





Designing for Dignity

The Intersection of Aesthetics and Accessibility

BY MARLEY CUNNINGHAM

What makes a campus feel welcoming? Is it the architecture?
The student body? The messaging in your marketing materials?

For students with disabilities, especially those navigating physical limitations, their answer is often simpler: a campus feels welcoming when they can independently and comfortably access it—without having to ask for help, hunt for alternatives, or feel like an afterthought.



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In the realm of aquatic facilities, accessibility has traditionally been viewed through a binary lens: compliant or not. But as universities across the nation push for inclusive excellence, this narrow interpretation is no longer enough. The next evolution in accessibility lies not just in functional design but dignified design. That means access solutions that are not only compliant and safe, but also aesthetically aligned with the overall brand and spirit of the campus itself.

Moving Past the “Medical Look”

For decades, accessibility features—especially in pools—have visually signaled that they were a clear afterthought in the design process. Stark white, medical-looking cranes with cold, clunky components, often accompanied by unwelcoming signage, were commonplace. They worked, but they also sent a visual message: this wasn’t really made for you.

Today, that message is being rewritten. The tools of access no longer have to conflict with a facility’s aesthetic. Instead, they can, and should, complement it.

As part of their new aquatic center, Tarleton State University installed a custom purple pool lift to reflect their school colors and overall brand identity. Small detail? Perhaps. But for the students who rely on that lift, it transforms the experience from one of accommodation to one of true inclusion.

This is about more than paint—it’s about perception. When accessibility tools blend seamlessly into the environment, they shed the clinical stigma and instead become integral parts of the space, used with confidence and school pride.

First Impressions Start Online

Prospective students today are choosing their schools through screens before ever stepping foot on campus. Virtual tours, social media, and marketing materials are often the first indicators of whether a campus is the right fit. And for students with disabilities, that evaluation includes a critical, if unspoken, question: Will I feel like I belong here?

Universities go to great lengths to showcase state-of-the-art athletic centers, modern lounges, or eco-conscious architecture in their recruiting materials. But what about showcasing accessible spaces—especially in recreational or wellness facilities?

A strategically placed photo of a branded lift, an inclusive fitness space, or an adaptive aquatics program speaks volumes. It says: We see you. We thought of you. And you're already a part of our story.

Accessible Design Is Brand Strategy

At private universities, branding isn't just an exercise, it's a competitive necessity. Everything from mascot colors to locker finishes is chosen with brand identity in mind. So why should accessibility be any different?



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Your pool lift, for example, is just as visible as your bleachers. Your railing is touched by just as many hands as your entry gate. If these elements reflect the same thoughtful design as the rest of your facility, you're reinforcing your brand values of excellence, inclusion, and integrity.

Better yet, accessible features that match your branding create photo-worthy moments. When students feel empowered using your equipment, they're more likely to share those experiences—spreading a message of inclusion organically across social platforms and peer networks.

The Wellness Connection

Campus recreation centers play a key role in student wellness. For students with disabilities, pools can offer therapeutic benefits that extend far beyond physical exercise—alleviating chronic pain, building confidence, and offering emotional release.

Yet, despite this value, many accessible aquatics features remain underutilized, simply because students don't know they exist, don't feel confident using them, or worse, don't feel invited to use them.

Designing for dignity helps close that gap. Accessible elements that are clearly integrated, easy to use, and visually appealing encourage usage. It makes accessibility feel like a natural part of campus life—not a concession.

Reframing the Investment

It's easy to think of accessible enhancements as “extra”—a cost center rather than a differentiator. But as demographics shift and the number of students identifying with disabilities grows, accessibility is becoming an increasingly influential factor in school selection.

According to recent studies, students with disabilities make up more than 19 percent of undergraduate enrollment nationwide. That number is even higher when you consider temporary disabilities, chronic conditions, or neurodivergent needs.

Investments in accessible, aesthetically aligned infrastructure are no longer niche; they're strategic. They support recruitment.

They strengthen your DEI efforts. And they communicate your values in ways that resonate with all students.

Designing with Empathy

Ultimately, the most successful accessibility features are those that feel invisible—not because they're hidden, but because they feel intuitive. They don't remind users of their limitations. They elevate their experience.

To design with empathy means invoking stakeholders with lived experience. It means consulting with disability services, student groups, and manufacturers who understand the nuances of adaptive use. It means rethinking compliance as the floor—not the ceiling—of what's possible.

At Aqua Creek, we've had the opportunity to collaborate with designers and universities that understand this shift. We've seen firsthand how a small aesthetic change can make a major impact on the student experience. From a student perspective, it's not about the equipment. It's about how it makes someone feel.

What Story Does Your Campus Tell?

If your accessible features feel like an afterthought, students will notice.

If they feel like intentional, empowering parts of your campus environment, students will remember.

Dignified access isn't just a checkbox, it's a conversation. It's a design philosophy. And for the next generation of students, it's a difference that could define their college choice and their college experience.



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At a major university residential expansion project in the Southeast, collaboration and cooperation among the construction management firm, window and door manufacturer, and installation contractor resulted in a several stunning projects recreating the look of the surrounding century-old buildings. All totaled, Hope's Windows, Inc., supplied over 1,200 unique windows made from custom hot-rolled steel profiles and nearly 100 high traffic and fire-rated door assemblies made from 10 and 12 gauge cold-rolled steel.

According to Sean Farrell, senior project manager at Layton Construction, establishing collaborative relationships is key to successful construction projects. One of the best examples of this maxim is a multi-phase university project for which Layton Construction is serving as construction manager. Layton, part of the STO Building Group, is a nationally-ranked commercial contractor with ten offices around the United States. The firm specializes in healthcare, industrial, warehousing, and higher education projects. As construction manager, Layton hires the sub-contractors and manages and oversees the project as part of a team.



“Since we were building windows and doors to make a brand new college, we needed a company with the methodology to produce the product like it was done 100 years ago.”

— Sean Farrell, Sr Project Manager
Layton Construction

Hope's Brian Whalen, Vice President of Sales, acknowledges that the project was a real test of Hope's capabilities. He is especially proud that they Hope's was able to expedite the schedule even in the face of design changes and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. The shop drawing approval process – including preparation of blueprints of windows and doors with all setting conditions, sizes, customized designs, and required testing – took longer than normal. Changes were made along the way that might have pushed back the delivery schedules for some, but Hope's made adjustments during the production process to deliver all materials on time. Whalen gave a nod to Joey Riggan and the team at Alexander Metals, the frame and glass installer team, saying the overall project went extremely smoothly once the frames were on site.

Says Whalen, “It was a fantastic collaboration among all the parties. Hope's worked closely as the manufacturer to fulfill the architect's design vision, and then the installer worked closely with us to make sure everything was installed executed properly.”



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Hope's® Windows, Inc., is a business based on 100 percent customized work design and manufacturing. Hope's provides a specialized skillset to assist clients in design and production of unique window and door assemblies. Meeting the expectations of Layton Construction in combination with the aesthetic vision of the client and architect was definitely a challenge. The overall experience was a testament to the quality standards of the university and an honor to be a part of. In business since 1912, Hope's had the global experience to make it happen.

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