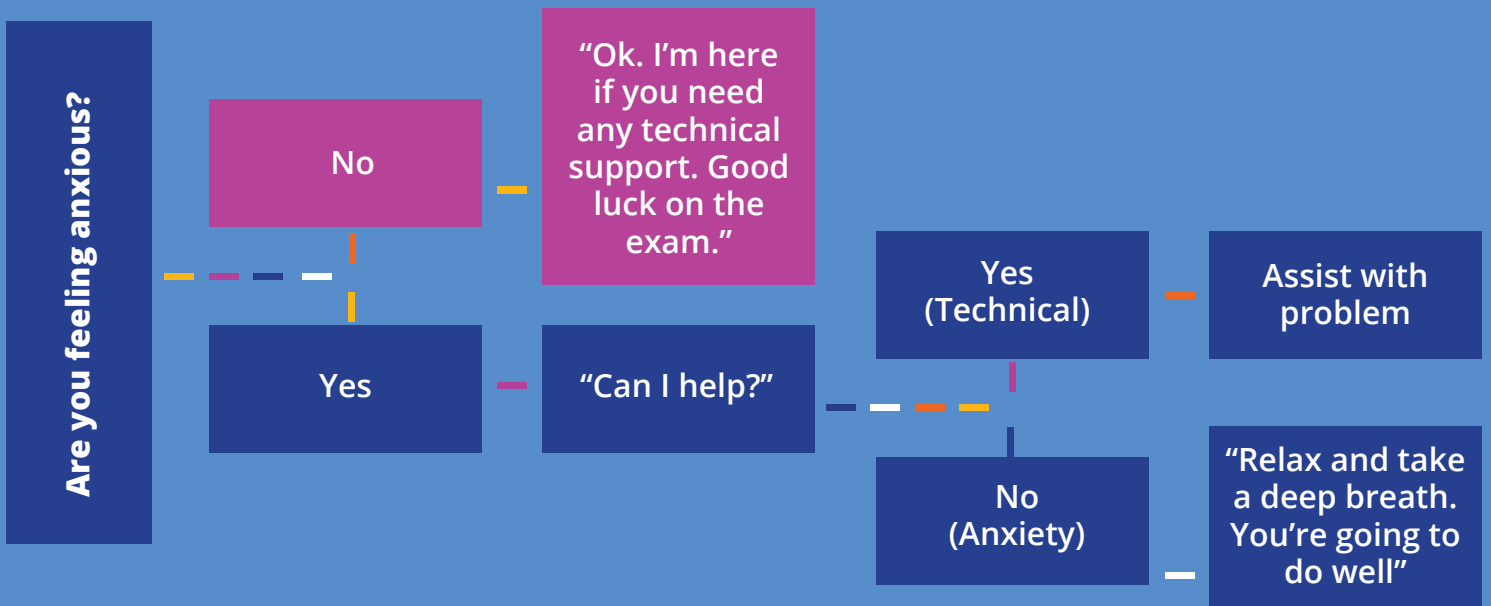
We started by looking at existing research on how stress manifests itself physically during testing.<sup>2</sup>

We selected four physical behaviors that most reliably signal a student in stress including lip licking, excessive throat clearing, propping the head up and touching or rubbing the face.

Proctors were trained to spot these behaviors and proactively interact with students using a reassuring set of talking points (Figure 1).

In the intervention group, there was a decrease in anxiety associated specifically with the proctoring experience between their first and second exam. And 100% of students who interacted with a proctor responded "Yes" to the interview question "Did the proctor make you less anxious?"<sup>3</sup>

**FIGURE 1**



## Familiarity with a proctor via pop-in engagement results in less anxiety and reduces student's anxiety during the exam.

- ▶ Of students that had a proctor interaction, all said they felt much better afterward.
- ▶ Students lack understanding of what consists of a “flaggable moment” so proper language during an intervention is key. **For example, here are the things students think might get flagged** (none of these actually cause flags in Honorlock):
  - Reading the question out loud
  - Looking up for a moment to think
  - Dog or cat making noise
  - Tapping pen on desk





## Preparation and Timing are Key

By creating familiarity with any proctoring system, universities and instructors can proactively and effectively reduce student anxiety.

This may require creating more opportunities for practice exams, technology checks, initiating proctor engagement at the beginning of assessments or providing more upfront information to students on the process, triggers and reasons for engagement.

**“My professor set up a practice test the week before the first real test. The practice test listed out all of her expectations and requirements. On my first real exam, I was fully prepared for the online proctoring experience since I knew what to expect.”**

- Student quote in a post exam interview

Proctoring solution providers also have a role to play. For example, based on Honorlock's ongoing university, instructor and student feedback, we instituted a new pre-exam system check.

**Since being introduced we have seen a 57% increase in pre-exam contact from students regarding system readiness (browser version, minimum system requirements, network speed check, etc.).**

These students are able to resolve technical issues prior to entering the assessment, improving their in-exam experience and helping reduce unexpected problems and anxiety during the exam.

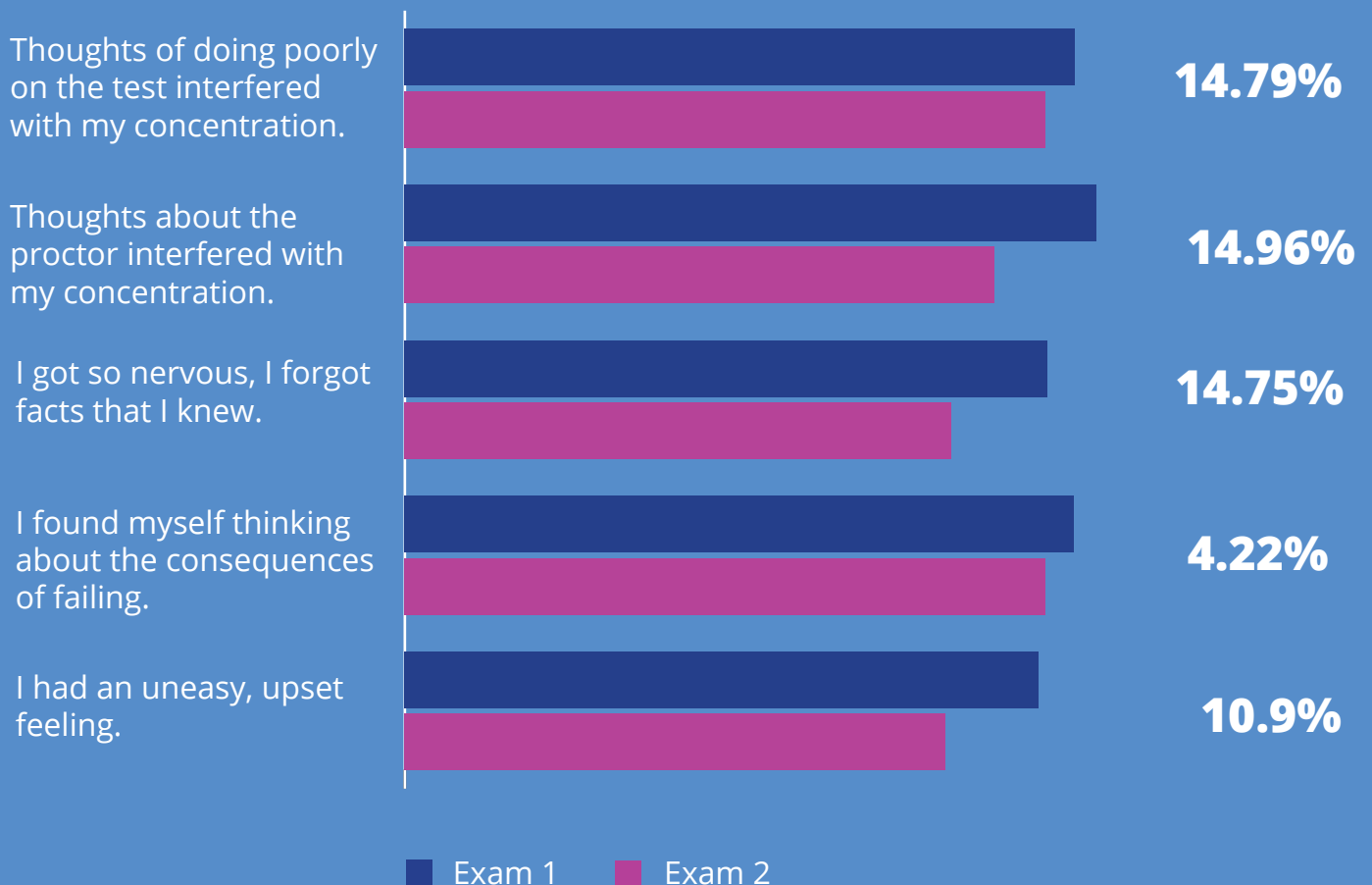
Timing is also key. Instructors should consider introducing proctoring on a low-stakes assessment or during a practice exam early in the year or semester to set students up for success right away.



When we surveyed students regarding anxiety levels relative to low-stakes or high-stakes assessments, students consistently fell below the threshold indicating anxiety for low-stakes assessments, and above the threshold for high-stakes assessments. So, starting with an assessment with minimal impact on grades or performance is beneficial.

In addition, the simple act of experiencing one proctored exam had a measurable impact on future anxiety, proving the value of practice and preparation. Across both the study control group and the intervention group, student anxiety decreased 6% overall from the first proctored exam to their second proctored exam.

### Reduction in Anxiety: Test 1 vs Test 2



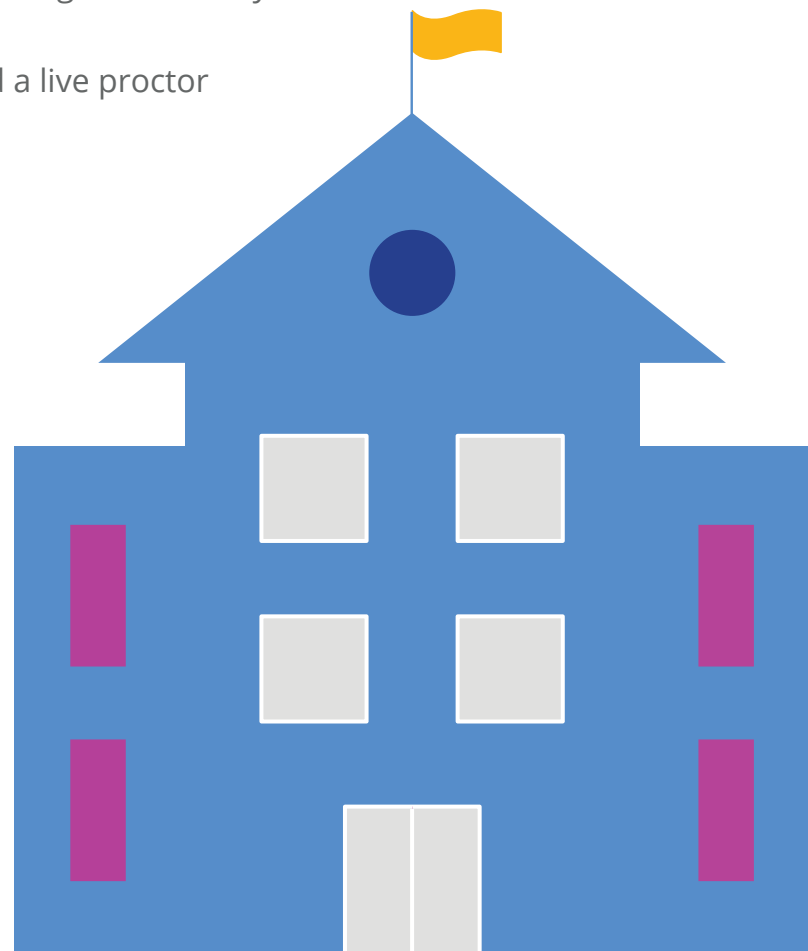
# Notes on methodology:

This study was a prospective educational intervention approved by the Institutional Review Board from the University of North Alabama. The study ran from August through October 2020 and targeted high-stakes mid-term and final exams from summer and fall semesters for two different classes. A total of 187 tests were proctored during the study period. A control group consisted of 50 students who were followed from July 1 – August 15, 2020. The intervention group consisted of 155 students who were followed from September 1 through October 21, 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Anxiety, depression reached record levels among college students last fall | University of Michigan News (umich.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Asghari, A., Abdul Kadir, R., Elias, H., & Baba, M. (2012). Test anxiety and its related concepts: A brief review. *Education Science and Psychology*, 3(22), 3-8 and Kolski, T. and Weible, J. (2018) Examining the Relationship Between Student Test Anxiety and Webcam Based Exam Proctoring Central Michigan University

<sup>3</sup> Sample size of five students that engaged a live proctor



# Choose to Proctor with Integrity & Humanity

Our purpose isn't to simply catch cheating - we create a better testing experience that supports students and protects academic integrity.



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