Building Community, Recognizing Dignity: Beyond the ADA

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The University of Maryland School of Law will open its new building for the 2002-03 academic year, marking a notable step forward in the architecture of higher education—especially legal education—as it relates to persons with disabilities. Although the Americans with Disabilities Act mandates certain standards in new construction, we recognized that statutory compliance was not enough. Inevitably, the architecture of an institution sends a message about institutional values and culture. The institutional values and culture of our law school required architectural and technological accommodations that would recognize the dignity of each member of the law school community. We regarded the "dignity decision" as sufficiently important to justify the substantial additional expense.

Funding, however, only begins to tell the story of erecting a building designed to assure the dignity of all its users, including not only students but also employees, clients of the Clinical Law Program, and the public. One must think carefully about the needs of persons less able to cope with conventional design. Typically, when one thinks of accessibility for persons with disabilities, one thinks of those who use wheelchairs. Some matters are obvious or required by law. Ramps for wheelchair users, for example, should not rise more than an inch per foot. Thus, a teaching podium raised a mere 18 inches off the floor requires an 18-foot long ramp to accommodate a wheelchair. Anything less is simply too steep to negotiate in comfort. The ceremonial courtroom, however, presented special problems. Ramps needed to be designed for not only those seated in the audience, but also for the bench and witness box. Access to the jury box was also a consideration. The combination of accessibility, aesthetic, and utilitarian concerns presented interesting challenges.

Some problems are less obvious. Although many classroom configurations allow wheelchair accessibility only in severely limited locations—typically the first or last row on the aisle—we designed most of our classrooms to allow accessibility in a variety of locations. Moreover, in all settings within the building, we thought carefully about sightlines for persons using wheelchairs. In addition, we set the counter heights at serving areas at 34 inches, rather than the standard 36 inches, because wheelchair users are more comfortable at that height.

Recognizing that some wheelchair users have little upper body strength, we set all restroom doors, as well as other doors to public areas such as administrative offices (deans, registrar, admissions, career services, etc.) on automatic openers. Because entrances to buildings should not require long sojourns in inclement weather, there are also card access automatic door entrances immediately adjacent to our handicapped parking area, which is sufficiently wide to accommodate vans.

Persons using wheelchairs also require wider aisles in which to pass, so aisle spaces in student locker areas are seven feet, three inches wide—enough space for two persons in wheelchairs to pass each other with at least one locker door open. Similarly, the space between ranges in the library stacks are sufficiently wide to allow wheelchair access, and there is space at the ends of the ranges for wheelchairs to turn around. All study carrels in the library and in student clinical workspace are also designed for use by persons in wheelchairs, as well as for others. Moreover, to accommodate control technicians who use wheelchairs, control rooms containing state-of-the-art computer and audio-visual equipment are sufficiently larger than one is likely to find in most facilities.

Changes in level are particularly difficult for persons in wheelchairs. Often, the solution is a jerry-built "lift"—a motorized, unenclosed platform typically attached to a bannister. Such lifts are notoriously unreliable. When they break down, persons using wheelchairs may be stranded until help arrives. All vertical transport in our new building can be accomplished through enclosed elevators, one of which travels only a single-floor level. Although enclosed elevators are much more expensive than lifts, they are infinitely more reliable, less subject to stranding users, and most importantly, more dignified as they do not create the spectacle produced by the use of a lift.

In addition to the needs of wheelchair users, we addressed the needs of persons with other types of disabilities. For example, all carpeting is non-directional, because directional designs can affect individuals with vertigo. Persons with visual impairments can access a large numbers of computers equipped to display supersized fonts or convert what appears on screen to voice-articulated material. Persons with hearing impairments are accommodated by infrared assisted listening systems, computers that translate the spoken word into text, and a centrally located TTY telephone. Wiring every seat in classrooms and in the library for power and data hookups enables easier accommodations for persons with visual or hearing impairments.

We would like to thank both the individuals with disabilities and those with expertise in the disability field—like our own professor, the late Stanley Herr—who ably assisted us with this project. These individuals helped us appreciate the day-to-day difficulties encountered by

persons with disabilities. Those of us who are not part of the disability community need to learn from those who are how best to deal with their disabilities.

Making our building more fully accessible sends a powerful message to the entire School of Law community: All members and all visitors to our building are welcomed with recognition of their dignity. We are hopeful that this message might encourage the next generations of legal professionals to greater awareness and

sensitivity to the wisdom of building community, of recognizing dignity.

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