

Designing Inclusive Campus Tours: An Accessibility Toolkit for Customs Week

Haverford campus presents themselves as spaces of belonging, inclusion, and opportunity. These values aren't always reflected in the real experiences of students when they come to campus.

One of the first important experiences for new students at Haverford College is Customs Week. Students participate in campus tours, social events, and group activities that are designed to help them feel connected to their hallmates. These activities are meant to be welcoming, it can create exclusion with peers.

This project asks an important question: *What would campus tours look like if accessibility was the starting point, instead of an afterthought?* Building on my previous research, I argue that accessibility should be built into the design of campus tours from the beginning. Using the concept of structural ableism, I show how current tour practices can unintentionally exclude disabled students. I introduce an accessibility toolkit that gives practical ways to redesign campus tours so they are inclusive for everyone. This project provides a resource that can be used to improve real campus practices, while also engaging with ideas from disability studies.

This project also builds on feedback from my peers. They pointed out that campus tours can be physically exhausting, with long walking distances, lack of seating, and little time to rest. This helped me expand my focus beyond mobility to also include pacing, energy, and comfort. My peers emphasized that accessibility is treated as reactive instead of intentional, which strengthened my argument that accessibility must be built into the design from the beginning. In addition, their feedback highlighted the importance of centering disabled students' experiences,

which I further developed through my interview and analysis. This feedback helped me improve my project by making it more practical and inclusive.

Structural Ableism in Higher Education

Jay Dolmage explains that higher education is built around an “ideal” student. This ideal student is assumed to be able-bodied, neurotypical, and able to move through spaces without difficulty. Because of this assumption, many systems, buildings, and activities are designed without considering different bodies and needs.

Structural ableism isn't always obvious. It is built into everyday practices and environments. People who benefit from these systems may not notice them, but for others, it creates constant barriers. Accessibility becomes something that is added later, instead of something that is included from the beginning.

In the context of campus tours, structural ableism appears in many ways. Tours assume that all students can walk long distances, move quickly, and navigate stairs or uneven paths. When a student cannot do this, the solution is usually to adjust the experience for that one individual. This does reinforce the idea that the problem is the student, not the design of the tour itself.

Campus Tours as Rituals of Belonging

Campus tours are not just showing buildings or giving directions. The tours are symbolic. It functions as rituals that introduce students to the culture and expectations of the college. During these tours, students learn how they are expected to move, interact, and belong within the space and just being Haverford students.

Rituals are powerful because they communicate values without directly stating them. For example, when a tour moves quickly or follows certain paths, it suggests what is considered “normal.” Students who can easily follow the tour feel included and comfortable. However, students who cannot participate in the same way, feel different or excluded.

When a student has to leave the group to take an elevator or use a different entrance, the experience becomes more than just a logistical issue. It becomes a symbolic message. It suggests that the “real” tour is designed for others, and that their participation is secondary or just not needed. Even when accommodations are provided, the fact that they are separate can add to this exclusion. Campus tours are one of the first experiences students have, they can shape the students' sense of belonging. If accessibility is not included from the start, students feel that the campus was not designed for them only their peers.

Evidence from Experience and Observation

This project is grounded in direct experience and observation. During Customs Week, I worked with a student who uses a wheelchair. While the tours are trying to be inclusive, many aspects weren't designed with accessibility as a priority.

For example, some routes have uneven terrain, stairs, or entrances that aren't accessible. As a result, the student sometimes had to take a different path or separate from the group. Even when adjustments were made, they were often reactive and happened in the moment.

These situations created both practical and emotional challenges. On a practical level, this made it more difficult to navigate the campus. On an emotional level, they affected the student's sense

of belonging. Being separated from the group or unable to participate in certain activities made the student feel less included.

The interview responses also highlighted important points. The student emphasized that accessibility should be built into the design of activities, not added later. They also explained that when accessibility is not planned, it places a burden on disabled students to advocate for themselves. This can be exhausting and can make students feel like they are an inconvenience. These experiences show that accessibility isn't just about physical access. It is also about social inclusion and emotional comfort.

From Accommodation to Design

A key idea in this project is the shift from accommodation to design. In many systems, accessibility is treated as an accommodation. This means that when a problem happens, adjustments are made for specific individuals.

While accommodations are important, it's not enough. They happen after exclusion has already happened. They also reinforce the idea that disabled students are exceptions, instead of part of the normal student population.

Instead, accessibility should be part of the original design. This means asking from the beginning: *How can this experience work for everyone?* This approach changes the focus from fixing problems to preventing them.

Designing for accessibility doesn't only benefit disabled students. It improves the experience for all students. Clear routes, comfortable pacing, and inclusive activities create a more welcoming environment for everyone.

Accessibility Toolkit for Campus Tours (Main Section)

To move from theory to practice, I made an accessibility toolkit. This toolkit provides practical guidelines for designing inclusive campus tours.

1. Accessible Route Design

The first step is to design routes that are accessible to all students. This means identifying paths that can be used by people with different mobility needs, including wheelchair users.

Instead of creating separate routes, the goal should be to have one shared route that works for everyone. This prevents separation and promotes a sense of unity. Accessible entrances, ramps, and elevators should be clearly included in the main tour path, not alternatives. Planning routes in advance is essential. CF's (Custom Facilitators) should not have to make last-minute decisions about accessibility.

2. Pacing and Energy Access

Accessibility isn't only about physical movement. It is also about energy and comfort. Many tours move quickly and try to cover a large area in a short time. This can be exhausting for many students.

An inclusive approach includes a slower pace and built-in rest stops. Seating areas or short breaks allow students to stay engaged without feeling overwhelmed. This benefits not only disabled students but also students who may be tired, anxious, or adjusting to a new environment.

3. Communication and Training

Clear communication is an important part of accessibility. CF's should give clear instructions and describe what to expect. For example, they can mention if there are hills, long distances, or places to rest.

Training is also important. CF's should understand accessibility as a mindset, not just a checklist. They should be aware of different needs and know how to create an inclusive environment.

In addition, signage should be clear and visible. Accessible entrances, ramps, and elevators should be easy to find.

4. Inclusive Activities

Many Customs Week activities are designed without considering different abilities. Activities like scavenger hunts or dorm olympics can exclude students who can't participate in the same way.

Inclusive design means creating activities that allow multiple ways to participate. For example, instead of requiring physical movement, activities can include observation, discussion, or teamwork. The goal is to make sure that all students can participate meaningfully, not just be there.

Application to Haverford College

This toolkit can be used to improve Customs Week at Haverford College. By redesigning campus tours using these principles, the college can create a more inclusive experience for new students.

For example, accessible routes can be mapped in advance and used for all tours. CF's can be trained to prioritize inclusion and clear communication. Activities can be redesigned to make

sure there is participation for all students. They require a shift in mindset. Accessibility should be seen as a core value, not an additional feature.

Critical Reflection

While this toolkit gives practical solutions, it is important to recognize its limits. No single design can meet every individualist need. Some students can still require specific accommodations.

This raises an important question: *Can universal design fully address all forms of difference?*

While universal design improves accessibility, it shouldn't replace individualized support.

Another challenge is implementation. Even when ideas are clear, institutions could resist change due to time, cost, or tradition. This shows that accessibility is not only a design issue, but also a cultural one.

Listening to disabled students must remain central. Their experiences should guide ongoing improvements.

Conclusion

To conclude, rethinking campus tours through accessibility requires a shift from accommodation to design. Using the concept of structural ableism, this project shows how current practices can unintentionally exclude students. Campus tours are not just logistical tools; they are rituals that shape a sense of belonging.

By developing an accessibility toolkit, this project gives practical ways to redesign these experiences. When accessibility is built into the foundation, it benefits all students and creates a more inclusive environment.

Ultimately, inclusion is not about adjusting individuals to fit systems. It is about changing systems so that everyone can belong.