

How Thoughtful Aquatic Accessibility Shapes the Campus Experience

BY AQUACREEK

Imagine walking into a classroom with no desks.

A football field with no bleachers.

A residence hall with no doors.

You would immediately notice something was wrong because the space clearly wasn't designed for everyone meant to use it.

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Now, think about how many aquatic facilities quietly send that same message every day. Not intentionally, of course—most colleges and universities care deeply about inclusion, wellness, and creating welcoming environments for students. But when facilities are functionally disconnected from the people they are intended to serve, it shows. And the ripple effect can be far greater than many people realize: a pool lift tucked away in storage, a therapy spa with no realistic transfer solution, a ramp entry with no aquatic wheelchair—equipment that technically checks an ADA box, but feels disconnected from how the facility actually functions.

Modern campus aquatic centers are no longer just a place for lap swimming. These spaces have evolved into hubs for recreation, rehabilitation, stress relief, athletic recovery, wellness programming, adaptive athletics, and community connection. From

competition pools and hydrotherapy spas to cold plunges and elevated swim spas used in athletic performance programs, aquatic environments now serve a wider range of users and abilities than ever before. That means accessibility can no longer be treated as an afterthought hidden somewhere in the project specifications. It needs to be part of the experience from the very beginning.

Different Pools Require Different Solutions

One of the biggest mistakes facilities make when selecting ADA accessibility solutions is assuming that every aquatic environment has the same operational needs. In reality, modern university recreation and athletic facilities often contain multiple bodies of water serving completely different purposes. A competition pool has very different accessibility needs than a hydrotherapy spa. A cold plunge designed for athletic recovery creates different challenges than a recreation

pool used for student wellness programming. Elevated swim spas and above-ground therapy pools require entirely different access solutions than traditional in-ground aquatic environments.

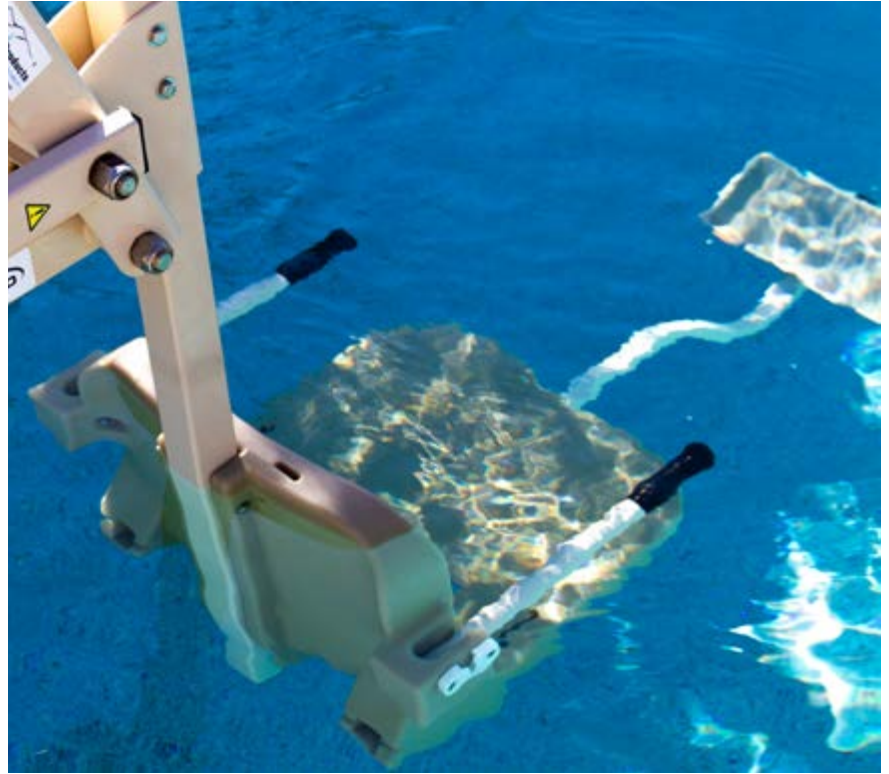
This is where thoughtful planning becomes critical because accessibility should never be approached with a one-size-fits-all mindset. For some facilities, a fixed ADA pool lift may be the best long-term solution. In others, a semi-submerged therapy spa with a transfer wall may create a more intuitive and independent experience for users.

The best access solutions are designed and installed intuitively for each unique application, and reflect how the facility is actually being used every day.

The Problem with “Good Enough”

ADA compliance plays an essential role in aquatic accessibility. But truly inclusive facilities understand that compliance alone does not automatically create equal and equitable access – and this distinction matters more than many people realize.

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Even equipment that technically meets compliance requirements can still create barriers if it is difficult to use in real-world situations. For example, ADA standards recognize ramp entries as primary means of pool access. They can provide excellent accessibility for many users, but present a major issue for wheelchair users if the facility has not provided aquatic wheelchairs specifically designed for aquatic environments. A user's everyday mobility chair is often an expensive piece of equipment that is not intended for prolonged water exposure or submersion. Overlooking this detail can unintentionally create another obstacle instead of removing one.

A common misconception often seen in the field is that the use of a single portable lift across multiple pools satisfies ADA requirements. In reality, each pool and spa must have a compliant accessible means of entry available whenever the facility is open for use. It's also important to understand that while some portable lifts may meet ADA requirements, not all do. ADA compliant pool lifts (portable or not) must be fixed and securely anchored to the pool deck while in use. Facilities should verify that any portable lift

system they purchase is specifically designed to meet those requirements.

Handrails deserve the same level of intentionality. Effective rail systems should provide continuous ergonomic guided movement from point A to point B, helping users maintain stability and confidence throughout the entire entry and exit experience rather than only supporting isolated transition points.

True accessibility is not simply about getting people in the water. It is about allowing people to move through the environment with confidence, dignity, and independence.

Durability Starts at the Source

Once you have determined which accessibility solutions best fit your aquatic environment, the next question becomes just as vital: will it last, and what happens if it doesn't?

Commercial aquatic environments are demanding. Constant exposure to moisture, pool chemicals, UV exposure, and heavy daily usage can quickly expose weaknesses in equipment quality. Long-term durability and product longevity begin long before installation day—they are baked into the very essence of the product down to the brand that stands behind it.

Material quality matters. Facilities evaluating stainless steel access equipment should look beyond appearances alone and consider the quality of the raw materials being used. Manufacturers that prioritize high-quality U.S.-sourced stainless steel provide greater long-term durability and consistency, particularly in harsh commercial aquatic environments where lower-quality materials are likely to deteriorate prematurely.

Safety and quality certifications can also provide valuable insight into how manufacturers approach reliability and performance. Certifications such as UL and ISO 9001:2015 help demonstrate that equipment and manufacturing processes have undergone structured evaluation for safety, consistency, and quality management practices.

Just as importantly, universities should evaluate the long-term support structure behind the product itself. Accessibility equipment is not a short-term purchase. Facilities should consider technical support responsiveness, training resources, and ongoing maintenance guidance when evaluating manufacturers. A warranty only matters if the company behind it is prepared to support the product long after the ribbon-cutting ceremony is over.

Accessibility Shouldn't Feel Institutional

One of the most overlooked conversations surrounding aquatic accessibility is aesthetics.

Universities spend enormous amounts of time and resources selecting branded scoreboards, custom deck furniture, signage, starting blocks, bleachers, and other architectural finishes because they understand that visual identity shapes how students experience a space. So why should accessibility equipment feel disconnected from the rest of the facility?

Custom colors, coordinated finishes, and intentional design choices help accessibility equipment feel integrated rather than institutional. And while that may sound like a small detail, it sends a powerful message to students and visitors alike: accessibility was considered from the beginning, not bolted on as an afterthought to satisfy a requirement.

Operational readiness matters just as much as appearance. Equipment should remain visible, functional, and ready for use without creating unnecessary operational headaches. Features such as solar charging systems can help reduce battery maintenance demands while improving long-term equipment readiness, helping ensure lifts remain operational throughout regular facility use.

People Participate When They Feel Welcome

The conversation surrounding aquatic accessibility often becomes heavily focused on regulations, compliance requirements, and risk management. While those conversations are important, they shouldn't overshadow the bigger picture.

Accessible aquatic facilities create opportunities for participation.

They support injured athletes throughout rehabilitation and recovery.

They expand opportunities for adaptive sports programs.

They encourage students to engage in wellness activities that improve both physical and mental health.

And they create spaces where students, faculty, staff, and visitors can experience the same sense of belonging and community that universities work so hard to foster throughout the rest of campus life. Students notice when environments are intentionally welcoming.

They also notice when they aren't.

The strongest campus environments are not built around minimum requirements. They are built around people. Because at the end of the day, aquatic accessibility is not simply about helping someone into the water. It's

about making sure every person has the opportunity to fully participate in everything waiting on the other side of it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Since 2002, Aqua Creek has designed and manufactured American-made aquatic access solutions that promote freedom, confidence, and inclusion. This family-owned Montana company combines quality craftsmanship, white-glove service, and integrity to help people of all abilities enjoy the water with dignity.

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