

Law, Policy, and Culture:  
The History of Access for Disabled Students  
at the University of California, Berkeley, Barnard College, and Columbia University,  
1962-1991

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	1
Disability Theory and Historiography	5
The Construction of an Archive	10
An Argument through Language	13
Chapter Breakdown	14
<b>Chapter 1: Establishing a System to Include Disabled Students</b>	16
Devising Educational Access	18
The Intangible and Nonetheless Felt Effects of the Cowell Program	21
<b>Chapter 2: The Physical Manifestations of Access</b>	28
A Personalized Educational Approach at Barnard College	29
Approaching Accessibility at a Large Research Institution, Columbia University	37
<b>Chapter 3: Care in Higher Education</b>	52
Defining Care and Culture	53
The Cowell Memorial Residence Program, University of California, Berkeley	55
Barnard College	59
Columbia College	63
<b>Epilogue</b>	75
A Shift in the Legal Landscape	79
Where Are We Today?	80
<b>Bibliography</b>	81

## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

**BC:** Barnard College

**CARDS:** Center for Accessibility Resources and Disability Services (Barnard College)

**UCB:** University of California, Berkeley

**RBML:** Rare Books and Manuscripts Library

**SEAS:** School of Engineering and Applied Science

## Introduction

*“Does accepting my disability mean I must be complacent? Does being well-adjusted and rehabilitated suggest a life of shit-taking and no complaints?”* Tarri L. Tanaka, Disability Rights Activist, *The Independent*, 1977.<sup>1</sup>

On April 5, 1977, thousands of disabled people resoundingly answered the question posed by disability rights activist Tarri Tanaka in the negative. Across the United States, demonstrators with many types of disabilities—both visible and non-apparent—and their allies from other social movements mobilized at the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to protest the government’s failure to enforce federal law. Four years earlier, President Richard Nixon had signed Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act into law to prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in any entity that received federal funding, including schools and businesses.<sup>2</sup> By 1977, Joseph Califano, the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), still had not signed the regulations to clarify the law and its enforcement mechanisms. These regulations defined both disabled persons and disability discrimination, specifying what fell under the purview of Section 504 and to whom it applied. When continuous delays and office leaks suggested that the government would weaken the regulations, demonstrations erupted at the national HEW office in Washington D.C. and nine regional offices in major cities. At the rallies, disabled leaders shared their firsthand experiences with disability and disability discrimination, emphasizing the personal impact of Section 504. Then, demonstrators occupied federal buildings to advocate for the legal protections that would improve access to education at multiple levels, including primary, secondary, and post-secondary. For them, Section 504 actualized the ideal of “equal[ity] in the eyes of the law.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tarri L. Tanaka, “A Moving Wave,” *The Independent*, Summer 1977, <https://dredf.org/504-sit-in-20th-anniversary/a-moving-wave/>.

<sup>2</sup> Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 504 (1973).

<sup>3</sup> “Voices of 504,” *The Independent*, Summer 1977, <https://dredf.org/504-sit-in-20th-anniversary/voices-of-504/>.

The sit-in in San Francisco marked a turning point in the disability rights movement, as disabled people mobilized to bring the barriers they faced to the forefront. Activists occupied this city’s Old Federal Building for twenty-six days—the longest sit-in at a federal building in United States history—while many concurrent sit-ins did not last more than twenty-four hours.<sup>4</sup> Between one and two hundred individuals remained in the building each night, and participants manifested the diversity of the disability community: people with a range of disabilities and of different races, genders, socioeconomic statuses, and ages united under their shared disability identity. This cohesion strengthened the fight for social and political rights to advance the movement’s larger goals. It also had practical significance: solidarity facilitated the day-to-day tasks required to manage the demonstration. Advocates organized committees that rallied speakers, arranged fundraising efforts, found medical assistance, and spearheaded a publicity campaign.<sup>5</sup> They garnered support from disabled and non-disabled people throughout the state; labor unions and religious organizations donated money and labor, and politicians, including HEW staff members, gave mattresses and blankets.<sup>6</sup> According to one activist, “everyone” in California donated food.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, the political pressure led Califano to sign the regulations on April 28, 1977. By advocating for equal rights to education, disabled people directly and significantly impacted millions of lives.<sup>8</sup>

But 1977 was far from the first time disabled people pressed for accessibility. More than a decade before, wheelchair-using students at the University of California, Berkeley raised

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<sup>4</sup> Kitty Cone, “Short History of the 504 Sit-In,” Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, accessed January 13, 2024, <https://dredf.org/504-sit-in-20th-anniversary/short-history-of-the-504-sit-in/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Ervin, “The 25 Day Siege That Brought Us 504,” *Mainstream*, April 18, 1986, <https://www.independentliving.org/docs4/ervin1986.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

awareness of gaps in accessible programs and shaped the implemented solutions. A critical moment came in 1962 with the enrollment of Edward Roberts, the first documented wheelchair user at Berkeley, who worked with school administrators to meet his access needs. These discussions and the matriculation of other wheelchair-using students over the next few years galvanized the formation of the Cowell Memorial Residence Program (referred to as the Cowell Program). In this uniquely innovative approach, students with physical disabilities, primarily quadriplegia and paraplegia, attended classes at Berkeley while residing in a wing of the on-campus Cowell Memorial Hospital with attendant care.<sup>9</sup> Catherine Butcher, an employee of the state Department of Rehabilitation, joined the program's staff in 1969 to formally authorize it, and during its existence from 1962 to 1987, a total of 155 students took part.<sup>10</sup> Through this initiative, Berkeley's undergraduates and administrators shaped what it meant for disabled students to participate in academic and extracurricular life at a prestigious university.

While California was a hub of disability advocacy in higher education, institutions in another metropolitan area also spearheaded accessibility initiatives on a similar timeline. In New York City, Barnard College, located on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, underwent comprehensive infrastructural modifications after receiving a grant in the late 1970s to fund accessible design. Staff members in the Office for Disabled Students provided practical support by offering, for example, academic and housing accommodations.<sup>11</sup> These changes occurred

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<sup>9</sup> Hale Zukas, "The History of the Berkeley Center for Independent Living," 1975, Center for Independent Living, University of California, Berkeley, <https://www.independentliving.org/docs3/zukas.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert R. Willmore, "The Cowell Program Is Designed to . . .," n.d., BANC MSS 99/249c, Box 1, Folder 3, The Herbert Willmore Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter UCB); Lucile Withington, "Cowell Hospital Residence Program Special Assignment," interview by Sharon Bonney, 1969, Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement Oral History Series, Online Archive of California, [https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt5z09n82q&chunk.id=d0e3871&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire\\_text](https://oac.cdlib.org/view?docId=kt5z09n82q&chunk.id=d0e3871&brand=oac4&doc.view=entire_text); "Report on Employment Survey: Physically Disabled Students' Residence Program," February 1987, BANC MSS 99/249c, Box 1, Folder 3, The Herbert Willmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>11</sup> Jeannette Walls, "Campus Renovations for Handicapped Students Under Way," *Barnard Bulletin*, November 3, 1980, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/6260f78a-c7f5-42dd-99a5-16d02bbc5207#mode/2up>.

within a favorable environment; namely, Barnard's identity as a women's college cultivated a sense of community that situated accessibility as a matter of collective importance and integrated accessible design into the school's core mission.<sup>12</sup> Across the street at the home of Columbia College and the School of Engineering and Applied Science, Barnard's affiliates, undergraduate students with mobility disabilities called attention to challenges they faced in navigating Columbia University's Morningside Heights campus. The disjointed structure of the Ivy League research institution led to challenges with allocating financial responsibility for campus modifications and implementing accountability standards. However, due to the awareness raised by students and efforts of several committees, the Morningside Heights campus underwent significant transformation toward the end of the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

The law played a critical role in shaping these schools' actions. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 required that universities provide reasonable accommodations for disabled students; failure to do so would leave schools open to the charge that they did not comply with the law.<sup>14</sup> Yet while Section 504 greatly expanded legal protections for disabled students, its limited scope spurred further activism by the disabled community, eventually leading President George H.W. Bush to sign the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) into law in 1990. Among other stipulations, this law mandated that educational institutions, whether private or public, create access to all academic and extracurricular opportunities for students with disabilities.<sup>15</sup> In

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In 2019, Barnard's Office for Disabled Students was renamed the Center for Accessibility Resources and Disability Services. I will use the term Office for Disabled Students for referring to this resource at Barnard before 2019.

<sup>12</sup> "Report of the Committee on Missions and Goals," January 1970, BC05-14, Box 5, Folder 5, Center for Accessibility Resources and Disability Services, The Barnard Archives, Barnard College.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Murphy to Michael Sovern, "Memorandum," February 4, 1987, Box 554, Folder Committees – Committees on Disability, Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Records, UA#0083 Box 554, Folder 30, The Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University.

<sup>14</sup> Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 504 (1973).

<sup>15</sup> Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § ii (1990).



essence, it expanded the scope of the protections granted by Section 504 to encompass all educational institutions, legally guaranteeing the civil rights for which disabled people had fought.

This thesis examines how the University of California, Berkeley, Barnard College, Columbia College, and the School of Engineering and Applied Science expanded access to educational programs and services. I focus on the years from 1962 to 1991 to encompass the beginning of Berkeley's distinctive initiative for disabled students, the planning and implementation of accessible design at Barnard and Columbia, and the immediate effects of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The beginning of coeducation at the Cowell Program and Columbia College (1968 and 1983, respectively) directly overlaps with this period, so I also explore how gender informed the formation of disability services at Berkeley, Barnard, and Columbia. This examination adds to the historical understanding of disability rights by probing the role of disabled students in expanding access to prestigious colleges and universities and revealing how institutional considerations about disability and accessibility evolved. In doing so, I show how this social movement and its activism at these schools spurred meaningful change in school policy and campus culture.

### ***Disability Theory and Historiography***

To analyze the experiences of disabled students in higher education, one must first understand key definitions. The most central is the term "disability," which is primarily defined by two contrasting theories. Tom Shakespeare, Professor of Disability Research at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, explains that the medical model positions disability as resulting from the lack of physical, psychological, or cognitive functioning, a notion that

positions disability as an individual issue that requires medical intervention.<sup>16</sup> While this conceptualization influenced activism and accessible services, so too did the social model of disability, which separates impairment, or the individual's condition, from disability, the structural barriers that result in the disablement of people with impairments.<sup>17</sup> Disability activists from the late 1960s onwards poignantly used the social model as an effective political tool to express their grievances and challenge disability discrimination. Still, both models assumed legal weight, given multiple developments over this period, such as Section 504 (1973), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1975), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990).<sup>18</sup>

Despite two discrete paradigms for defining disability, the Americans with Disabilities Act offered a singular definition of accessibility for legal and practical purposes. According to the law, accessibility describes “a site, facility, work environment, service, or program that is easy to approach, enter, operate, participate in, and/or use safely and with dignity by a person with a disability.”<sup>19</sup> Put differently, it involves increasing the participation of disabled people in various settings. Implementing accessible design may include infrastructural adjustments such as ramps or elevators, or assistive technologies such as screen readers and large text materials. In an educational or workplace environment, accessibility often entails accommodating students

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<sup>16</sup> Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J Davis, 6th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2021), 18.

Shakespeare's text has become central to the field, with over 2,500 citations, and clearly articulates how the medical and social models operate. This text builds on other key pieces of scholarship. See also: Justin A. Haegle, “Disability Discourse: Overview and Critiques of the Medical and Social Models,” *Quest* 68, no. 2 (March 2016): 193–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1143849>; Steven R. Smith, “Social Justice and Disability: Competing Interpretations of the Medical and Social Models,” in *Arguing about Disability* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 504 (1973); Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § ii (1990).

<sup>19</sup> Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § ii (1990).

individually by registering students with the proper office and approving discrete accommodations.

Perhaps the legal definition of accessibility makes this concept appear simple, but Disability Studies scholarship nuances the meanings of access and inclusion. For the purpose of this paper, I study how these ideas operate in institutions of higher learning, making Jay Dolmage's book *Academic Ableism* central. Dolmage examines the relationship between the philosophical mission of higher education and the physical infrastructure of universities, which he shows mutually influence each other. Through standard architectural features like steep steps, universities construct a hierarchy of participants in the institution where able-bodiedness is positioned as "ideal" and "normal."<sup>20</sup> As such, the physical design can contribute to the stigmatization of perceived weakness, which situates disability as the antithesis of higher education. Just as steep steps construct the groups included in and excluded by the university, so too do they underscore a mutually dependent relationship between accessibility and inaccessibility: according to Dolmage's theory, "accessibility is existentially second in a way that demands a body that cannot access. Nothing is inaccessible until the first body can't access it."<sup>21</sup> In this view, one must first be unable to access a particular structure or feature. Since architecture is generally designed with the non-disabled person in mind, the addition of accessible features like ramps and curb cuts can emphasize the perceived otherness of people with disabilities in higher education.<sup>22</sup> Another groundbreaking Disability Studies work, *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach*, by Nancy Evans and colleagues, studies historical and theoretical understandings of disability and its implications on disabled

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<sup>20</sup> Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

students, faculty, and staff. Employing a social justice lens, the authors explore institutional policies that foster an enabling environment for disabled students and the role of university administrators in spearheading inclusive practices broadly. This approach enables them to critique the structures and policies that continue to exclude disabled people from higher education.<sup>23</sup>

Disability historians employ a broader temporal approach than Dolmage's and Evans' Disability Studies methodology. One of the most comprehensive accounts is Kim Nielsen's *A Disability History of the United States*, which is also the first chronological examination of disability from the pre-Columbian period to the contemporary era. Analyzing disability as a symbolic and rhetorical concept, Nielsen demonstrates how citizenship requirements gave rise to an ideal body that implicitly demanded ableness. The resulting social construction justified the exclusion of disabled people from political and civic circles. Under this conceptualization, disability was applied more broadly to other social groups. Specifically, heterosexual white males used disability status to describe racial minorities and white women in order to legitimize legally constructed inequality based on race and gender. Through analyzing how disability influenced one's participation in American society, Nielsen implies that disability became more than an identity; it became a tool of political influence.<sup>24</sup>

Scholarship on the history of education reveals another dimension to access by showing how changing social and political contexts aligned with shifts in student body demographics. Robert McCaughey examines this evolution in his book *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004*. By analyzing several periods in the institution's existence, McCaughey shows how Columbia assumed the status of a prestigious university.

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy J. Evans et al., *Disability in Higher Education: A Social Justice Approach* (Wiley, 2017), 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Kim E. Nielsen, *A Disability History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 46-50.

From an academic perspective, the Core Curriculum came to lie at the heart of the studies of Columbia College students beginning in the interwar period. To satisfy “the moral obligation to be intelligent,” students examined “the greats” of literature, philosophy, art, and music.<sup>25</sup> The small classes allowed students from different upbringings to engage in challenging discussions where agreement with one’s peers or professor, with even the text, was not necessary or even expected.<sup>26</sup> The opportunity for disagreement did not nullify the requirement to justify one’s views in daily discussions, which perhaps gave weight to this “moral obligation.”<sup>27</sup> By the time the United States entered World War II, the importance of the Core Curriculum had intensified. “The College had become the Core, the Core the College,” McCaughey argues.<sup>28</sup> Blending the two constructed a particular meaning of smartness within the university setting.

Using a narrower approach than *Stand, Columbia*, Robert McCaughey studies the history of Barnard College from 1889 to 2019 in *A College of Her Own*. A private liberal arts college, Barnard largely resembles its peers among the Seven Sisters (i.e., Smith, Wellesley, and others). What distinguishes Barnard from these other historically women’s colleges, McCaughey shows, is its relationship with Columbia University and its location in New York City. The dynamics between the University and Barnard shifted over time, and strong female leaders played a central role. Their work spearheaded the college’s growth from a subordinate to an equal affiliate to Columbia. Despite their relationship, Columbia College and Barnard College diverged with respect to educational access, as Barnard’s institutional mission meant more than expanding academic opportunities for white women from upper-class backgrounds; it also encompassed

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<sup>25</sup> John Erskine in Robert A. McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 285, 293.

<sup>26</sup> McCaughey, *Stand, Columbia*, 298.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

access for students from lower socioeconomic statuses and immigrant backgrounds. The emphasis on many types of diversity underscored the notion of an “inclusive Barnard,” where inclusivity assumed several forms.<sup>29</sup>

While these texts deepen understandings of rights to education, citizenship, and other societal systems, they do not examine the implications of access to prestigious universities for disabled students. This thesis builds on the scholarship of historians such as McCaughey and Nielsen to analyze schools where exclusivity is a given not only for disabled people but also for students more generally. Given that selectivity impacts all applicants and students at these institutions, access barriers may affect many at these schools, which illuminates the importance of studying the added dimensions for disabled students. In such environments, how could and did accessibility take shape?

### ***The Construction of an Archive***

As a relatively new field of scholarly research, disability history is only now identifying source material. I located several categories of sources at the University of California, Berkeley, Columbia University, and Barnard College to build an archive for this thesis. Three types of narratives became particularly central: institutional documentation, students’ perspectives, and records from the disability rights movement.

I draw on university records from Berkeley, Barnard, and Columbia to understand discussions about accessibility at the institutional level. At Berkeley, I accessed records on the development and maintenance of the Cowell Memorial Residence Program in the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement archive, one of the largest in the nation on the

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<sup>29</sup> Robert McCaughey, *A College of Her Own: The History of Barnard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), ix, 44, 51-53.

political and social history of this movement.<sup>30</sup> At Barnard, I used the Center for Accessibility Resources and Disability Services (CARDS) collection, which included documents from administrative committees focused on increasing access. Given that Columbia does not have a disability-specific archival collection, I used collections from the Office of the President, the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, the Office of the Provost, and the Columbia University Libraries Office. These collections each contained folders related to disability and accessibility. Architectural blueprints and campus maps showed the development of accessible design features. Interviews with the administrators who spearheaded Columbia’s accessibility initiatives during my focal period provided the last component of these sources. My less systematic research process at Columbia, necessitated by the archival structure, reflected the more disjointed University structure that created obstacles for disabled people, which I analyze in Chapters Two and Three.

Throughout this work, I prioritize accounts narrated by disabled people, especially students, to understand how they described their educational experiences. Berkeley’s Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement archive included the personal papers, oral histories, and audio transcripts of twenty-three disabled students at Berkeley. At Barnard College, I consulted articles from the *Barnard Bulletin*, *Barnard Magazine*, and *Columbia Daily Spectator*, as well as the growing oral history collection in the Barnard Archives, which contains narratives of recent alumnae. Since oral histories were not available for disabled students at Columbia University, I drew on the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, the second oldest continuously operating

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<sup>30</sup> The Bancroft Library, “The Collection: Oral Histories/Archives,” Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement, accessed April 3, 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200426044542/https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/drilm/collection/collection.html>.

college newspaper nationwide.<sup>31</sup> Finally, I interviewed Columbia College alumni, whom I identified through *Spectator* articles they authored about their disability experience. Locating the voices of disabled female students proved difficult at Berkeley and Columbia. Although the Cowell Program and Columbia College introduced coeducation relatively early in the focal period for this thesis, female students were admitted to these schools relatively late in the institutional histories. I suspect that this history might have influenced the challenge I faced, as cultural factors may have contributed to women's lower participation in journalism organizations and given female students a personal reluctance to write about their disability journeys in a school periodical.

I also sought to understand disability rights discourse, so I probed materials by leaders of the disability rights movement. Many of these activists fiercely advocated for access to education through their speeches, pamphlets, interviews, and conference documentation. I used the papers of advocates like Edward Roberts, Judith "Judy" Heumann, and the Disability Rights and Education Fund to illuminate the centrality of education to conceptualizations of disability rights and understand how law and policy contributed to educational accessibility.

To account for the wide range of sources, I significantly narrowed the scope of this thesis. An intersectional approach is necessary to uncover how disabled students experienced access to education at Barnard, Columbia, and Berkeley.<sup>32</sup> This thesis analyzes the gendered dimensions of disability in higher education, given Barnard's identity as a women's college and the all-male student bodies of Berkeley's Cowell Program and Columbia College at the beginning of my focal period. Additional work is needed to understand further how identities

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<sup>31</sup> "Columbia Daily Spectator," Columbia Undergraduate Admissions, accessed February 23, 2024, <https://undergrad.admissions.columbia.edu/studentgroup/columbia-daily-spectator>.

<sup>32</sup> See: Evans et al., *Disability in Higher Education*, 1-3.



such as race, ethnicity, and class have influenced educational access for disabled students. In this period, school administrations focused on infrastructural projects that improved physical access to campus spaces, with less emphasis on non-apparent disabilities. More research is needed to show the similarities and differences between approaches that expanded access for students with a wide range of disabilities. Finally, since universities may restrict central files for at least twenty-five years after their creation, further work must be done to uncover the later experiences of disabled people at these institutions.<sup>33</sup>

### ***An Argument through Language***

The language used for disability has meaningfully shifted throughout history, reflecting changing perceptions of disabled people. In the past, terms such as “cripple,” “idiot,” “lunatic,” “feeble-minded,” “freak,” “crazy,” “handicap,” “lame,” “special,” and “differently abled” have described disabled people. However, in the present day, these terms range from blatantly derogatory to problematic to accepted in everyday conversations.<sup>34</sup> This paper employs such language when quoting source material, but I replace these terms with “disabled people” or “people with disabilities” for my own analysis. Not only do my sources use these general descriptors of disability, but they may also describe types of disabilities referred to by different terminology today. Except when quoting material, I use language accepted in the present day for discussions of the experience of students who self-identified their disabilities. One such grouping includes terms for neurologic and learning disabilities, as well as chronic illness. Following the

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<sup>33</sup> “Central Files (Office of the President Records), 1890-1984,” Columbia University Archives, accessed April 3, 2024, [https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-ua/ldpd\\_4080177/](https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-ua/ldpd_4080177/).

<sup>34</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 5.

For more on this topic, see Irmo Marini, “The History of Treatment Toward People with Disabilities,” in *Psychosocial Aspects of Disability* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826180636.0001>; Chomba Wa Munyi, “Past and Present Perceptions Towards Disability: A Historical Perspective,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2012): 32, <https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v32i2.3197>.

updated recommendations from Disability: In, the leading nonprofit for workplace accessibility, I use the term “non-apparent disability” to signify this category.<sup>35</sup>

While I select these terms to account for contemporary understandings of disability-related language, I also recognize an ongoing debate between two different paradigms of disability identification that informs the choices I make. The first paradigm is person-first language (person with a disability), which emphasizes personhood and implies that disability constitutes only one part of a multifaceted individual.<sup>36</sup> In contrast, identity-first language (disabled person) alludes to the fundamental connection between disability and identity.<sup>37</sup> I employ both types of language for this paper since this discussion largely remains unresolved, opting for the individual’s preference when known or, when unknown, selecting the paradigm based on context.<sup>38</sup>

### ***Chapter Breakdown***

Chapter One analyzes how Berkeley’s Cowell Memorial Residence Program—one of the nation’s first formal programs for disabled students in higher education—served as both a platform for community building and a site of political activity. I evaluate the extent and meaning of its success in expanding accessibility on campus and in the city of Berkeley, California. Chapter Two studies the physical manifestations of access at Barnard College, Columbia College, and the School of Engineering and Applied Science. Although Section 504 required each school to improve access to educational opportunities, they differed in their

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<sup>35</sup> Alex Clem, “‘Non-Apparent Disability’ vs. ‘Hidden’ or ‘Invisible Disability’ – Which Term Is Correct?” Disability: IN, January 5, 2022, <https://disabilityin.org/mental-health/non-apparent-disability-vs-hidden-or-invisible-disability-which-term-is-correct?>

<sup>36</sup> Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2013), 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Monique Botha, Jacqueline Hanlon, and Gemma Louise Williams, “Does Language Matter? Identity-First versus Person-First Language Use in Autism Research: A Response to Vivanti,” *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 53, no. 2 (January 20, 2021): 870, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04858-w>.

responses: Barnard examined and addressed the challenges that disabled students faced on campus and raised awareness of societal barriers, whereas Columbia College and the School of Engineering approached accessibility much more narrowly. I argue that even though institutional history, financial circumstances, and administrative structure affected these schools' responses, it was culture that most significantly shaped access to educational resources and gave rise to contrasting campus experiences. Chapter Three studies the student experience, analyzing the extent to which these three institutions of higher education supported students. Key to this analysis is the question of if, when, and how the schools established care systems that affected the campus experience of disabled people. While we cannot necessarily extend findings in prestigious institutions to the broader landscape of colleges and universities, this work sheds light on broader issues of school culture and institutional policy which extend beyond these elite institutions.

## Chapter 1: Establishing a System to Include Disabled Students

*“The doctor wound up shortly after I was sick telling my mother that because of the high fever that she should be prepared for the fact that if I survived that I would be a vegetable for the rest of my life [...] But we really had to get at the fact that the severity of the disability may not be the most important factor of all – In fact, it may be a motivation.”* Edward Roberts, University of California, Berkeley, Class of 1964.<sup>39</sup>

At age fourteen, Edward Roberts became permanently paralyzed by polio. In the view of his doctors, peers, and teachers, paralysis meant more than the physical immobilization of his body; it also signified the broader termination of participation in social and educational spheres. Still, neither Roberts nor his mother subscribed to this idea. Zona Roberts provided her son with medical and academic assistance to empower him to succeed. With his mother's support, Roberts honed the critical thinking and writing skills necessary to graduate high school and attend the College of San Mateo.<sup>40</sup> While there, he developed an interest in politics and government, so his counselor advised him to apply to the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>41</sup> Upon his acceptance in 1962, Roberts became the first student with a severe disability at this institution.<sup>42</sup>

The application process marked only the beginning of the challenges Roberts faced in higher education; numerous, arguably more complex, issues arose following his admission. For instance, the question of residence almost immediately raised concerns. The dean of students, Arleigh Williams, recommended that Roberts seek housing in one of the dormitories or the International House. However, none of these sites were willing to accommodate his needs. “Oh, no, we don’t have any students who.... Oh, no, we couldn’t have him,” Roberts remembered a

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<sup>39</sup> [Edward Roberts], “Draft of Ed’s Speech in Dallas, Texas,” April 25, 1979, BANC MSS 99/34 cz., Box 1, Folder 16, Edward Roberts Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter UCB).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> [Edward Roberts], “UC Cowell Hospital Residence Program for Physically Disabled Students,” 1999, University Archives, UCB, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt9t1nb3t1>.

<sup>42</sup> “Draft of Ed’s Speech,” Edward Roberts Papers, UCB.

student remarking.<sup>43</sup> Given that residence served as a measure of social integration into campus life, Roberts' physical exclusion from student housing signified his exclusion from abled university communities. While Roberts' academic ability led to the first marker of access—literal admission to Berkeley—it did not defeat the widespread disparaging attitudes of his peers toward disability.

Yet Roberts was not deterred. Dean Williams' next recommendation of contacting Dr. Henry Bruyn at Cowell Memorial Hospital provided a crucial step toward reimagining the possibilities for disabled students in higher education. At this point, Cowell Memorial Hospital was just that—the hospital that provided student health services—but Roberts' visit inspired a new purpose for this building. Upon meeting this student, Bruyn reflected on how polio epidemics had likely led to a sizeable cohort of qualified college-age students who could not attend institutions of higher education because of a dearth of support.<sup>44</sup> This sparked a new idea: to house students with quadriplegia and paraplegia in the hospital itself. Over the next few decades, this one instance of student residence developed into an exceptional initiative through the Cowell Memorial Residence Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

This program's success and growth critically depended on the specific legal landscape of California. The state's legal code included more comprehensive disability protections than federal law, providing an auspicious context for this program. For example, the federal Fair Employment and Housing Act (1959) barred professional discrimination in companies with at least five employees, and, when combined with the federal Architectural Barriers Act, Government Code 4450 (1968) guaranteed a degree of physical access to government

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<sup>43</sup> "UC Cowell Hospital," University Archives, UCB.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

buildings.<sup>45</sup> However, the government of California did not stop at architectural access. In 1977, more than a decade before Congress enacted the Americans with Disabilities Act, California passed Government Code 11135 to prohibit discrimination on account of demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, sex, and “mental or physical” disability.<sup>46</sup> The legal framework illustrated the state’s broad understanding and protection of disability, laying the groundwork for disability activism and positioning Berkeley to spearhead disability rights.

However, as this chapter shows, the success of the Cowell Memorial Residence Program (referred to as the Cowell Program) also depended on student activism. It grew out of their advocacy and alongside the disability rights movement in California with administrative support. Ultimately, the chapter argues that the Cowell Program provided a locus for identification around the shared experience of disability, empowering participants to succeed academically and gain hope for their future.

### *Devising Educational Access*

The growth of Berkeley’s program for disabled students involved several support systems. By 1966, two students with quadriplegia had joined Roberts to live in the wing of the Cowell Hospital. The university established the formal program two years later, offering students a private room, necessary medical care, three meals a day, custodial service, standard utilities, orderly and nursing care, and five hours per day of individual attendant care.<sup>47</sup> California’s Department of Rehabilitation equipped Berkeley to launch this program. The first of its kind nationwide, the state developed the Department of Rehabilitation in 1963 to manage employment

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<sup>45</sup> Kilb Hastings, “The State of the ADA and California Law” (Hastings Disability Law Symposium, San Francisco, CA, February 2007), <https://dredf.org/news/publications/the-state-of-the-ada-and-california-law/>.

<sup>46</sup> CA Govt. Code § 11135.

<sup>47</sup> John Velton, “The Cowell Hospital Live in Program for Disabled Students,” n.d., BANC MSS 99/147 c, Box 1, Folder 3, John Velton Papers, UCB.

and independent living services for people with disabilities.<sup>48</sup> Not unexpectedly, this department played a critical role in expanding access to education, providing not only administrative assistance in managing the Cowell Program but also financial support.<sup>49</sup> Berkeley's public nature enabled the university to take full advantage of California's economic and personnel resources rather than having to rely primarily on itself. This backing led the number of disabled students who resided in the Cowell Memorial Hospital to grow to twelve by 1967.<sup>50</sup> Through this program, students fully participated in academic life and developed the skills to become self-sufficient.

The expansion of the program underscored its success from administrators' perspectives. Dr. Bruyn, the Director of Student Health Services, reflected that he "was pleased with the progress and services to the students [which would] not be possible under other circumstances."<sup>51</sup> His satisfaction with both the care provided to disabled students and their academic merit showed his faith in the program, an essential factor in its continuation. University administrators also came to express their approval when they learned that the academic performance of Cowell Program participants far exceeded the average of university students in California: comparing grade point averages, students in the Cowell Program earned an average GPA of 3.3, compared to the state average of 2.8.<sup>52</sup> The students' superior academic achievement

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<sup>48</sup> "Department Overview," CA Department of Rehabilitation, last modified 2023, <https://www.dor.ca.gov/Home/DepartmentOverview>.

<sup>49</sup> Hale Zukas, "The History of the Berkeley Center for Independent Living," 1975, Center for Independent Living, University of California, Berkeley, <https://www.independentliving.org/docs3/zukas.html>; "The Cowell Residence Program: University of California, Berkeley," n.d., BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 3, Herbert Willmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>50</sup> Zukas, "The History of the Berkeley Center," Center for Independent Living, UCB.

<sup>51</sup> John Velton, "Henry B. Bruyn Correspondence," 1968, BANC MSS 99/147 c, Box 1, Folder 3, John Velton Papers, UCB.

<sup>52</sup> Herbert R. Willmore, "As Participants in the Cowell..." 1970, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 3, Herbert Willmore Papers, UCB.

revealed the program's educational effectiveness, highlighting the potential of students with disabilities when equipped with the necessary services.

The state of California likewise developed an acute interest in this initiative. “Cowell has been successful,” asserted John Velton, the Department of Rehabilitation representative responsible for the program.<sup>53</sup> “The students in this program,” he remarked, “are feasible clients with competitive vocational goals. IL [independent living] training is an intermediate goal necessary to successful training and competitive work.”<sup>54</sup> Writing in 1975, several years after the residence program officially began, Velton stressed the role of education in equipping disabled students with the skills to acquire steady employment and improve their career prospects. For him, the importance of educating students with disabilities reflected commonly held beliefs about the purpose of higher education. The 1987 Employment Survey for the Physically Disabled Students’ Program, a derivative of the Cowell Program, further displayed the program's effectiveness in improving career opportunities available to graduates. Of the individuals studied, 81% were securely employed or continuing their education, while 19.5% were unemployed. In comparison, 66% of people with disabilities nationwide were unemployed.<sup>55</sup> The Cowell Program significantly improved students’ career prospects by enabling them to attend class and gain the academic skills and experience to participate in the workforce. The employment outcomes revealed the attainment of this goal.

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<sup>53</sup> “Memorandum to Norman Evans from John Velton,” July 2, 1975, BANC MSS 99/147 c, Box 1, Folder 3, John Velton Papers, UCB.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> “Report on Employment Survey Physically Disabled Students' Residence Program,” 1987, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 3, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.



### *The Intangible and Nonetheless Felt Effects of the Cowell Program*

Students considered the program's role as broader than mere knowledge acquisition. For them, the opportunity to apply their intellectual capabilities expanded the possibilities they had previously envisioned for themselves, which instilled hope. For instance, Herbert Willsmore deemed his future unpromising after he suffered a spinal cord injury that resulted in quadriplegia. "Homebound, a burden, living with my parents [...], I was left with but one major attribute, my mental ability," he remembered.<sup>56</sup> Due to his physical state, Willsmore saw himself as dependent on his parents to complete activities of daily life. Higher education provided an alternative path, one not inhibited by physical barriers. He followed this course of action in the Cowell Program, where he resided with twelve peers beginning in the late 1960s. While there, he gained the skills to "overcome disability and prepare for a career."<sup>57</sup> Negative societal attitudes, he implied, obstructed his full participation in society, suggesting that these obstructions—rather than his physical impairment—disabled him. But by engaging in challenging discussions with peers in and out of the classroom, Willsmore achieved independence, thereby triumphing over societal limitations.<sup>58</sup> In this way, the Cowell Program contributed both to students' academic progress and personal development.

Likewise, one alumnus of the program, Mark O'Brien, credited the Cowell Program with developing valuable life skills. In reflecting on his "Quest to Become Independent," he analyzed his initial sentiments regarding his condition:

Having polio placed me at the bottom of a human hierarchy consisting of doctors, nurses, social workers, and parents. I was certain they would determine the course of my future life. I felt that it would be impossible for me to make the decisions concerning my education, where I would live, and my future occupation, if any. I always knew there was a possibility that the authorities would not know what to do with me. In that case, my life

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<sup>56</sup> "Autobiographical Summary of Herbert R. Willsmore," 1972, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 1, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

would be wasted. But at least I would have the consolation that it would not be wasted through any fault of my own. Everything was to be decided by ‘them.’<sup>59</sup>

Social biases led to the underestimation, devaluation, and dehumanization of O’Brien, limiting the exercise of his autonomy. Indeed, those around him determined many aspects of his life and, in doing so, restricted his fundamental ability to bear responsibility and make his own decisions. He called attention to this idea in his book *How I Became a Human Being*, where he outlined his personal, medical, and educational journey. He reflected on his life before entering the Cowell Program and noted, “Because this society has, by unspoken agreement, defined a human being as someone who can bear the major responsibilities required for a self-directed life, I was not a human being.”<sup>60</sup>

Berkeley’s initiative shifted both residents’ views of themselves and society’s perception of them, which opened new possibilities—and opportunities. Students gained agency over their academic pursuits and medical needs by determining the terms of their care and attending class. They managed their own lives and thrived with this increased responsibility, leading to more agency over themselves and greater societal opportunities. In turn, as O’Brien said, “I have been granted that degree of respect which is commonly accorded to a human being.”<sup>61</sup> Participation in university life, therefore, had higher stakes for the students than mere acquisition of knowledge. They gained respect and autonomy through caring for themselves medically and educationally.

Still, students developed more than knowledge and hope; they also honed the confidence and ability to advocate for their needs in the supportive environment of their peers. Living in the

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<sup>59</sup> Mark O’Brien, “A Quadriplegic’s Quest to Become Independent,” n.d., BANC MSS 99/247 c, Box 4, Folder 20, Mark O’Brien Papers, UCB.

<sup>60</sup> Mark O’Brien, “How I Became a Human Being,” n.d., BANC MSS 99/247 c, Box 4, Folder 2, Mark O’Brien Papers, UCB.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

same hospital wing fostered a sense of belonging since residents shared similar experiences with and concerns about navigating life at the university and beyond.<sup>62</sup> This sparked a broader sense of organization around their common disability identity. John Hessler, for example, was involved in a swimming accident that resulted in a spinal cord injury that paralyzed him from the neck down and forced him to reside in the Contra Costa County Hospital for the next six years. There, he said, “the outlook was bleak.”<sup>63</sup> Discharge from the hospital did not offer a much better solution, as the inability to walk, drive, or dress by himself inhibited reintegration into abled society. However, once he gained admission to the University of California, Berkeley, he led advocacy efforts with his peer, Edward Roberts, to expand access for disabled students. They worked with blind and physically disabled students to spearhead the Physically Disabled Students’ Program, and the hospital became a “mecca” for disabled students that attracted applicants from across California.<sup>64</sup> In 1969, Hessler and Roberts created the Rolling Quads organization for students in the Cowell Program to organize around their shared commitment to independent living and expanding access to educational opportunities for disabled people.<sup>65</sup> This work formed a sense of belonging among students as they supported one another through the academic, social, and medical challenges of university life.

The year 1969 galvanized their fight for equality. At this point, students had forged a community where light-hearted antics were central. They engaged in wheelchair races in the hospital wing and hosted drinking parties.<sup>66</sup> Though such mischief was not uncommon for fraternities or other abled communities, staff members stifled it among Cowell residents due to

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<sup>62</sup> Zukas, “The History of the Berkeley Center,” Center for Independent Living, UCB.

<sup>63</sup> Lynn Kidder, “They Fought Disabilities and Won,” May 2, 1982, *Daily Ledger*, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 4, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>64</sup> “They Fought Disabilities,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB; “As Participants,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>65</sup> “History and Development of Physically Disabled Students Program,” September 1974, BANC MSS 99/147 c, Box 1, Folder 3, John Velton Papers, UCB.

<sup>66</sup> “They Fought Disabilities,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

their perception of disabled people as “helpless invalids.”<sup>67</sup> The paternalistic, patronizing attitude extended beyond these shenanigans. For example, the Department of Rehabilitation counselors who managed the program compelled students to take additional classes and instituted stricter admissions guidelines, while nurses who did not work in the Cowell Program wing would enter residents’ rooms unannounced and search their belongings.<sup>68</sup> In the fall of that year, students reached their limit when staff members attempted to dismiss two of their peers because of “unfeasible” academic progress and “improper” ways of living.<sup>69</sup> United in their opposition, Cowell participants met with the administrative leaders, and when unsuccessful, they took their cause to the newspapers. Their determination, coupled with the power of the press, led to their ultimate success.<sup>70</sup>

With a common goal of self-determination, students sought to further their claim for autonomy, and the literal structure of the residence program facilitated this goal. Ideas circulated freely in a shared space of people who faced similar challenges and experiences, which cultivated unity and self-assuredness among Cowell residents.<sup>71</sup> They pushed back against the “in loco parentis” regulations set by the Department of Rehabilitation and implemented by the nurses, instead envisioning alternative possibilities for their continued participation in higher education.<sup>72</sup> They drafted a proposal to allocate ten percent of the Federal Office of Education funds earmarked for “disadvantaged [university] students” to physically disabled students.<sup>73</sup> Drawing on their personal experiences, they recognized they would need assistance executing their morning routines, preparing meals, and completing other activities of daily living. They

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<sup>67</sup> Willsmore in “They Fought Disabilities,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>68</sup> “They Fought Disabilities,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>69</sup> Zukas, “The History of the Berkeley Center,” Center for Independent Living, UCB.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

would also require wheelchair repair, support in acquiring their financial benefits, and advocacy in university affairs for matters such as pre-enrollment, accessible class locations, and examination arrangements.<sup>74</sup> In the fall of 1970, this vision came to fruition through the Physically Disabled Students Program, located in a repurposed apartment two blocks from campus.<sup>75</sup> This moment was one of the first where, as Mark O'Brien reflected, disabled people "began to tell able-bodied people what we wanted. Freedom."<sup>76</sup>

Collaboration with marginalized groups was not only limited to people with physical impairments; indeed, cooperation with students with other types of disabilities amplified their message. Through working with Deaf and blind students, students with epilepsy, and others, Cowell residents realized they shared feelings of isolation and frustration due to the "segregat[ion] and devalu[ation]" they faced.<sup>77</sup> This coalition-building forged belonging among disabled people and created a force to push for change. At the same time, students understood that these feelings were not only held by disabled people but instead recognized the commonalities with the fight for freedom and equality during the Civil Rights Movement and other social movements.<sup>78</sup> By using terms that alluded to the grievances expressed by Black people in the United States, these students positioned their struggle for rights in a longer history of activism and encouraged cooperation across various identities. On campus, their advocacy tactics eventually spurred the development and implementation of accessible features, including curb cuts and ramps, as well as the integration of interpreters and readers.<sup>79</sup> These efforts improved navigation around campus and academic spaces, enabling students to participate in

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> "They Fought Disabilities," Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>76</sup> "How I Became a Human Being," Mark O'Brien Papers, UCB.

<sup>77</sup> Edward Roberts, "The Emergence of the Disabled Civil Rights Movement," May 1980, BANC MSS 99/34 cz, Carton 1, Folder 24, Edward V. Roberts Papers, UCB.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

abled communities more fully. But they broadened their efforts beyond the physical to include attitudinal shifts. They sought to dismantle pervading assumptions of dependency and weakness for people with disabilities.<sup>80</sup>

Students applied this lesson to their activist efforts in the city. By liaising with elected officials, they spearheaded curb cuts, ramps, and other infrastructural features to gain access to urban hubs, which ultimately made Berkeley “one of the most accessible cities in the nation.”<sup>81</sup> The architectural changes on campus and in the surrounding area materialized their fight for access, and the progress was evidenced by students’ determination and the institution’s responsiveness. Media attention amplified their message, strengthening their negotiating power with university and government leaders. The experience revealed the importance of disseminating their goals.

As discussed in the Introduction, this wave of student advocacy galvanized a national movement for disability rights, and Cowell alumni assumed leadership roles. In the mid-1970s, Roberts and Hessler noticed that the federal government was considering proposals that would undermine the rights protected by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, landmark legislation that prohibited discrimination based on disability in any program or service that received federal funding.<sup>82</sup> Scores of disabled people occupied the Federal Building in San Francisco, with Berkeley graduates among the key actors. After the protest’s success, Edward Roberts noted that “the 504 regulations now stand as a Bill of Rights for persons with disabilities in this country. It showed we were tough, principled, and willing to fight attitudes.”<sup>83</sup> In his speech, Roberts

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

positioned this act of civil disobedience in the broader context of United States history by invoking the national origins. In doing so, he showed that disability rights held the same authority as freedom of speech, religion, and assembly to emphasize how people with disabilities merited equal protection under the law.

Two decades after graduating from Berkeley, Hessler and Roberts assumed roles in the state Department of Rehabilitation. While there, they both championed a federal requirement that would make public transportation accessible to disabled riders as well as a prohibition on discrimination in hiring, promotions, and educational access.<sup>84</sup> Their continued advocacy showed their commitment to the cause and underscored the many efforts to make society accessible for disabled communities. Reflecting on his success, Hessler noted that it “has been possible because of a quiet revolution that has occurred in his lifetime—that of disabled people battling for equal rights in employment, transportation, and schooling.”<sup>85</sup> His remarks emphasized his colleague’s equation of disability rights to the Bill of Rights by alluding to the colonists’ fight for independence from England. They were not the only two that drew on this metaphor, as O’Brien applied it to analyze the social effects of the disability rights movement in his book. “This book,” he wrote, “shows how that revolution freed me to become a human being and how that revolution made a society become more human.”<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> “They Fought Disabilities,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>85</sup> Hessler in “They Fought Disabilities,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>86</sup> “How I Became a Human Being,” Mark O’Brien Papers, UCB.

## Chapter 2: The Physical Manifestations of Access

*“Even with physical accessibility now mandated by law, it takes a lot more than obeying the law to create surroundings that minimize problems for disabled students.”* Linda Laubenstein, Barnard College, Class of 1969.<sup>87</sup>

Linda Laubenstein, a wheelchair-using student, entered Barnard College in the fall of 1965, almost a decade before the passage of Section 504 and well before the deadline for compliance with the regulations set by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. When she reflected on her college experience years after graduating, she powerfully articulated how she faced relatively few access barriers even without these laws in effect.<sup>88</sup> But her testimony highlighted another factor besides literal navigation that made her college experience meaningful: not only did the school promote access at a policy level, but it also cultivated a welcoming culture where all students could meaningfully participate in academic and campus life. For Barnard, access involved both academic and social inclusion, and formal policies and school culture together encouraged this participation for non-disabled and disabled students.

This chapter turns from the case of Berkeley, which, in responding to state and student pressure, pioneered access for disabled people, to analyze the manifestations of accessibility and inclusion at Barnard College and Columbia University, with a particular focus on two of its undergraduate schools. I show how dissimilar financial constraints, administrative structures, institutional histories, and school cultures led to different responses to Section 504 at Barnard and Columbia. I argue that, although the finances and bureaucracy of Columbia University inhibited its approach to accessibility, the most potent obstacle was the culture. Barnard’s

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<sup>87</sup> “Disabled Students at Barnard [Booklet],” 1980, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 4, Center for Accessibility Resources and Disability Services (hereafter CARDS), The Barnard Archives, Barnard College (hereafter BC).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.



effectiveness in spearheading accessibility, partly resulting from its inclusive atmosphere, underwrote this difference in policy.

### *A Personalized Educational Approach at Barnard College*

Barnard's history as a small women's college fundamentally shaped its approach to improving access for disabled students. Administrative leaders emphasized how the small size of the student body promoted individual attention for each person inside and outside the classroom. Academically, it allowed for closer student-to-faculty interactions since, from 1960 to 1970, 80% of classes had thirty-four students or fewer.<sup>89</sup> The Committee on Missions and Goals acknowledged the importance of continuing to increase curricular offerings to expand participation in seminars, colloquia, and discussion groups.<sup>90</sup> The objective of strengthening personalized support also motivated a new vision for the advising structure; administrators recommended increasing faculty involvement in order to remedy the existing situation of two or three advisors for each class of approximately 500 students.<sup>91</sup> Such proposals heightened the school's ability to promptly and directly address students' needs, which highlighted the institutional value of personalized education.

Course offerings further reflected this value, leaders argued. When Barnard College opened in 1889, it provided one of the few, if not only, chances for female students to study the sciences in New York City, and in the interwar period, Barnard students became more likely to study the sciences than Columbia College men.<sup>92</sup> In addition to the intrinsic value of expanding academic opportunities for women, the availability of these classes also "signalled [sic] the

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<sup>89</sup> "Report of the Committee on Missions and Goals," January 1970, BC05-14, Box 5, Folder 5, CARDS, BC.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> "Grant Proposal for Increased Accessibility and Disability Services at Barnard College," May 3, 1979, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 1, CARDS, BC; Robert McCaughey, *A College of Her Own: The History of Barnard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 116.

beginning of a tradition of open-minded flexibility.”<sup>93</sup> This academic ethos directly influenced students' daily experiences, allowing each student “to adapt her educational experience to meet her individual needs.”<sup>94</sup> In other words, female undergraduates could pursue the areas of study they themselves selected, which gave them agency over their learning.

While this personalized approach enabled all students to pursue opportunities that fit their interests, it also had specific implications for students with disabilities. Even before Barnard had a formal accommodations policy, the school authorized disabled students to extend their course of study or substitute course requirements to ensure accessibility.<sup>95</sup> Professors also offered resources, which built an informal academic support system.<sup>96</sup> Inclusion was not only limited to those within the campus gates due to the establishment of the Homebound Students Program in 1980. Through this initiative, students who could not come to campus for disability-related reasons attended class via a two-way telephone that allowed them to hear classroom discussions and participate over a speaker.<sup>97</sup> The few undergraduates who took classes at home emphasized the value of this education. Irene Mallia told the *Barnard Bulletin*, “Absolutely nothing can be done to improve this program!” and Shawn Mahieu said, “This is a wonderful program and Barnard should be proud of it. Not many schools have a program like this.”<sup>98</sup> Maureen Nolan, another student who stayed at home, showed the program’s academic and cultural importance:

There is a very special feeling about Barnard. You are made to feel that you are not only getting a superb education but that you are being groomed to take on a professional role

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<sup>93</sup> “Grant Proposal,” CARDS, BC.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> “Disabled Students at Barnard,” CARDS, BC; “Access Barnard College: A Comprehensive Guide to On and Off Campus Activities and Services for Disabled Students,” 1982, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 5, CARDS, BC.

<sup>96</sup> “Disabled Students at Barnard,” CARDS, BC.

<sup>97</sup> Robyn Miller, “Bringing Barnard Home,” *Barnard Bulletin*, September 28, 1983, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/e5251123-a958-488a-b923-8a92be38d057#page/4/mode/2up>.

In this article, Barnard’s Associate Director of the Office for Disabled Students noted that the expensiveness of this program limited the number of students who could participate. Additionally, only those with chronic disabilities were eligible for the program. See: Miller, “Bringing Barnard Home.”

<sup>98</sup> Irene Mallia and Shawn Mahieu in Miller, “Bringing Barnard Home.”

in the world. That's important for women. and it's doubly important for disabled women. At Barnard, you are taken seriously. I was made to feel that I was being brought up to be a scholar, and that was extremely reassuring to me.<sup>99</sup>

The institution cultivated an environment in which women could develop the confidence and skills to assume influential roles, and the atmosphere affected students even when they were not physically on campus. Disabled undergraduates noted this uniqueness, showing that administrators' views about education were also felt by those at the center of policy: the student body.

Inclusion was the goal for Barnard's community, which motivated the administration's comprehensive response. This approach focused on "designing an administrative, programmatic, and physical structure in which intelligent, highly motivated, disabled women can learn, grow, and flourish."<sup>100</sup> The end goal of learning, growing, and flourishing underscored the multifaceted nature of this program. That is, leaders sought to expand opportunities for students beyond Barnard just as they sought to deepen students' more immediate academic pursuits. Revealingly, the intended beneficiaries held three attributes—intelligence, motivation, and disability—which the grammatical separation showed were not mutually exclusive. Through this articulated vision, school officials fostered an empowering environment in which disabled women could develop academic and social skills.

Flexibility did not mean the school neglected to develop official policies on access, and the year 1977 marked a turning point in formalizing accommodations procedures. That year, President Jacquelyn Mattfeld appointed administrators, faculty, and students to serve on Barnard's inaugural Committee to Meet the Needs of the Handicapped (hereafter Committee) in

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<sup>99</sup> "Disabled Students at Barnard," CARDS, BC.

<sup>100</sup> "Grant Proposal," CARDS, BC.

order to fulfill “*both the letter and the spirit* of Sections 503 and 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act” [emphasis added].<sup>101</sup> The literal legal requirement of instituting reasonable accommodations to guarantee accessibility did not necessarily translate to the inclusion of disabled people. But this was the goal that Barnard articulated, which gave rise to an initiative that included three components: (i) modifying the physical structure, (ii) developing programs and services, and (iii) installing new equipment.<sup>102</sup>

The Committee primarily focused on removing physical barriers in academic buildings and residence halls to facilitate disabled students’ campus involvement. In 1979, the Committee prepared a comprehensive plan, at a cost of \$505,000, to modify seven of the main academic buildings, build new ramps, and renovate the tunnel system.<sup>103</sup> That year, Barnard received a grant of \$267,000 from the Max C. Fleischmann Foundation, and the Pew Charitable Trust contributed the outstanding \$238,000 for this project.<sup>104</sup> Included in this initiative was the construction of a tunnel between Altchul Hall and Milbank Hall, which contained classrooms for seven liberal arts departments and most administrative offices, including that of the Dean of Disabled Students, who used a wheelchair herself.<sup>105</sup> The Committee also planned to replace temporary ramps with permanent mason ones and to eliminate barriers in the tunnel system.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Jacqueline Anderson Mattfeld to Mary Ellen Tucker, March 10, 1980, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 5, CARDS, BC; “Grant Proposal,” CARDS, BC.

<sup>102</sup> Mattfeld to Tucker, CARDS, BC; “Grant Proposal,” CARDS, BC.

<sup>103</sup> James Barron, “Barnard to Smooth the Way for People in Wheelchairs,” *The New York Times*, November 23, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/11/23/archives/barnard-to-smooth-the-way-for-people-in-wheelchairs-barnard-to.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Barron, “Barnard to Smooth the Way”; Beth Knobel, “Futter, at Barnard Convocation, Says School is Stronger than Ever,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, September 9, 1982, [https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/6260f78a-c7f5-42dd-99a5-16d02bbc5207#mode/2up](https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19820909-01.2.22&srpos=41&e=-----198-en-20--41--txt-txIN-handicapped-----; Jeannette Walls, “Campus Renovations for Handicapped Students Under Way,” <i>Barnard Bulletin</i>, November 3, 1980, <a href=); Mattfeld to Tucker, CARDS, BC.

<sup>105</sup> Barron, “Barnard to Smooth the Way.”

<sup>106</sup> Hope Starkman, “2.2 Million Funds Major Campus Renovations,” *Barnard Bulletin*, August 31, 1982, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/406898b1-e484-47d3-ba3f-66c3b74cb378#mode/2up>; Walls, “Campus Renovations.”

By the 1982-1983 academic year, the tunnel system came to have three accessible entrances that connected all academic buildings, and several new ramps had been constructed. The following year, Barnard implemented another accessible entrance to the tunnel network.<sup>107</sup> Carrying out these proposals began to physicalize the institutional goal of inclusivity, which strengthened the connection between administrators' stated principles and their practical actions.

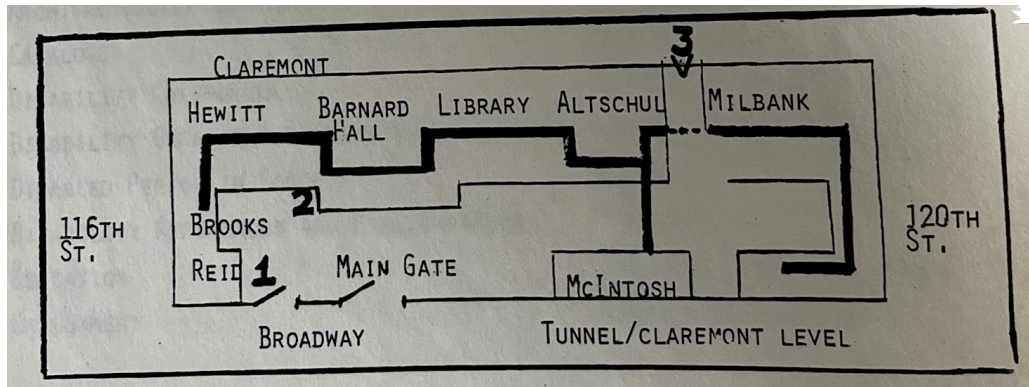


Figure 1: Tunnel System at Barnard College, 1982-1983.<sup>108</sup>

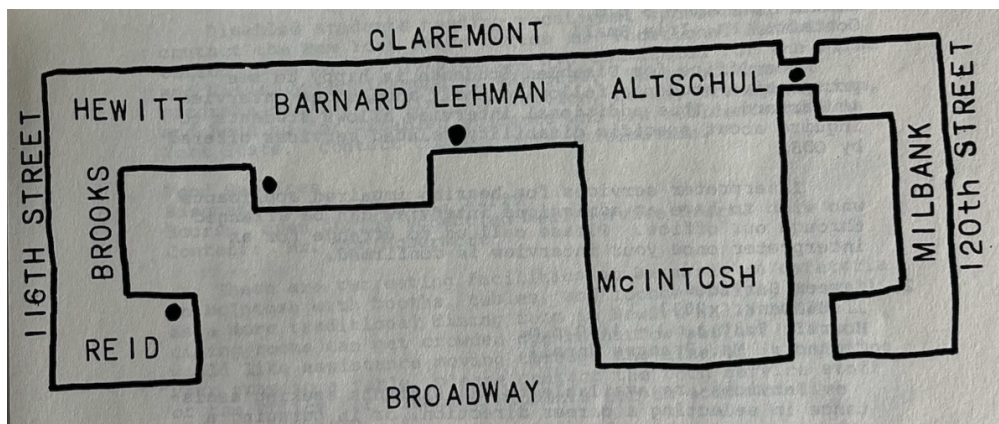


Figure 2: Tunnel Access Points at Barnard College, 1983-1984.<sup>109</sup>

The shift in the maps' format between the two academic years reveals an implicit argument about accessibility at Barnard. Even though the thick black line connects each

<sup>107</sup> "Access Barnard College," 1982, CARDS, BC.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> "Access Barnard College; Part I: A Comprehensive Guide to On and Off Campus Activities and Services for Disabled Students," 1983, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 6, CARDS, BC.

educational space in both, the sharp changes in direction in the first image emphasize the separateness of the buildings, much like how a traditional campus map would isolate each structure. Accessibility becomes an added feature, distancing students with mobility disabilities from their non-disabled peers. Conversely, the spacious view of the latter map reveals the fundamental connection between the academic buildings, which unites all members of the academic community in a continuous educational system. While the former image is a standard rendering of campus spaces, the latter advances an argument about inclusivity, as all become joined by the tunnels.

Architectural modifications moved beyond exterior design to also encompass the interior. The Subcommittee on Circulation and Security increased lighting, improved informational graphics, and installed emergency telephones to enhance tunnel use and safety.<sup>110</sup> The Subcommittee on Elevators and Safety Devices renovated elevator cars and lowered control panels.<sup>111</sup> The groups that focused on specific academic buildings spearheaded the development of accessible restrooms and the lowering of water fountains, and the team that concentrated on residential life planned dormitory modifications. By 1982, eight accessible rooms existed for students with mobility disabilities.<sup>112</sup> On account of these comprehensive campus changes, Dean of Disabled Students Julie Marsteller told the *Barnard Bulletin* that “It’s now possible for a Barnard Student to get up, go to class, go to lunch and go forth on a winter day without ever going outside.”<sup>113</sup> Her wording here is telling. Marsteller referred to “a Barnard student” rather than “a wheelchair user,” “a disabled student,” or even “a disabled person.” In doing so, she

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<sup>110</sup> Mattfeld to Tucker, CARDS, BC.

<sup>111</sup> Walls, “Campus Renovations for Handicapped Students.”

<sup>112</sup> Mattfeld to Tucker, CARDS, BC; “Access Barnard College,” 1982, CARDS, BC.

<sup>113</sup> Nancy Workman, “Office of Disabled Students Seeks Funds,” *Barnard Bulletin*, November 10, 1982, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/1bf9ee1-decf-4907-8740-e4315811e2d5#mode/2up>.

positioned infrastructural modifications—changes intended to increase accessibility—as a benefit to all students, not a particular subset. Her language and the Committee’s actions together attested to Barnard’s commitment to facilitating involvement in student life.

The Office for Disabled Students, likewise established in 1977, complemented the Committee’s focus on architectural modifications by developing and implementing programs and services. The very name of the office emphasized its person-oriented approach: staff centered their efforts on students, and students shaped the accommodations available. This translated to a mission of “insur[ing] that all students with long-term or temporary disabilities have equal opportunity to participate fully in the life of the college.”<sup>114</sup> By broadening its focus to explicitly include students with temporary disabilities (such as a broken leg), the office showed how all students may, at some point, draw on the available expertise and resources. In doing so, the staff underscored the importance of accessibility to all community members and situated it as a common good.

While the services of the Office for Disabled Students encompassed many aspects of campus life, they fit into three main categories—academic accommodations, personal assistance, and advocacy support. Students could register for accommodations such as readers, notetakers, and typists, and gain assistance when communicating their disability-related needs to professors. Those registered could also seek mobility and personal aides, as well as counseling on a temporary or long-term basis to discuss personal, academic, or medical matters.<sup>115</sup> But outside of individualized support for students with disabilities, staff members also sought to educate the Barnard community about societal issues pertaining to disability, such as the legal landscape and

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<sup>114</sup> “Access Barnard College,” 1982, CARDS, BC.

<sup>115</sup> [Office for Disabled Students], “Accommodative Aide Directory,” BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 8, CARDS, BC.

“cultural myths and stereotypes, handicapism and sexism, and strategies for change.”<sup>116</sup> In the view of staff, systemic biases created the obstacles that disabled people faced, and for the disabled community at Barnard, these biases included ones on account of gender and disability. This nuanced understanding motivated staff to not only provide resources that facilitated each student’s education but also to raise awareness of and challenge these barriers more widely. To actualize its activist goal, the Office interfaced with Barnard College administrators and other parts of Columbia University, in addition to “the world at large including service agencies, special interest groups, and the government.”<sup>117</sup> The Office for Disabled Students positioned itself as working within Barnard’s gates and beyond the school to fight for accessibility for disabled people.

Two core tenets shaped these administrators’ actions. First, school leaders acknowledged that “enriching the College community with highly motivated students who, given present circumstances, might not choose to attend Barnard, is reason enough to complete the proposed physical plant modifications.”<sup>118</sup> On one level, the enrollment of disabled students added to their own intellectual and personal development while also deepening the educational experience of other members of the Barnard community. Physical accessibility provided a critical step towards this enrichment, but access had implications beyond enabling students with mobility disabilities to navigate campus. As the Dean of Disabled Students noted, it would “relax the attitudinal barriers [that contribute to the] unconscious avoidance” of disabled students.<sup>119</sup> Her claim implied that fulfilling this goal enriched the social experience of all students by dissolving abstract obstacles between disabled and non-disabled students. The all-encompassing nature of

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<sup>116</sup> “Access Barnard College,” 1982, CARDS, BC.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> “Grant Proposal,” CARDS, BC.

<sup>119</sup> Julie Marsteller in Walls, “Campus Renovations for Handicapped Students.”



the program meant incorporating accessibility into the operations and mission of the school, expanding Barnard's focus on inclusivity to not only gender but also disability.

Throughout this work, one woman was particularly crucial. In 1978, Julie Marsteller, Barnard Class of 1969, became the first Dean of Disabled Students. A wheelchair user herself, Marsteller spearheaded a program for disabled women to develop educationally and personally. To this end, she led a fundraising campaign that earned over one million dollars for infrastructural projects, accommodations programs, and assistive technologies that would enable students with a range of disabilities to join the school community and support them once there.<sup>120</sup> She "forced not just individuals, but a whole institution to expand who it felt belongs," said Barnard Professor Christopher Baswell at her memorial.<sup>121</sup> Julie Marsteller brought the challenges faced by individuals to this college's attention and catalyzed administrative efforts to increase the involvement of disabled students in campus life. Her efforts also bear on Barnard's inherent awareness of inclusivity as a core value, where administrators, staff, and the student body employed a multifaceted, multi-tiered effort to position accessibility as a matter of collective importance.

### ***Approaching Accessibility Within the Large Research Institution, Columbia University***

Disabled students had an altogether contrasting experience across the street from Barnard on Columbia University's (referred to as the University hereafter) Morningside Heights campus. As Irene Bloom, a professor of East Asian Languages and Cultures, observed, the physical environment inhibited the participation of students with physical disabilities in academic and

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<sup>120</sup> Kris Kanthak, "Barnard Dean of Disabled Students Dies," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 14, 1990, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19900214-01.2.6&srpos=1&e=-----199-en-20--1--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

<sup>121</sup> Christopher Baswell in Kris Kanthak, "Dean Marsteller Mourned by BC Students, Faculty," *The Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 23, 1990, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19900223-01.2.4&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-marsteller----->.

student life.<sup>122</sup> She gained this insight while working with Dorothy Tessoehn, a wheelchair-using graduate student in her department. Although Tessoehn could enter the East Asian Library, she could not access the stacks, which required that she hire an attendant to bring books to her. The challenges of navigation extended outside the library walls, as the restrooms in Kent Hall, which housed the East Asian Languages and Cultures Department, were not wheelchair accessible. Low Library had the only wheelchair-accessible restroom on campus, so Tessoehn developed a “regimen of not drinking any liquids the entire day” to avoid having to navigate to the one restroom she could use.<sup>123</sup> The University did not provide the essential infrastructure and support, forcing Tessoehn to develop her own strategies to access course material and cement her belonging in the school community. Her approach worked in that she could access the resources guaranteed to non-disabled community members. Still, in addition to the fact that her peers did not have to restrict their fluid intake, this reliance on a student’s initiative was far from ideal.

Tessoehn’s experience exemplified that of people with mobility disabilities at the University, including that of undergraduate students in Columbia College and the School of Engineering and Applied Science, who resided and attended classes on the Morningside Heights campus. (I do not focus on the School of General Studies, the third undergraduate school, since the University does not guarantee housing for these students.) Columbia’s complicated administrative structure contrasts sharply with that of Barnard, where administrators set policies that solely affected the operations of one school. Due to this bureaucratic difference and more complex architectural issues, Columbia had a more protracted response to the law.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Irene Bloom to Robert Murphy, February 14, 1980, UA#0001, Box 848, Folder 14, Central Files (Office of the President records) (hereafter Central Files), The Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University (hereafter RBML).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> McCaughey, *A College of Her Own*, 218-221.

In the Spring of 1978, the University formed its own ad hoc Committee on the Handicapped (ad hoc Committee hereafter) to ensure compliance with the regulations of Section 504. Composed of faculty and administrators, this committee was tasked with developing and implementing a plan to eliminate physical barriers.<sup>125</sup> Achieving this objective first involved identifying existing obstacles through a self-evaluation that asked each part of the University to determine whether policies and programs that applied to students discriminated against disabled people. Schools had to justify their findings of nondiscrimination or propose “non-physical or non-structural changes” to rectify discrimination.<sup>126</sup>

Given the disjointed nature of the University, administrators at each school managed their own evaluations. Columbia College leaders found that any degree requirement could be altered to meet the individual needs of a disabled student.<sup>127</sup> Students could also make use of several accommodations, such as taping lectures, taking exams out of the classroom with specific typewriters and equipment, or sitting in the front row of the class to improve the audio. Ultimately, Columbia College concluded that “No activities discriminated against handicapped students.”<sup>128</sup> Disabled students in the School of Engineering and Applied Science could utilize many of the same accommodations as their Columbia College peers, although findings related to the curriculum differed slightly.<sup>129</sup> According to Dean of Students James Parker, the flexibility of non-technical academic requirements allowed students to select classes that met their needs, and

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<sup>125</sup> Howard Heller, “CU Sans Handicapped Plan One Month After Deadline,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 6, 1978, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19780206-01.2.4&srpos=2&e=-----197-en-20--1--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

<sup>126</sup> “Project on the Handicapped: Characteristics of the Columbia University Self-Evaluation of Student Services,” April 28, 1978, UA#0083, Box 630, Folder 30, Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Records (hereafter Office of the Provost), RBML.

<sup>127</sup> “Self-Evaluation [Columbia College],” 1978, UA#0083, Box 630, Folder 30, Office of the Provost, RBML.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> James F. Parker to Michael Mooney, “Section 504 Self-Evaluation: Academic Adjustments and School-based Non-Academic Services [School of Engineering and Applied Science],” June 22, 1978, UA#0083, Box 630, Folder 30, Office of the Provost, RBML.

the team-based laboratory courses enabled students to draw on their peers' strengths. Parker said one requirement had arguably less flexibility: students in many areas of study had to complete one course in graphics, which involved understanding various types of engineering drawings, and faculty expressed "serious doubts that a blind student would be able to complete the graphics course."<sup>130</sup>

The University's process for filing accessibility-related grievances satisfied the stipulations of Section 504, but other issues plagued the self-evaluation process. The format of the evaluations varied widely across different schools within the University, as did compliance with the legal requirements of the self-evaluation. For instance, when identifying physical barriers, some schools cataloged "every conceivable kind of building or space where barriers may generally exist without identifying any specific barriers."<sup>131</sup> The disjointed administrative structure hindered the creation of a clear list of inaccessible design features. Bureaucratic irregularities consequently prevented the University from identifying and rectifying specific issues, which obstructed infrastructural improvements.

Despite finding no explicit areas of discrimination in the College or the School of Engineering, many physical obstacles on the Morningside Heights campus inhibited educational access. This motivated President William McGill to reconstitute the ad hoc Committee on the Handicapped as the President's Advisory Committee on the Handicapped (Advisory Committee hereafter) in 1980. Comprised of three administrators, two professors, two students, and four additional members, the inaugural Advisory Committee expanded its membership while retaining the administrators and faculty who previously served.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Philip Benson, "Memorandum," February 5, 1980, UA#0001, Box 581, Folder 41, Central Files, RBML.

<sup>132</sup> William McGill, "Memorandum from William McGill to The Advisory Committee to the President on the Handicapped," February 21, 1980, UA#0001, Box 848, Folder 14, Central Files, RBML.

Through the Advisory Committee's work, two contrasting explanations—one technical and one cultural—emerged to describe the root of inaccessibility at Columbia University. On one hand, McGill articulated a clear perspective about the causes of campus obstacles:

This campus was designed before the turn of the century on a hilly location in Upper Manhattan. Over the years we have become constricted by the competitive demand for Manhattan real estate, so that we have tended to grow vertically in the campus quadrangle and also creep across busy city streets. These characteristic features of our local geography create unusual challenges for Columbia's handicapped people.<sup>133</sup>

For him, the history of the University's expansion gave rise to inaccessibility. The preservation of the institution required spatial expansion to keep pace with peer schools and ensure it continued attracting high-achieving applicants.<sup>134</sup> What complicated this growth was the high cost of Manhattan real estate and spatial constraints, which resulted in vertical development. Stairs came to connect the Morningside Heights campus, inhibiting access for people with mobility disabilities. Members of the Advisory Committee agreed that this view accounted for some challenges facing disabled people. Still, Professor Robert Krauss, who served as the chair of the ad hoc Committee, raised another issue. "It seems to me," the Psychology professor asserted, "that the University has not been as sensitive as it might be to the needs of the handicapped members of the Columbia community. It would be very gratifying to help contribute to the alleviation of this problem."<sup>135</sup> Krauss' reference to the University's impersonal culture starkly contrasted the reflections of Barnard administrators and students, who emphasized the compassionate school atmosphere. Rejecting the argument that campus barriers stemmed

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Board of Visitors Winter Meeting, "Columbia College in the 1980s: Some Views of the Board of Visitors," February 2, 1980, UA#0001, Box 843, Folder 14, Central Files, RBML; "Memorandum," February 21, 1980, Central Files, RBML.

<sup>135</sup> Robert M. Krauss to Michael I. Sovern, June 24, 1980, UA#0001, Box 848, Folder 14, Central Files, RBML.

from the geographic location, Krauss instead linked school culture to the challenges facing people with disabilities.

The goal of improving access to centers of academic and student life informed the Advisory Committee's initial priorities and recommendations. They focused on creating access points where none existed, prioritizing improvements to navigation around the general campus, followed by academic buildings and then particular spaces. More specifically, their first goals were to (i) facilitate navigation between North Campus and South Campus, (ii) create access to Butler Library from South Campus, (iii) enable wheelchair use in Van Am Quad, the location of John Jay Residence Hall and Dining Hall, and (iv) improve access to classroom spaces, prioritizing buildings that held many classes over those with fewer classrooms or administrative offices.<sup>136</sup> In addition to devising new access points, the Advisory Committee focused on eliminating barriers in existing access sites. For instance, a metal ramp by Pulitzer Hall connected College Walk to South Campus, and one by Kent Hall connected College Walk to North Campus. However, since the University had installed these features to facilitate deliveries rather than wheelchair navigation, the ramps were too steep and slippery for safe use in good weather and highly dangerous in poor weather.<sup>137</sup> These considerations attested to the Advisory Committee having "the student end in hand."<sup>138</sup> Put differently, members concentrated on improving access to regions that would, in their view, most enhance the student experience.

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<sup>136</sup> "Budget 1981-1982," 1981, UA#0083, Box 630, Folder 30, Office of the Provost, RBML.

<sup>137</sup> Presidential Advisory Committee on the Handicapped to the Capital Budget Committee, April 22, 1981, UA#0083, Box 630, Folder 30, Office of the Provost, RBML.

<sup>138</sup> Phillip Benson, "Interdepartmental Memorandum," May 23, 1980, UA#0083, Box 630, Folder 30, Office of the Provost, RBML.

The Advisory Committee resembled its Barnard counterpart in that both focused on the student body first and foremost and aimed to expand access to most campus spaces, including libraries, residential halls, and classrooms. However, in ordering these tasks, an Advisory Committee member initially positioned library access as the first action item, followed by access to North Campus and South Campus, and finally, classroom space. In the final draft, another member switched the first two priorities.<sup>139</sup> Given that the Advisory Committee shaped what people with disabilities could and could not access, disabled students, who were the target of the initiatives, would gain access to the University's community of learners without necessarily being able to participate in other aspects of student activities. The sequence underscored some members' perspective that the importance of accessing books and knowledge superseded inclusion in campus life.

By the beginning of the 1981-1982 academic year, the University began actualizing the Advisory Committee's proposals. In October 1981, the Capital Budget Committee, which examines the University's annual budget and discusses the budgetary plans, approved \$300,000 for the first step in removing architectural barriers: constructing ramps from South Campus to College Walk and an elevator by Dodge Hall that connected College Walk to North Campus and the West Tunnel.<sup>140</sup> After Murphy expressed the Advisory Committee's "disappoint[ment]" in the failure to allocate funding for a ramp to Butler Library, the Capital Budget Committee approved funding for a temporary wooden ramp from South Campus to this building the following month.<sup>141</sup> In May 1982, the budget committee allocated another \$600,000 to construct

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<sup>139</sup> Rosalind Fink to Norman Mintz, "Memorandum," June 1, 1982, UA#0001, Box 892, Folder 11, Central Files, RBML.

<sup>140</sup> "Memorandum by President's Advisory Committee on the Handicapped," June 1, 1982, UA#0001, Box 848, Folder 14, Central Files, RBML; "Budget Committee," Columbia University Senate, accessed March 31, 2024, <https://senate.columbia.edu/committees/budget>.

<sup>141</sup> Robert F. Murphy to Diana Murray, October 27, 1981, UA#0083, Box 554, Folder Committees – Committees on Disability, Office of the Provost, RBML; Diana T. Murray to Robert F. Murphy, November 20, 1981, UA#0083,

a handrail on the steps near the Schermerhorn Extension and a ramp connecting College Walk to South Campus from Hamilton Hall.<sup>142</sup> Within a year of proposing infrastructural change, these two groups of administrators, faculty, and students significantly improved campus use for disabled people.

The Advisory Committee's priorities for the 1982-1983 academic year likewise concerned the navigation of campus space and academic buildings. Extending the previous year's goals, members advocated for ramps to Kent Hall, which would provide a critical access point between North Campus and South Campus. The Advisory Committee prioritized Havemeyer Hall, which contained many laboratories and classrooms, and recommended chairlifts by Schermerhorn Hall and Hamilton Hall because of the significant number of classes held in both buildings and the administrative importance of the latter. Improvements to the West Tunnel would facilitate wheelchair use around campus, and accessible restrooms, at the time found in only four academic buildings, would enhance the overall participation of people with disabilities on campus.<sup>143</sup> These exterior design projects were not all that were needed to bring the University into compliance with the federal statute; existing accessible features also required modifications. The Advisory Committee stressed one such case: elevators on the Morningside Heights campus needed exterior and interior call buttons to ensure wheelchair users had full access.<sup>144</sup> Only by implementing these solutions would the Committee be "satisfied."<sup>145</sup> This

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Box 554, Folder Committees – Committees on Disability, Office of the Provost, RBML; Rosalind S. Fink to Norman Mintz, "Memorandum: Requests for Funding of Architectural Renovations by the Morningside President's Advisory Committee on the Handicapped," June 1, 1982, UA#0001, Box 892, Folder 11, Central Files, RBML.

<sup>142</sup> Rosalind Fink, "Memorandum [RE: Requests for Funding of Architectural Renovations by the Morningside President's Advisory Committee on the Handicapped]," June 1, 1982, UA#0001, Central Files, Box 892, Folder 11, RBML.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> "Memorandum: Requests for Funding," June 1, 1982, Central Files, RBML.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.



wording suggested that such changes could provide sufficient campus access for people with disabilities.

Though the Advisory Committee's cost estimates considered functional necessities, they also factored in aesthetic design, where aesthetics signified the maintenance of the Classical design of the Morningside Heights campus. Approval of these projects depended on satisfying these conditions due to the architectural requirement to maintain the character of the campus plan. This consideration increased the palatability of the Advisory Committee's solutions and integrated accessibility into the original design, although it also raised the cost of construction.<sup>146</sup> In addition to the goal of preservation, other architectural factors increased the logistical complexity of campus modifications: the University's listing on the National Register of Historic Places and the landmark designations of Pupin Physics Laboratory and Low Memorial Library.<sup>147</sup> These designations require the University to seek governmental approval for building alterations, adding additional time and financial constraints to the projects. To account for these architectural features, the Advisory Committee met with Dean James Stewart Polshik, the President's Special Advisor for Physical Development and Planning.<sup>148</sup> Compliance with the landmark status and preservation requirement increased the complexity of the overall initiative, but it particularly raised the financial costs of construction and limited the measures the University could take.

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<sup>146</sup> Advisory Committee to the Capital Budget Committee, April 22, 1981, UA#0001, Box 867, Folder 16, Central Files, RBML; Morningside Advisory Committee on the Handicapped, "Minutes of Meeting," November 18, 1980, UA#0214, Box 364, Folder Handicapped: President's Advisory Council 1980-1983, Columbia University Libraries: Library Office Files (hereafter Library Office Files), RBML.

<sup>147</sup> "Columbia Has Three National Historic Landmarks on Campus," Columbia College Today, January 18, 2023, <https://www.college.columbia.edu/cct/issue/fall-2022/article/columbia-has-three-national-historic-landmarks-campus>.

<sup>148</sup> The President's Advisory Committee on the Handicapped to Capital Budget Committee, April 22, 1981, UA#0083, Box 554, Folder Committees – Committees on Disability, Office of the Provost, RBML.

These architectural and financial limitations contributed to tension between institutional principles and the implementation of access. In 1981, President Michael Sovern affirmed “*our* role as a caring institution [emphasis added]” when announcing the University’s Affirmative Action Program on the employment of people with disabilities.<sup>149</sup> This initiative, he argued, would “assure that we do not deprive ourselves of the company of outstanding people who are successfully meeting difficult challenges every day of their lives.”<sup>150</sup> Sovern asserted a united institutional identity, a “we,” that brought all members of the University together under shared values of inclusivity and skillfulness. This mission, reminiscent of that of Barnard College, enriched each person's educational and professional experience, giving everyone a personal interest and stake in accessibility.

Yet disabled students suggested that the University did not realize the values Sovern articulated. By way of illustration, David Birnbaum, who used a wheelchair, wrote a letter to the Director of Admissions of the School of Engineering and Applied Science and several other senior leaders, including President Sovern, to decline his offer of admission. He expounded on one key reason that motivated his decision—“my dissatisfaction with the Morningside Heights campus and environs”—without detailing or even naming others.<sup>151</sup> He recognized that at least one entrance provided access to almost every building but argued that “this accessibility was limited and without careful planning.”<sup>152</sup> Ramps were dangerous, renovated inaccessible stalls were “especially displeasing,” and the single elevator between North Campus and South Campus

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<sup>149</sup> Michael L. Sovern to Vice Presidents, Deans, Directors, and Chairmen of Departments, “Memorandum,” March 31, 1981, UA#0001, Box 867, Folder 16, Central Files, RBML.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> David Birnbaum to T.R. Phillips, September 10, 1984, Folder Handicapped, Office of the Provost, UA#0083, Box 554, Folder 8, RBML.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

was “inconvenient.”<sup>153</sup> He implied that campus modifications had made access possible but not well-considered, leading to them to be cumbersome and ultimately ineffective. Birnbaum reasoned that “Columbia may believe they do not have a large enough population of students with ambulatory disabilities to warrant investment in accessible modification.”<sup>154</sup> In his view, this resulted in “a cyclic effect of low disabled student enrollment. Columbia must move beyond merely making buildings accessible in order to comply with laws and concern themselves with the quality of life for a disabled member of their community.”<sup>155</sup> If frustration and inconvenience were less tangible effects of inaccessibility, then enrollment decisions were a practical ramification. What this student suggested was that institutional policy shaped school communities and motivated enrollment decisions, and an administrative focus on inclusion, rather than strict legal compliance, was essential in making disabled students feel welcome on campus.

Faculty and administrators later echoed this student’s sentiments as they analyzed building projects that prioritized other goals over access. In 1987, Murphy wrote a letter to President Sovern expressing the Advisory Committee’s “disappoint[ment]” that “recent renovation projects, ideal opportunities for increasing access instead left current barriers in place or, in some instances, created new ones.”<sup>156</sup> Murphy reasoned that accessibility had fallen prey to “oversight or short-sighted expediency”: the closure of the East Tunnel in the 1970s saved a few thousand dollars but “destroyed an excellent access route” that would require heavy investment to reopen.<sup>157</sup> Perhaps even more clearly, he examined the costs of the Havemeyer Hall building

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<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Robert Murphy to Michael Sovern, “Memorandum,” February 4, 1987, Box 554, Folder Committees – Committees on Disability, Office of the Provost, UA#0083, Box 554, Folder 30, RBML.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

project, arguing, “As these economies are but a minute fraction of a \$27,000,000 project (wheelchair access through the main entrance to Havemeyer was estimated at \$205,000), the conclusion that the University views full accessibility in new construction as a minor frill, an expendable extra, seems inescapable.”<sup>158</sup>

In other words, what the University saw as nonessential could have manifest exclusionary consequences for disabled people. At Uris Hall, the home of Columbia Business School, Murphy noted that a renovation project “effectively foreclosed” the building to wheelchair users by eliminating accessible entries.<sup>159</sup> By implication, the architectural changes resulted in concrete consequences for the composition of the student body by obstructing navigation and access for enrolled wheelchair-using students. But more deeply, this renovation also contributed to the cultural exclusion of wheelchair users, evoking the complaint raised by Joseph Gibney and Jennifer Kern. The effects also extended beyond current students. The building modification had the potential to reduce the applications and enrollment of prospective disabled students for a similar reason that the admitted engineering student declined his offer, indirectly resulting in the molding of the school’s demographics. For the Advisory Committee, the new barriers served as a salient illustration of the University’s values and priorities, priorities which contrasted those stated by Sovern.

Another dimension—gender—complicated considerations about access in theory and practice. When Murphy wrote this memorandum in 1987, Columbia College had only begun admitting female students four years earlier. The shift in institutional policy required infrastructural change to ensure their inclusion in university life. However, in his memorandum, Murphy highlighted how the plan to construct an accessible restroom in the Women’s Health

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

Service had been eliminated “without any consideration of the consequences.”<sup>160</sup> On the one hand, this issue echoed the one that Dorothy Tesso, the wheelchair-using graduate student, faced in 1980. On a deeper level, though, the absence of an accessible restroom for female students called attention to the misalignment of the University’s articulated goal of including “all” students and the lack of infrastructural support to accommodate them. Murphy’s memorandum underscored how the University did not meaningfully implement the infrastructural changes required to achieve Sovern’s mission.

Murphy’s critique further revealed how concrete design features manifested the intangible qualities of university life. In his view, the issues of the construction projects were “elegant testimony to the fact that accessibility should be just as much a *conditio sine qua non* of all University building and renovation plans as strength of structural supports.”<sup>161</sup> Murphy’s image of an architectural plan that allowed all people to navigate campus easily recalled how Barnard blended their renovations with the value of inclusivity. But his vision also evoked Sovern’s notion of a “caring institution.”<sup>162</sup> Though Murphy drew on a similar idea, he instead argued that the school had fallen short of fulfilling it. “Accessibility is not a negotiable luxury,” he argued, “and it is inexcusable, even unthinkable, to create new barriers to the handicapped in the construction of renovation projects.”<sup>163</sup> In addition to the explicit criticism for the University’s failure to reach its stated intention, Murphy’s remarks revealed that this failure weakened the institution’s standing on a broader scale. The lack of concrete manifestations of access reflected more intangible qualities of University life, and “A policy of full accessibility [...] would do much to reassert the University’s commitment to a campus open to all whatever

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Sovern to Vice Presidents, March 31, 1981, Central Files, RBML.

<sup>163</sup> “Memorandum,” February 4, 1987, Office of the Provost, RBML.

their circumstances of life.”<sup>164</sup> This claim underscored what Murphy saw as a fundamental connection between physical access, institutional policy, and educational values: these tenets shaped the daily experience of all those at the University and mutually influenced each other, as institutional policy shaped architectural development, which itself cemented or called into question administrative emphases on inclusivity.

This chapter has revealed two critical differences in the approach to access at Barnard and Columbia—one tangible and one much less so. Barnard’s sole focus on undergraduates fostered a more direct link between the student body, faculty, and administrators, which gave rise to an understandably simpler institutional structure. Such a structure produced a favorable context for successfully implementing accessible design solutions: after committees identified issues and proposed solutions, they sought funding and implemented the recommendations. By contrast, Columbia College and the School of Engineering and Applied Science are part of a complex research institution where committees had to propose solutions to leaders with various levels of authority within the bureaucracy. The desire for accessibility may have existed, but additional responsibilities over many undergraduate and graduate schools complicated budgetary allocations. So, despite identifying the importance of access, seemingly competing needs could take precedence. These structural differences between Barnard and Columbia contributed to their disparate approaches.

However, the structure did not fully account for the divergence; instead, another factor—school culture—fundamentally influenced implementation. At Barnard, students and administrators articulated a value of inclusivity that united the school community. With

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

Barnard's institutional history as a women's college came an emphasis on access where students from many backgrounds engaged in campus life. In this environment, accessibility became central not only for people with disabilities but for all individuals within Barnard. Conversely, Columbia's fragmented university structure inhibited the creation of a common identity and reinforced individualism. A reduced focus on the collective prevented the positioning of accessibility as a community need, which, in turn, required that each student advocate for their own needs and that the Office for Disabled Student Services fulfill needs on an individual basis. The contrasting views of access—one as a core tenet of college life and the other as a discrete requirement for students—gave rise to different manifestations of accessible design with varying levels of effectiveness.

### *Chapter 3: Care in Higher Education*

*"This place [Morningside Heights campus] is an architectural disaster [...] It's a pathetic situation, and it starts with the administration."* Joseph Gibney, Columbia Law School, Class of 1989.<sup>165</sup>

In 1986, Joseph Gibney, a second-year law student, and Jennifer Kern, Barnard College Class of 1988, filed a complaint with the New York Regional Office of Civil Rights that charged Columbia University with violating Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Physical barriers continued to impede access to the Morningside Heights campus; according to Gibney, unsafe inclines or the lack of side guards meant that many ramps did not comply with federal regulations, and several buildings remained inaccessible to wheelchair users. Consequently, Gibney stated that he had spent forty-five minutes during a medical emergency trying to enter the University's Health Services Office on the third floor of John Jay Hall.<sup>166</sup> Given the time-sensitive nature of such an emergency, physical obstacles could lead to the lack of necessary medical treatment and adverse health effects. But unequal access to institutional resources also revealed how people with disabilities were excluded from campus life and the broader university culture.

While the complaint addressed the seemingly objective question of the University's compliance with the law, Kern stressed another dimension—the human one. “Basically,” she explained, “we filed a complaint because being a disabled student at Columbia University is very frustrating.”<sup>167</sup> The emphasis on the personal cost showed how architectural design could take a marked psychological toll, meaning that inaccessibility could have less physical but still striking

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<sup>165</sup> Joseph Gibney in Maria Nieves, “Wheelchair Inaccessibility Blasted,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, September 11, 1987, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19870911-01.2.5&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-wheelchair+inaccessibility----->.

<sup>166</sup> Nieves, “Wheelchair Inaccessibility.”

<sup>167</sup> Jennifer Kern in Nieves, “Wheelchair Inaccessibility.”



effects on disabled persons. Though the complaint only resulted in minor modifications and not the comprehensive changes they sought, Gibney told the *Barnard Bulletin*, "It let the University know we meant business and gave us a little future leverage."<sup>168</sup> For them, this measure had symbolic value as much as practical importance due to the awareness it raised.

This chapter analyzes the concept of care within a college or university setting, mainly focusing on various relationships within these schools. I first discuss the idea of care broadly within the field of disability studies and apply it to institutions of higher education. I then focus on students' experiences at Berkeley's Cowell Memorial Residence Program, Barnard College, and Columbia University. In these sections, I examine manifestations of care between disabled students and administrators, faculty, and peers. I show how this intangible concept had nonetheless "felt" ramifications for those in the university, whether disabled or non-disabled.

### ***Defining Care and Culture***

Analyzing care within the context of higher education first requires unpacking this concept. Professors Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher define this term in their paper "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," where they suggest that "caring be viewed as *a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible* [sic]."<sup>169</sup> Tronto expands on this definition in her book *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice*, where she argues that a "world" includes one's self and one's surroundings.<sup>170</sup> According to this theory, caring is necessarily relational and involves both self-care and interpersonal care. Another concept—the Ethics of Care—connects to

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<sup>168</sup> Antigone Stoken, "New Statute Opens Doors for Disabled Students: BC Student Considers Filing Complaint against CU," *Barnard Bulletin*, April 4, 1988, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/d16924f1-778b-4f50-998c-a1d8e0e2c95a#page/4/mode/2up>.

<sup>169</sup> Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care*, eds. Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990), 40.

<sup>170</sup> Joan C. Tronto, *Caring Democracy: Markets, Equality, and Justice* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 19.

Tronto's dual focus on the self and others. For philosopher Virginia Held, "The central focus is on the compelling moral alliance of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we are taking responsibility."<sup>171</sup> While concentrating on the idea of dependence, this view leaves room for any person to require care at some point in their life, including childhood and old age. Consequently, care becomes a universal need. Reason and emotion each play a significant role in justifying this theory since emotion illuminates the most moral course of action and facilitates its implementation through the application of reason. The relationship between reason and emotion is critical to understanding the relationship between the intent and impact of accessibility initiatives in higher education.<sup>172</sup>

Tronto's and Fisher's five-step methodology reveals the nuances of care. First, a person recognizes unfulfilled needs and, second, assumes responsibility for meeting those needs. Third, they perform the work necessary for care, and fourth, they evaluate the recipient's feedback to understand the sufficiency of their actions.<sup>173</sup> Finally, Tronto adds in *Caring Democracy* that the fifth element "requires that caring needs and the ways in which they are met need to be consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all."<sup>174</sup> With this extension to the process, care can only be genuinely performed when it complies with a set of ethical principles.

These theories give rise to the question of who participates in care, either as the giver or recipient. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* provides one key answer as she analyzes how care moves from an individual matter to one of collective importance through "care webs." By care webs, Piepzna-Samarasinha means care that

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<sup>171</sup> Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>174</sup> Tronto, *Caring Democracy*, 23.

is informed by the needs and wants of disabled people themselves. Disabled and non-disabled people may together navigate a care web, or a web may exist with only disabled people giving, receiving, and dictating the terms of care.<sup>175</sup>

The ability to satisfy these principles in a university setting depends in part, I argue, on the school culture. I draw on Kent Peterson's and Terrence Deal's theory in *The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook* to understand the concept of culture. These scholars define culture as "the complex elements of values, traditions, language, and purpose," which exist "in the deeper elements of a school: the unwritten rules and assumptions, the combination of rituals and traditions, the array of symbols and artifacts, the special language and phrasing that the staff and students use."<sup>176</sup> This intangible aspect of an educational setting, which influences the day-to-day interactions and activities of students, faculty, and staff, develops from the approaches that individuals take to "solve problems, cope with tragedies, and celebrate successes."<sup>177</sup> That is, culture arises from how people navigate school life while simultaneously shaping how they approach these activities.

### ***An Informed Care Model at the Cowell Memorial Residence Program***

At the University of California, Berkeley, students with physical disabilities navigated two different, albeit overlapping, systems of care—one directed by administrative leaders and the other, developed later, by students themselves. The formal services in each model generally matched; what set the models apart was the relative control of disabled people, which determined students' responses and the level of support they articulated.

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<sup>175</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 41.

<sup>176</sup> Kent D. Peterson and Terrence E. Deal, *The Shaping School Culture Fieldbook*, 2nd ed. (United Kingdom: Wiley, 2009), 9.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

Recall from Chapter One that the Cowell Memorial Residence Program offered daily attendant services, whereby non-disabled students supported their disabled peers with bathing, dressing, and other needs, and rehabilitation professionals assisted them with maintaining physical and mental health through exercise, preventive medicine, and psychological support.<sup>178</sup> This initiative offered disabled students the opportunity to participate in higher education. At the same time, the fact that non-disabled staff administered and managed care reinforced perceptions about the medical dependency of disabled people, evidencing Berkeley's paternalistic approach to accessibility that began to frustrate the students.

Dissatisfied yet inspired, Cowell participants expanded this model by establishing the Physically Disabled Students' Program, briefly introduced in Chapter One. Edward Roberts and John Hessler, the first documented wheelchair users at Berkeley, "teamed up" shortly after the latter's enrollment in 1963 to support one another in navigating campus life.<sup>179</sup> Under their leadership, Cowell residents planned, founded, and directed this new program. For their first year at the university, disabled students lived in residence halls with twenty-four-hour access to support resources. Then, they transitioned to living independently in an apartment, a home, or with their parents while maintaining access to the program's services, including wheelchair repair, accessible transportation, and attendant referrals.<sup>180</sup> There, disabled students managed their own care and engaged in an act of self-determination to identify and fulfill the needs of disabled members of the student body.

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<sup>178</sup> Herbert R. Willsmore, "As participants in the Cowell...", 1970, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 3, Herbert Willsmore Papers, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter UCB).

<sup>179</sup> Lynn Kidder, "They Fought Disabilities and Won," May 2, 1982, *Daily Ledger*, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 4, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>180</sup> "Report on Employment Survey Physically Disabled Students' Residence Program," 1987, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 3, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

Though disabled people managed the Physically Disabled Students Program, informal peer-to-peer relationships revealed another dimension to care. As graduate Herbert Willsmore remembered, “At mealtime and in the evenings, we often talked about our problems and exchanged ideas about how to solve them. At first, discussions centered around self-care techniques: how to empty one’s own urinal bag, how to put on a jacket without assistance, how to prevent bedsores or bladder infections.”<sup>181</sup> By implication, disabled students assumed the role of educators about independent living strategies, and their firsthand experience strengthened their ability to offer informed advice to their peers. Willsmore emphasized how “Over the years people have modified and adapted various self-care methods to suit their own needs,” which led to his claim that “The informal exchange of ideas and techniques among quadriplegics is the most important aspect of this learning process.”<sup>182</sup> Students took on caregiving responsibilities by assisting their peers with tasks of daily living and managing their own needs. Interdependence arose as they supported each other in attaining self-sufficiency. Residence with peers who had comparable experiences facilitated this knowledge exchange. Students shared the understanding that they deserved to have their needs met, a goal they recognized they were best suited to satisfy.

Another aspect of the program—the demographics—deepened the educational experience. Willsmore reflected that the residence aspect “promotes a feeling of security from a healthy group identification. Mutual learning occurs from the disparity of the length of time individuals have been injured, the variety of ages, and the coeducational nature of the living

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<sup>181</sup> Herbert Willsmore, “Autobiographical Summary,” 1972(?), BANC MSS99/249c, Box 1, Folder 1, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>182</sup> “As Participants In...,” Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

conditions.”<sup>183</sup> Residents’ similar disability experiences fostered empathy, a sense of comfort, and belonging. At the same time, their different intersecting identities shaped both their disability and life experience, which enriched formal and informal educational opportunities.

Student groups also facilitated caregiving. In 1969, disabled students formed the Rolling Quadriplegics ( “the Rolling Quads,” as shortened by members) with the goal of “mak[ing] university life easier and more comfortable for severely handicapped students by assaying developing resources and by facilitating communications between this group and the community.”<sup>184</sup> The group provided a platform for organization around a shared commitment to independent living and expanding access to educational opportunities for disabled people.<sup>185</sup> The collaboration of disabled students worked to shift the university's culture through ongoing communication. This collective approach gave rise to a community that emphasized the needs of students, showing how care manifested itself in sites of identification and unification.

The Cowell and Physically Disabled Students Programs underscored what I call an “informed model of care.” In this model, physically disabled students collaborated with peers who shared similar life experiences to improve access to campus and city spaces. Such an approach lends credence to Piepzna-Samarasinha’s concept of collective disabled intelligence,” which is fostered by disabled people sharing practical advice and emotional support derived from personal experience to create a system sustained by disabled people.<sup>186</sup> Similarly, the principal focus on physical disability in Berkeley’s initiatives allowed students to share informed, practical

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<sup>183</sup> Herbert Willsmore, “Cowell Rehabilitation Program,” September 26, 1969, BANC MSS99/249c, Box 1, Folder 3, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>184</sup> “The Rolling Quadriplegics Charter,” 1970, BANC MSS99/247c, Box 1, Folder 6, Herbert Willsmore Papers, UCB.

<sup>185</sup> “History and Development of Physically Disabled Students Program,” September 1974, BANC MSS 99/147 c, Box 1, Folder 3, John Velton Papers, UCB.

<sup>186</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 61.

approaches while also creating a psychologically supportive environment. This shaped the development of a model that was kept alive through the drive of disabled people themselves.

### *Collective Care among Barnard College Students*

Formal and informal systems of care also took shape at Barnard College but in a different form from Berkeley's informed care model. At Barnard, what I call a "collective care" approach grew out of disabled and non-disabled people incorporating accessibility into the overall educational mission of the school. Architectural modifications situated access as a community good, while an emphasis on a welcoming culture allowed students to connect with both disabled and non-disabled people.

The school's identity as a women's college and the size of the student body integrally shaped manifestations of care. As a small college, Barnard College could cultivate an educational environment where administrators, faculty, staff, and students could communicate more directly. Of course, smallness in and of itself does not mean that the administration will act on the needs of the student body. However, the Committee on Mission and Goals saw school leaders as creating such an environment due to the "program of individual attention" that promoted greater awareness of student concerns and the potential to address them effectively.<sup>187</sup> Because of administrative accountability to the student body, Barnard, in theory, satisfied the terms of care, where care assumed pedagogical and personal dimensions. This second element became apparent when analyzing the words of Temma Kaplan, the director of the Women's Center. In her view, Barnard's identity as a single-sex school created an environment where female students were "more secure and comfortable, enabling them to speak out and become

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<sup>187</sup> "Report of the Committee on Missions and Goals," January 1970, BC05-14, Box 5, Folder 5, Center for Accessibility Resources and Disability Services (hereafter CARDS), The Barnard Archives, Barnard College (hereafter BC).

more assertive.”<sup>188</sup> The emphasis on interpersonal care in an educational environment underscored how the college recognized the complex needs of navigating higher education aside from those specifically tied to one’s role as a student.

Barnard undergraduates affirmed these administrators’ perspectives. For instance, one student credited close relationships with peers and professors with making her “a lot more open to new ideas and able to take initiative.”<sup>189</sup> At the same time, another said Barnard “encouraged me to take risks, to formulate nontraditional opinions, and to challenge the status quo.”<sup>190</sup> These students attested to the leaders’ claims, underscoring how individuals at several levels of the College, from student to senior leader, felt the impact of the inclusive culture and personalized educational mission.

The cultural emphasis on accessibility and inclusivity was further underscored by the architectural modifications; Barnard officials did not understand renovations as separate from the culture but instead saw the construction of elevators, ramps, and tunnel entrances as reflecting and strengthening the school’s values. When articulating the stakes of the construction project, school leaders explained, “Environmental barriers are significant not only because of the physical limitations they impose but because they affect attitudes and perceptions about persons with disabilities; thus, the existing physical environment influences prevailing social conditions.”<sup>191</sup> The explicit linkage of the material environment and school culture underscored how architecture revealed the institution’s level of care for its community members. Campus modifications, therefore, became part of a broader strategy of “integrat[ing] campus and

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<sup>188</sup> Debbie Levenson, “BC Committed to Autonomy,” April 24, 1985, *Barnard Bulletin*, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/f5bc4a67-9622-4409-b54c-0e1c20b11541#page/8/mode/2up>.

<sup>189</sup> Nalim Trwan in Levenson, “BC Committed to Autonomy.”

<sup>190</sup> Andrea Katz Summed, “Blooming After Barnard,” *Barnard Bulletin*, April 24, 1985, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/f5bc4a67-9622-4409-b54c-0e1c20b11541#page/8/mode/2up>.

<sup>191</sup> “Grant Proposal for Increased Accessibility and Disability Services at Barnard College,” May 3, 1979, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 1, CARDS, BC.



community.”<sup>192</sup> By including accessibility within its broader ethos, Barnard cultivated a culture informed by both the physical environment and those who accessed it. This mission fostered an identity in which the campus united all students, faculty, and staff, meaning that accessibility became *part* of campus life rather than a later addition. Students, faculty, and staff were all responsible for the institution's operations, and this collectivism raised the stakes of accessible design.

Naturally, the question of whether students agreed with the administration's perspective arises, and disabled students' testimonies suggested they echoed the sentiments of their institutional leaders. Julia Sear, Class of 1983, reflected, “Here I am asked what *I* need [sic]. My needs are different from a person in a wheelchair or even from someone who is completely blind. Everything here is done on a one-on-one basis... I am happy that I came here. I had looked at other schools, but it seemed like at Barnard, giving special attention came naturally. That wasn't true at the other places I considered.”<sup>193</sup> Individualized attention allowed students to share their specific needs and advocate for support, making more personalized solutions possible. Instead of Barnard staff telling students what they would benefit from, disabled students, including Sear and many of her peers, emphasized that they had control over their accommodations.<sup>194</sup> This agency deepened the participation of disabled students in academic and campus life, increasing their sense of belonging. In this case, care came in the form of sharing control between disabled students and staff members.

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<sup>192</sup> “Grant Proposal,” CARDS, BC; Jeannette Walls, “Campus Renovations for Handicapped Students Under Way,” *Barnard Bulletin*, November 3, 1980, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/6260f78a-c7f5-42dd-99a5-16d02bbc5207#mode/2up>.

<sup>193</sup> “Disabled Students at Barnard [Booklet],” 1980, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 4, CARDS, BC.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

Peer-to-peer support took shape via formal and informal channels. Through the Disabled Students Organization, founded in 1981, disabled and non-disabled members collaborated on addressing academic and accessibility issues. They told personal anecdotes and offered practical advice, building a community united by shared first-hand experiences and a commitment to access. Support extended beyond those currently enrolled at Barnard to incoming students with disabilities in order to ease their transition to college life. By assisting students throughout their college journey, the Disabled Students Organization recognized how access challenges could arise at several points, which required ongoing attention.<sup>195</sup> But more broadly, such a mission facilitated cross-identity community-building by connecting disabled and non-disabled students. This structure expanded the group's reach and emphasized how improving access to campus affected not only people with disabilities but also the wider community, enabling it to "promote understanding within the campus community about disabled people."<sup>196</sup> The group looked beyond the experience of their members to raise awareness of the abilities of disabled people, dispelling negative stereotypes.

Another student-driven tactic encouraged greater community awareness about the meaning and manifestations of accessibility. In February 1984, the *Barnard Bulletin* began a new column, "Equal Time," which the newspaper developed "to address issues confronting the disabled communities."<sup>197</sup> In weekly articles, disabled writers engaged questions of educational equality, health care, accessible technology, the entertainment industry, and more.<sup>198</sup> The school newspaper provided an effective vehicle for championing equity and challenging societal biases,

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<sup>195</sup> "The Fine Line [journal/periodical]," published by Office for Disabled Students, Vol. 1, No. 3. May 1981, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 2, CARDS, BC.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> "Equal Time [Editor's Note]," *Barnard Bulletin*, February 1, 1984, <https://digitalcollections.barnard.edu/do/dbe1749f-c1e5-4af5-aff-dfecc14f98fc#page/2/mode/2up>.

<sup>198</sup> "Equal Time," *Barnard Bulletin*, February 1, 1984; February 8, 1984; February 15, 1984; February 22, 1984, February 29, 1984, March 7, 1984, March 28, 1984, April 11, 1984.

as it enabled writers to communicate with a diverse range of people, whether current students or other Barnard affiliates. It also allowed authors to tackle various topics to show the many ways access and disability discrimination could manifest, whether on or off campus. With this method, disabled women positioned their concerns as newsworthy matters, asserting themselves as equal members of the community who merited “equal time” as their non-disabled peers.

The interplay between the personalized and community approach to access fostered an environment in which students were central. This emphasis created a school culture that fostered interdependence and understanding among disabled and non-disabled individuals. In some ways, Barnard’s collective care model resembled Piepzna-Samarasinha’s idea of “cross-disability solidarity,” as both approaches involved the collaboration of people with various disabilities who could each apply their strengths to support those around them.<sup>199</sup> What differed at this women’s college, though, was the integration of non-disabled advocates to sites of disability activism and the incorporation of all members of the Barnard community, from students to administrators. Consequently, in Barnard’s case, individuals and institutional structures together advanced a model of care that facilitated access to campus spaces and saw access as a community good.

### ***Obstructions to Care at Columbia University***

While the opportunity for more direct communication between administrators, faculty, and students fostered a culture of collective care at Barnard, the disjointed structure of Columbia University (the University) hindered that development on the Morningside Heights campus. Robert Murphy, professor of Anthropology and chair of the President’s Advisory Committee on the Handicapped, recognized that “a lot of goodwill” drove University officials’ efforts on

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<sup>199</sup> Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 50.

accessibility.<sup>200</sup> Nonetheless, the institution's financial situation limited its action, with fiscal concerns taking precedence over ethical responsibility.

The circumstances changed in 1980 with the impending final deadline for compliance with Section 504. By October, Murphy argued, administrators were "afraid" that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare would eliminate federal funding due to noncompliance.<sup>201</sup> "They won't be able to get away with it after this year," Murphy told the *Columbia Daily Spectator*.<sup>202</sup> That a full professor and committee chair distinguished himself from those who implemented accessible solutions exemplified the separateness of Columbia. Who, if not Murphy and his colleagues on the Advisory Committee, were "they" responsible for this work? Almost a decade later, one student answered this question, telling the *Spectator* that "Columbia's powers that be" determined the extent of the University's accessibility.<sup>203</sup> The disunion between administrators, faculty, and students meaningfully illustrated a difference in how Barnard and Columbia understood community. Barnard used the mission of access to unite these three groups, whereas those at Columbia articulated clear distinctions. This contrast was further evidenced by how Murphy described motivations for accessibility initiatives: while goodwill might have existed, the weight of the law ultimately galvanized the University to act. In citing fear as the stimulus, Murphy revealed a marked difference in how Columbia and Barnard

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<sup>200</sup> Robert Murphy in Saul Hansell, "Panel Suggests Campus Changes to Aid Disabled," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 20, 1980, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19801020-01.2.2&srpos=5&e=-----198-en-20--1--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Joshua Prager, "CU Ignores Needs of Handicapped," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, November 19, 1991, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19911119-01.2.11&e=-----199-en-20--1--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

approached accessibility. It was a legal requirement for the former, whereas, for the latter, it was a cultural imperative.<sup>204</sup>

The University's narrow interpretation of Section 504 influenced its limited response. As early as October 1980, institutional leaders argued that this law required "program accessibility," according to which the Office of Disabled Student Services would move the physical location of a class should a student with a mobility disability want to register. This policy was clarified by Glen Waggoner, the Assistant Vice President for Administration, who explained, "If a student can't get to Fayerweather, we'll move Fayerweather to him."<sup>205</sup> Program accessibility did not require the institution to "make each of its existing facilities or every part of a facility accessible to and usable by handicapped persons."<sup>206</sup> Instead, it meant that the school had to ensure students could access any class they wished. Columbia fulfilled this requirement by changing room locations for individual students, an approach that did not ensure that all community members could access every University space.

Other school leaders disagreed with this bounded reading of the law and advocated for an expanded interpretation. Robert Murphy, for instance, argued that the University's existing approach to accessibility "may conform to the letter of the law, but not the spirit."<sup>207</sup> In distinguishing between the letter and spirit of Section 504, Murphy emphasized the importance of understanding lawmakers' intent: for him, congressional representatives had sought to guarantee access on a broader scale. Phillip Benson, the Director of Handicapped Services, added to this argument to underscore the policy's educational ramifications, "If you are a student

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<sup>204</sup> Robert Murphy in Saul Hansell, "Panel Suggests Campus Changes to Aid Disabled," *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 20, 1980, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19801020-01.2.2&srpos=5&e=-----198-en-20--1--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

<sup>205</sup> Waggoner in Hansell, "Panel Suggests Campus Changes."

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

<sup>207</sup> Murphy in Hansell, "Panel Suggests Campus Changes."

in sociology, there are certain departmental activities in Fayerweather you can't take part in."<sup>208</sup> Program accessibility entailed class attendance but did not ensure students could independently use other educational resources or participate in academic events or activities. In contrast, total access entailed facilitating the use of University programs and services for all people.

Part of the Advisory Committee's solution involved shifting community attitudes about disability through comprehensive educational programs. To satisfy the "real need" for this type of programming, members drew on the experience of Richard Mahler, the Project Coordinator for Technical Assistance, who led attitudinal awareness workshops at the request of various universities and colleges. At these events, faculty and staff "were asked to explore their personal feelings about disabled persons, and specific questions that they had were answered."<sup>209</sup> Mahler provided the Advisory Committee with a list of individuals from other institutions who had implemented "exemplary" workshops on this topic.<sup>210</sup> In addition to recommending such seminars, the Advisory Committee also recognized that the Columbia School of Social Work had created films "aiming at increasing attitudinal awareness."<sup>211</sup> These programs worked to address cultural gaps at an institutional level.

The Office of Disabled Student Services managed accommodations for students across the University, and to educate the community on available resources, this office published the *Disabled Students Handbook* in 1981. In this text, staff articulated several responsibilities, including to "Advise disabled students, their parents, or counselors about particular services that

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<sup>208</sup> Phillip Benson in Hansell, "Panel Suggests Campus Changes."

<sup>209</sup> "Minutes of the Advisory Committee to the President on the Handicapped," May 19, 1980, UA#0214, Box 364, Folder Handicapped, Columbia University Library Office Files, The Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University (RBML hereafter).

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

can be utilized to solve individual student problems [and] counsel incoming and newly enrolled students about life on campus and how to navigate on campus.”<sup>212</sup> By referring to students, parents, and counselors together, rather than making it clear that parents and counselors would be involved only at the student’s request, this office paternalistically assumed the dependence of students with disabilities on non-disabled caregivers. In contrast to Barnard students, who maintained autonomy over their accommodations, Columbia students did not necessarily drive the accommodations process; instead, the Office implied they shared power with other stakeholders. Another difference arose in that Barnard linked disability to both medical and social sources, whereas Columbia’s staff members saw disability as a matter for individual students. By implication, disability became a perceived ‘issue’ arising from a personal situation and requiring a cure rather than coming from systemic barriers.

Perceptions of these services sharply differed between students and faculty speaking on behalf of the administration. Into the late 1980s, each school within the University had a disability coordinator who arranged accommodations for students in that school. Robert Murphy saw this system as adequate and observed, “I want the best system possible. However, it is more in keeping with the culture of Columbia that each school should take responsibility for its own students.”<sup>213</sup> On the other hand, students advocated for a more centralized process in which one full-time coordinator managed the needs of all students across the University.<sup>214</sup> This disagreement underscored the cultural implications of the University structure and accommodations process. Students implied the fragmented administrative structure of many graduate and undergraduate schools inhibited cooperation on these issues, which hindered a

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<sup>212</sup> “Disabled Students Handbook,” April 22, 1981, UA#0001 Box 867, Folder 16, Central Files (Office of the President records), RBML.

<sup>213</sup> Murphy in Nieves, “Wheelchair Inaccessibility.”

<sup>214</sup> Nieves, “Wheelchair Inaccessibility.”

cohesive approach to implementing accessibility and the free flow of practical knowledge. Consequently, individualism assumed a different meaning than at Barnard; for the University, individualism entailed disconnection, not empowerment. The separation resulted in real consequences for students in using their accommodations and, for them, highlighted the importance of cross-school collaboration.

Still, students were not alone in naming these concerns, as Mary Murphy, Assistant Vice President for Student Services, identified similar challenges in administering services to disabled students. Part of her role involved overseeing Earl Hall and the Office for Disabled Student Services, which gave her insight into five factors that contributed to these issues:

- (1) no person in Facilities had primary responsibility for disabled student concerns [...]
- (2) there is too wide a separation between the Committee and Earl Hall; (3) the Earl Hall staff assigned to disabled students are of modest rank; (4) the schools' Liaison Officers are inadequately prepared; and (5) there is a lack of accountability resulting from too many people, and too many offices, being involved in provision of services.<sup>215</sup>

In response, Mary Murphy recommended consolidating the groups involved in providing services. Advisory Committee members agreed, recognizing the value of a full-time position solely dedicated to working with disabled students. They divided responsibilities, with members drafting the rationale for the position and job description, which included the title, level, qualifications, and reporting line.<sup>216</sup>

The culture manifested itself in the physical exclusion of disabled students from sites of belonging. Earl Hall, the hub of student life, was inaccessible to wheelchair users and people with mobility disabilities, which inhibited their participation in extracurricular activities and the

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<sup>215</sup> "Minutes of a Meeting of the President's Advisory Committee on the Handicapped for the Morningside Campus," October 14, 1987, UA#0083, Box 554, Folder: Committees – Committees on Disability, Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Records, RBML.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.



broader school community. Though accessible design was “possible,” the modification required constructing an elevator to the building’s entrance for as much as \$120,000.<sup>217</sup> When explaining the decision not to implement the elevator, Steve Lennard, the Director of Planning and Project Management, noted that it “would be unfair to every other student” because of the high cost.<sup>218</sup> Citing fairness as the root of not implementing architectural changes emphasized the administration’s perception of student communities. These views isolated students with disabilities and constructed a hierarchy of student concerns in which accessibility was a separate matter not relevant to non-disabled students. Unlike Barnard, where administrators situated accessibility as a collective need—one that did not only affect people with disabilities—Columbia drew sharp boundaries between non-disabled and disabled members of the student body. This distinction cemented the belonging of the former group while alienating the latter.

The inaccessibility of Earl Hall had additional implications for students with disabilities, given that this building housed the Office for Disabled Student Services. Because of the lack of direct access points, students first had to call the staff, who opened a side door that led to a ramp and eventually the office. This layout made disabled students reliant on non-disabled staff members, stratifying community members not only according to their role within the school but also by disability status. By imposing dependence, the infrastructure invalidated disabled students’ potential for self-sufficiency and reinforced a culture that undervalued disabled bodies. Still, because of this convoluted access system, the University could argue that Earl Hall was wheelchair accessible.<sup>219</sup> Students challenged this perspective with a twofold claim. First, Joseph

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<sup>217</sup> Steve Lennard in Jacqueline Tien, “Campus Will Be Altered for Disabled Students,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, September 30, 1981, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19810930-01.2.3&srpos=2&e=-----198-en-20--1--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid

<sup>219</sup> Tien, “Campus Will Be Altered.”

Gibney pointed out that disability coordinators only used the first-floor office space when working with a wheelchair user; “It’s not an office. No one occupies that room,” he said.<sup>220</sup> The temporariness of the first-floor office space dissolved the illusion of care by showing the lack of a straightforward approach to improving access. The space “discourages students from stopping by, and it keeps them from getting to those inside,” Joseph Gibney observed.<sup>221</sup> Inhibiting students from using the resources designed for their needs highlighted the perceived otherness of disabled people and reinforced the exclusionary culture.

Students with disabilities also pushed back against stereotypical representations of disability which they saw as evidence of their peers’ uncaring attitudes. In response to a cartoon published in the *Columbia Spectator* in 1983 that depicted “the blind beggar with dark glasses, cup, and cane,” Mary Smat wrote to convey her “outrage at your insensitivity to the fact that it is the proliferation of stereotypes such as seen in your cartoon, that has set societal attitudes that result in the physically impaired being treated as second class citizens in our employment and educational institutions.”<sup>222</sup> This doctoral student in the Visually Impaired Program of the Department of Special Education did not accuse the newspaper of explicitly endorsing ableist attitudes but instead criticized the publishers for failing to recognize the harmful societal views implicit in the cartoon. Due to this negligence, “You have done a disservice not only to those of us whose professional lives are constructed around a program for insuring [sic] equal opportunity for the impaired but also to those physically disabled who are making significant contributions as

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<sup>220</sup> Gibney in Nieves, “Wheelchair Inaccessibility.”

<sup>221</sup> Gibney in Nieves, “Wheelchair Inaccessibility.”

<sup>222</sup> Mary Smat, “Cartoon Stereotyped the Blind,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, September 27, 1983, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19830927-01.2.12&srpos=2&e=-----198-en-20--1--txt-txIN-blind----1983-->.

faculty and staff of the Columbia University community.”<sup>223</sup> Smat constructed a University community that included people with physical disabilities, disputing the constructed otherness and emphasizing the collective importance of a welcoming culture.

Fostering a community inclusive of people with disabilities was still a work in progress several years later. In 1988, a student published an article in which he expressed feeling “like some lower form of life—blind, deaf, mute, and operating only by my internal radar system—scuttling up the silent steps of Hamilton Hall.”<sup>224</sup> Josephine Stratton, the President of the Council for Exceptional Children Chapter No. 45, responded, “By demeaning some members of our student population and society, you lessen the respectability of all of us as human beings.”<sup>225</sup> Stratton, like Smat, positioned an inclusive culture as necessary for all at the University; deriding disabled members also undermined the entire student body. The appeal to their common humanity emphasized the belonging of disabled students and showed the high stakes of school culture. In November 1991, Joshua Prager, a sophomore in Columbia College, pointed out another language-related issue in his article in the *Columbia Daily Spectator*: he referred to campus interactions where those around him euphemized disability, using terms like “physically challenged,” “differently abled,” and “neurologically altered.”<sup>226</sup> Such language emphasized the misconceptions about disability that pervaded campus culture.

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<sup>223</sup> Smat, “Cartoon Stereotyped.”

<sup>224</sup> Anthony Mancini, “Delirium in Dative and Genitive,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, September 30, 1988, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19880930-01.2.10&srpos=2&e=-----198-en-20--1--txt-txINI+felt+like+some+lower+form+of+life%e2%80%94blind%2c+deaf%2c+mute%2c+and+operating+only+by+my+internal+radar+system%e2%80%94scuttling+up+the+silent+steps+of+Hamilton+Hall----->.

<sup>225</sup> Josephine M. Stratton, “Down with Derision for Disabilities,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 17, 1988, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19881017-01.2.18&srpos=1&e=-----en-20--1--txt-txIN-blind%2c+deaf%2c+mute----->.

<sup>226</sup> Joshua Prager, “CU Ignores Needs of Handicapped,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, November 19, 1991, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19911119-01.2.11&e=-----199-en-20--1--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

Language was not the only catalyst for Prager’s fierce critique of the University’s approach to accessibility. A wheelchair user after experiencing a spinal cord injury in May 1990, he underwent rehabilitation where he regained some ability to walk. Yet when he arrived on campus in January 1991, he found campus “totally inaccessible.”<sup>227</sup> For almost one year, he “navigated through decrepit equipment and put up with inadequate facilities.”<sup>228</sup> He faced absent ramps, broken elevators, and locked doors but “patiently waited for Columbia’s powers that be to awaken embarrassed.”<sup>229</sup> However, he did not wait passively; instead, he sent daily letters and emails and made daily phone calls to various offices because he “blatantly refused to believe that Columbia University does not care about me.”<sup>230</sup> Yet by 1991, he reached a new conclusion about the University’s inaction: “The reason is simply that this school does not care. It is not a financial problem. The school has spent money on more expensive, less important projects. Is my request irrational? No. It is deemed essential by law. Sad but true, this school does not care.”<sup>231</sup> One moment had catalyzed this assertion: the elevator in Hamilton Hall had broken, which prevented him from accessing the seventh-floor room for his next class. Prager communicated this issue to his professor and recalled the professor’s recommendation: “We will have members of the football team carry you up the stairs.”<sup>232</sup> Though a practical suggestion, this idea’s extreme insensitivity and inappropriateness prompted Prager’s protest to the University’s apathy.

This article, penned by an individual student, articulated a powerful ethical critique of the University. “In this advanced age of sidewalk cutouts and chairlifts,” Prager wrote, “Columbia is

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<sup>227</sup> Joshua Prager (Columbia College Class of 1994, Student with a Disability), phone call with the author, January 21, 2024.

<sup>228</sup> Prager, “CU Ignores Need.”

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Prager, phone call with the author, 2024.

a dinosaur. Located in the hub of modernity and technology, Columbia's campus is a throwback to the hardships becoming increasingly less endured around the country.”<sup>233</sup> Prager situated his writing within the contemporary historical and social context. After the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, accessibility had grown in the national consciousness, and it had become a more pressing legal and ethical concern for universities and colleges. But Prager implied that the University had not yet responded to this context. Due to the inaction, he had contrasting personal experiences when on and off campus: “Essentially, while on Columbia's campus,” he said, “not only am I more handicapped than I am while off it, but I am also dependent on others.”<sup>234</sup>

Prager’s article, remarkable for the response it prompted at a policy level, reflected sentiments expressed by other students at Columbia University, including Joseph Gibney (LAW '89) and Mary Smat (Doctoral Student Department of Special Education Visually Impaired Program, 1980s). From the student perspective, existing campus structures did not facilitate their involvement in campus life but rather isolated disabled students from their non-disabled peers. The University structure of multiple undergraduate and graduate schools hindered the incorporation of a collective commitment to access into the institution’s mission. In contrast, at Barnard College, disabled and non-disabled women united around a shared value of inclusivity in organizations such as the Disabled Students Organization, and administrators advanced this notion through policy. Infrastructural modifications displayed Barnard’s cultural value of accessibility, bringing together all community members—students, faculty, and administrators alike— under a common mission that had practical applications. In this way, the school’s physical infrastructure and abstract principles mutually reinforced each other. Similarly, Cowell

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<sup>233</sup> Prager, “CU Ignores Needs.”

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

Program graduates founded and managed the Physically Disabled Students Program, providing informed care and support to the student community. The formal and informal vehicles for assistance, as well as the formation of a shared value system at Barnard and Berkeley, fostered an environment that advanced care and support, unlike the developments on Columbia's campus.

## Epilogue

*“I didn’t want to do this. They just didn’t care, so I ended up becoming a journalist. Having the law on your side was so enormous.”* Joshua Prager, Columbia College, Class of 1994.<sup>235</sup>

Thirty years after graduating from Columbia College, Joshua Prager still vividly remembered the “immediate” response to the op-ed that expressed his frustration at the unsatisfactory institutional approach to addressing physical barriers around the Morningside Heights campus. Two days after its publication, President Michael Sovern and other administrators contacted him privately to apologize and express their discontent with the University’s work. Yet Sovern and Deputy Vice President of Campus Life Gerald Lowrey also publicized these concerns in an interview with the *Columbia Spectator*, where Sovern acknowledged, “It’s a difficult campus for disabled people, there are different levels [and] steps.”<sup>236</sup> He qualified this remark, saying “the University has worked hard to be responsive,” while accounting for finite resources, likely related financial and personnel limitations.<sup>237</sup> The University needed to improve, and he told the *Spectator*, “Am I satisfied? No.”<sup>238</sup> However, they did more than communicate their concerns; these leaders also sought Prager’s help to resolve the issues. “It was very empowering,” Prager said, and “practically very important.”<sup>239</sup> This student met with the Board of Trustees to show them the inaccessible buildings, elevators, and ramps. “There was a very steep metal ramp that went down from College Walk. It was insane and totally

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<sup>235</sup> Joshua Prager (Columbia College Class of 1994, Student with a Disability), phone call with the author, January 21, 2024.

<sup>236</sup> Michael Sovern in David A. Shimkin, “New Student Affairs Director to Start in Spring,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, November 21, 1991, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19911121-01.1.1&e=01-11-1991-30-11-1991-199-en-20--1--txt-txIN-sovern----->.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Prager, phone call with the author, 2024.

not up to code,” he remembered.<sup>240</sup> His article was “the turning point,” as it spotlighted the challenges students personally faced and put pressure on the University to act.<sup>241</sup>

Prager’s article not only sparked expressions of sympathy but also provoked policy change. Administrators invited him to serve on several committees, including the Advisory Committee on the Handicapped and the Committee on Ferris Booth Hall, where he centered the value of accessibility in dialogue about infrastructural modifications.<sup>242</sup> Lowrey also responded to grievances voiced years before about the structure of disability services; in 1991, he acted on the “need to improve coordination and cooperation among the various offices involved [in assisting students with disabilities].”<sup>243</sup> Lynne Bejoian assumed the role of Director of Student Affairs in January 1992, and under her leadership, the office underwent numerous changes. Perhaps most significantly, the University disbanded the Office of Community Programs in 1996, citing the fact that it “was a cluster of important programs that didn’t have a lot to do with each other.”<sup>244</sup> With the restructuring, Disability Services moved from being part of Community Programs to Columbia Health. The shift increased the number of staff available to assist Bejoian in running the office, which, she noted, would enable her to focus on several projects she had put on hold.<sup>245</sup> The consolidation began to shift the University’s individualistic approach to access.

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<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

<sup>242</sup> Sandra P. Angulo, “FBH Workers Report Chronic Safety Hazards: Renovation Plans Fail to Address Facility’s Immediate Needs, Students Say,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, November 18, 1992, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19921118-01.2.4&srpos=27&e=-----199-en-20--21--txt-txIN-handicapped----->.

<sup>243</sup> Shimkin, “New Student Affairs.”

<sup>244</sup> Sandra P. Angulo, “Campus Programs Disbanded to Improve Services,” *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 11, 1996, <https://spectatorarchive.library.columbia.edu/?a=d&d=cs19961011-01.2.7&srpos=16&e=-----199-en-20--1--txt-txIN-bejoian----->.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.



Prager's account, as well as those of students in the Cowell Memorial Residence Program and at Barnard College, illustrated the crucial role of social activism and school culture in shaping the response of Columbia University, Barnard College, and UC Berkeley to disabled students. At Berkeley, Edward Roberts' persistence in seeking access to education galvanized the creation of the Cowell Memorial Residence Program. There, students had access to medical and attendant care through the campus hospital while attending class with their disabled and non-disabled peers. From an academic standpoint, the program was a marked success, with higher grade point averages and meaningful employment outcomes.<sup>246</sup> The impact on students extended beyond scholastic and vocational pursuits to personal development. In the company of peers who shared similar life experiences, students honed confidence and self-sufficiency in completing activities of daily living and fulfilling their disability-specific needs. This program developed into the Physically Disabled Students Program, founded and led by graduates of the Cowell Program. It facilitated the transition from the live-in program to off-campus and apartment-style housing to promote independent living for disabled students. Residing with other students with mobility disabilities fostered knowledge exchange about self-care techniques and an opportunity for political mobilization. Students spearheaded advocacy initiatives on and off campus to improve the physical infrastructure and expand access to academic buildings and the city of Berkeley itself.<sup>247</sup>

Compared to Berkeley, collectivism and community assumed a different meaning at Barnard, where creating a welcoming culture entailed uniting administrators, faculty, staff, and students under the principles of flexibility and inclusivity. Its mission of educating women

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<sup>246</sup> Herbert R. Willmore, "As Participants in the Cowell..." 1970, BANC MSS 99/249 c, Box 1, Folder 3, Herbert Willmore Papers, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>247</sup> "History and Development of Physically Disabled Students Program," September 1974, BANC MSS 99/147 c, Box 1, Folder 3, John Velton Papers, University of California, Berkeley.

facilitated this purpose due to the already-cultivated values of open-mindedness and adaptability. Beyond this auspicious context for developing accessibility initiatives, the small size of the student body opened direct lines of communication between administrators, faculty, staff.<sup>248</sup> It also encouraged the school's more efficient and comprehensive approach to access which logistically entailed modifying the tunnel system and constructing ramps and elevators. The Office for Disabled Students likewise reflected Barnard's dual focus on the individual and collective. Staff worked with each student to design and implement accommodations plans while also broadening its focus to shift societal attitudes about disability. At an institutional level, this approach positively impacted the community.<sup>249</sup> Barnard students further extended the reach of accessibility by creating their own sites of association through the Disabled Students Organization, for example.<sup>250</sup> With a coalition of disabled and non-disabled students, this group strengthened its reach and impact on the school community, emphasizing the collective importance of accessibility. Ultimately, the connection between cultural cohesion and architectural design led Barnard to have the most effective approach to including people with disabilities in the school community.

The culture of Columbia University, an Ivy League research institution, differed from the public-service mindset of Berkeley and the commitment to educational access for women at Barnard. At Columbia, a culture of individualism grew out of and reinforced the disjointed administrative structure of the University where students and faculty positioned themselves

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<sup>248</sup> "Report of the Committee on Missions and Goals," January 1970, BC05-14, Box 5, Folder 5, Center for Accessibility Resources and Disability Services (CARDS), The Barnard Archives, Barnard College (BC)

<sup>249</sup> "Access Barnard College: A Comprehensive Guide to On and Off Campus Activities and Services for Disabled Students," 1982, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 5, CARDS, BC.

<sup>250</sup> The Fine Line [journal/periodical]," published by Office for Disabled Students, Vol. 1, No. 3. May 1981, BC05-14, Box 1, Folder 2, CARDS, BC.

separately from the administration.<sup>251</sup> The complex financial obligations and architectural history exacerbated this environment.<sup>252</sup> This context created challenges for implementing accessible solutions: after establishing a committee to address the legal requirements, it put changes into effect that satisfied a narrow interpretation of the law—program accessibility—but that did not, in practice, expand access for all students.

### *A Shift in the Legal Landscape*

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) changed the landscape of institutional responsibility, spurring a nationwide reckoning with the importance of accessibility. Section 504 had meaningfully expanded access to education by prohibiting discrimination on the basis of disability in all entities that received federal funding, including Berkeley, Barnard, and Columbia.<sup>253</sup> “It [Section 504] was a profound piece of legislation,” disability rights advocate Arlene Mayerson noted, although “it was also just kind of pieced together to try to push something through.”<sup>254</sup> Mayerson served as the Directing Attorney of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, a leading law and policy organization nationwide, where her work critically contributed to the development of the Americans with Disabilities Act. This law did not meaningfully change the legal definition of disability or disability discrimination. It continued to require institutions to eliminate barriers that inhibited access for disabled students and provide reasonable accommodations to foster educational opportunities. Yet, in contrast to Section 504,

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<sup>251</sup> Robert Murphy to Michael Sovern, “Memorandum,” February 4, 1987, Box 554, Folder Committees – Committees on Disability, Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Records, UA#0083 Box 554, Folder 30, The Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Columbia University (RBML).

<sup>252</sup> William McGill, “Memorandum from William McGill to The Advisory Committee to the President on the Handicapped,” February 21, 1980, UA#0001, Box 848, Folder 14, Central Files (Office of the President), RBML.

<sup>253</sup> Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 504 (1973).

<sup>254</sup> Arlene Mayerson, “On Defining Disability for the Americans with Disabilities Act,” Audio, 2001, Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement, The Bancroft Library, The University of California, Berkeley.

the ADA applied these protections to private schools and workplaces that did not receive federal financial support.<sup>255</sup>

The ADA also had an impact beyond the law. It shifted discussions about manifestations of disability and who was considered disabled. According to Mayerson, “It has absolutely stimulated a national dialogue, an academic dialogue, a philosophical dialogue, a moral dialogue. I mean, it has really opened this question. And all that opening hadn't happened before the ADA.”<sup>256</sup> In other words, for Mayerson, the ADA illuminated the multifaceted, cross-sectoral barriers that people with disabilities could face in society and sparked reflection on how to address them. It raised awareness of the need to expand access, giving disability rights advocates—and disabled students—another tool on which they could draw. With the ADA and Section 504, students with disabilities had protections under the law and in society to push for their educational rights.

### ***Where Are We Today?***

Due to the comprehensive legal shift after 1990, the landscape of access to institutions of higher education also changed. Because of this, I focus this essay on the period between 1962, with Edward Roberts’ enrollment in Berkeley, and 1991, with the publication of Joshua Prager’s article. However, in addition to the legal shift, the disability landscape has largely shifted at these schools over the past several decades. More and more students who register for accommodations have non-apparent disabilities. For instance, in the 2020-2021 academic year, 40% of the students who self-identified as having a disability at Columbia University identified as having neurodevelopmental disabilities, while 2% had sensory, 31% mental health, 7% physical, 17%

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<sup>255</sup> “Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 504 (1973); Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § ii (1990).

<sup>256</sup> Mayerson, “On Defining Disability,” 2001.

intersystem, and 2% temporary.<sup>257</sup> Similarly, at Barnard College, 29% of students identified as having neurodevelopmental disabilities, 2% sensory, 38% mental health, 22% physical, 4% intersystem, and 6% temporary.<sup>258</sup> Given the shifts in the law and disability identifications, one might wonder how this study applies to the present day.

This work has underscored the value of collective identity in promoting access for disabled people. I apply this idea not only to cross-disability unity but also to coalitions between disabled and non-disabled groups. Barnard effectively mobilized all community members to position accessibility as a collective good, while students at Berkeley inspired modifications to the very structure of their surrounding city. In contrast, a disjointed university structure like that at Columbia University can obstruct this idea. Studying these schools together sheds light on the reciprocal relationship between institutional policy and culture in fostering an inclusive learning environment.

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<sup>257</sup> “Columbia University - Students with Disabilities (2021-22),” New York State Educational Department, accessed February 24, 2024, <https://data.nysed.gov/highered-swd.php?year=2022&instid=800000047082>.

For the purpose of this survey, intersystem disabilities are defined as alcohol/substance abuse recovery, complex chronic medical conditions, and traumatic brain injuries.

<sup>258</sup> “Barnard College - Students with Disabilities (2021-22),” New York State Educational Department, accessed February 24, 2024, <https://data.nysed.gov/highered-swd.php?year=2021&instid=800000047062>.

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