

Beyond Compliance: The Ongoing Fight for Accessibility on College Campuses

When the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990, it was hailed as a groundbreaking step toward equity and inclusion. For the first time in U.S. history, discrimination against individuals with disabilities in public life was explicitly outlawed. Schools, workplaces, transportation systems, and public buildings were expected to make accommodations that would ensure access for everyone. But over three decades later, the physical and social landscapes of many institutions still fall far short of the ADA's promise. This is especially true on college campuses, where "access" too often means doing the bare minimum. At Bryn Mawr College, where historic buildings and outdated infrastructure meet modern student life, accessibility issues remain a glaring contradiction to the institution's stated values of inclusion and equity. The ADA may be the law, but true accessibility requires more than legal compliance. It demands a cultural commitment to justice and the full participation of disabled people in all areas of campus life.

Before the ADA, individuals with disabilities faced near-total exclusion from public life. Basic rights like using public transportation, entering a government building, or attending school were often denied, not explicitly, but by physical barriers that made such participation impossible. The disability rights movement of the 1970s and 1980s, driven by activists like Judith Heumann and the members of ADAPT, fought to make these issues visible. The ADA was the result of this struggle. It prohibited discrimination in employment, public services, and public accommodations, and it mandated that new construction be accessible and that existing buildings be retrofitted "where readily achievable."

However, the ADA's promise is undercut by its limitations. Many institutions, especially older ones like Bryn Mawr College, use the age of their buildings as a shield against making meaningful upgrades. Entrances remain inaccessible due to stairs, ramps are placed around the back of buildings or are steep and unsafe, elevators are unreliable, and signage for accessible routes is minimal or nonexistent. These are not just inconveniences; they are structural forms of exclusion. A student who cannot independently enter a classroom is effectively denied access to education. A faculty member who cannot reach their office cannot participate fully in the intellectual life of the college. And a prospective student touring campus may feel immediately, and painfully, that they do not belong.

Even when institutions comply with the letter of the law, they often fail to embody its spirit. "Compliance" becomes a checkbox exercise rather than a genuine commitment to inclusion. The ADA does not require proactive accessibility unless someone requests it, which puts the burden on disabled individuals to ask for what should already be there. This creates a culture of "on-demand" access instead of built-in equity, reinforcing stigma and exhaustion among those who must constantly advocate for themselves.

College campuses present a unique case for accessibility. These are not just learning environments. They are communities where students live, study, socialize, and grow. Access to dorms, dining halls, libraries, classrooms, and social spaces is critical for full participation. When even one of these spaces is inaccessible, it sends the message that disabled students are an afterthought. Moreover, campus accessibility is not just about physical infrastructure; it includes digital access, mental health support, and institutional culture. Are faculty trained to accommodate disabled students with dignity? Are syllabi designed with flexibility in mind? Is disability viewed as part of diversity or as an inconvenience?

At Bryn Mawr, the review of campus entrances revealed both progress and problems. While some buildings have ramps and automatic doors, others remain difficult or impossible to enter independently. Certain routes require taking a long and confusing detour, effectively segregating disabled students from their peers. These barriers are not just logistical; they are symbolic. They reflect the priorities of the institution and who is truly welcomed within it.

Accessibility is not a niche concern. It is central to the mission of higher education. When we talk about creating inclusive and equitable learning environments, we cannot leave disability out of the conversation. Colleges must stop treating accessibility as a matter of accommodation and start treating it as a matter of justice. That means allocating real resources, involving disabled students in decision-making processes, and committing to universal design principles that benefit everyone. After all, accessibility doesn't only help disabled students. It supports parents pushing strollers, students with temporary injuries, and anyone who simply wants to move through the world with dignity.

The ADA laid the foundation, but it is not enough. True inclusion requires more than laws. It requires listening, changing, and investing in a more equitable future. At Bryn Mawr and beyond, accessibility must be built into every decision, not tacked on as an afterthought. Anything less is a failure to live up to the values of higher education and the basic rights of disabled people.