

Rethinking Campus Accessibility: Designing Customs Week Tours for Inclusion at Haverford College

College campuses often present themselves as spaces of belonging, intellectual growth, and community. However, these ideals are not always reflected in the physical and structural realities students have when they arrive. One of the very first institutional experiences new students participate in is customs at Haverford College. During this time, freshmen are introduced to campus through the critical campus tour, social activities, and traditions meant to build connection with their hallmates. Yet, these seemingly welcoming rituals can lead to exclusion.

I want to ask a critical question: *What would it look like if Customs Week tours were designed with accessibility as the starting point, rather than as an afterthought?* With Jay Dolmage's concept of structural ableism, this paper examines how campus tours function not just as logistical tools, but as symbolic rituals that communicate where we all belong. By rethinking accessibility as a foundational design principle rather than an accommodation, this paper argues for a structural shift in how Haverford approaches inclusion during the critical campus tour.

Structural Ableism and Higher Education

Jay Dolmage argues that higher education is built around an "ideal" student. Someone who is able-bodied, neurotypical, and able to navigate physical and academic environments without barriers. This assumption is embedded into the architecture of the campus, the pacing of academic life, and even the social rituals that define belonging. Accessibility has become a set of adjustments made when someone does not fit the norm.

This model reflects what Dolmage calls structural ableism. Structural ableism is embedded in systems, spaces, and practices. It happens subtly, it goes unnoticed by people who do benefit from it, while creating consistent barriers for those who do not. I didn't realize how inaccessible the campus is until Gg became one of my kids this year.

The critical campus tours are a clear example of this. They are often designed with assumptions about mobility, stamina, and spatial navigation. Uneven terrain, long walking distances, stairs, and time constraints are normalized. When a student can't participate easily, the solution is to modify the experience for that individual instead of rethinking the structure of the tour itself. In this way, exclusion is not only produced but normalized.

Campus Tours as Ritual

To fully understand the impact of accessibility in Customs Week, it is important to recognize that campus tours are not just informational, they are symbolic. They function as a ritual of initiation, introducing students to the physical and social landscape of the college. Through these tours, students learn not only where things are, but also how they are expected to move, interact, and belong within the space.

Rituals are powerful because they communicate values without explicitly stating them. When a tour moves quickly, prioritizes certain paths, or excludes certain entrances, it sends a message about what is considered normal and acceptable. For students who can easily participate, the experience gives them a sense of belonging. For those who cannot, it can create feelings of difference, isolation, or being overlooked by their peers.

For example, when my kid, Gg, who uses a wheelchair encounters inaccessible routes or must take a separate path, the message is not just logistical, it is symbolic. It suggests that her experience is secondary, that the “real” tour is designed for others, who are able bodied. Even when accommodations are provided, the fact that they are separate reinforces the idea that accessibility is an exception instead of a norm.

Personal Motivation and Observations

This project is grounded in direct experience working with a Customs student who uses a wheelchair. During Customs Week, it became clear that many aspects of the campus tours were not designed with accessibility in mind. Routes included uneven paths, inaccessible entrances, and spaces that required last-minute adjustments.

These adjustments, while often well-intentioned, felt reactive rather than intentional. Instead of being integrated into the design of the tour, accessibility was something that had to be managed in the moment. This not only created logistical challenges but also shaped the student’s experience of the campus. Instead of feeling fully included, the student was constantly reminded of the ways in which the environment was not built with them in mind. This experience highlighted a broader issue that accessibility was not absent, but it was not foundational. It existed as a response instead of a principle.

Reimagining Accessibility: A Structural Approach

If accessibility were treated as a starting point instead of an afterthought, the design of Customs Week tours would look so fundamentally different. Instead of asking how to adjust

existing routes, the process would begin by asking what an accessible experience looks like for all students.

One key change would be the pre-mapping of accessible routes. This involves intentionally identifying paths that are navigable for individuals with varying mobility needs, including wheelchair users. Instead of offering multiple versions of the tour, the goal would be to create a single, universal route that works for everyone. This approach shifts accessibility from being individualized to being collective.

Clear labeling of ramps, elevators, and accessible entrances would also be essential. This not only improves navigation but also signals that these features are an integral part of the campus not secondary options.

Another important element is pacing. Traditional tours often prioritize efficiency, moving quickly to cover as much ground as possible. However, a more inclusive approach would normalize slower pacing, allowing all students to engage fully without feeling rushed. Built-in rest stops could help this. Accessibility is not just about mobility but also about energy and comfort that is inputted.

The training for tour leaders is also critically needed by the campus tour leaders who work for admissions. We should be equipped to understand accessibility not as a checklist, but as a mindset. This includes being aware of different needs, communicating clearly, and building an environment where all students feel included.

Finally, alternative formats such as virtual maps or tours can provide additional layers of accessibility. These resources allow students to engage with the campus in ways that suit their

own individual needs that does reinforce the idea that there is no single “correct” way to experience Haverford.

The design of Customs Week tours has implications beyond the first week of college. These tours shape students’ initial impressions of the campus and influence their sense of belonging. When accessibility is built into the structure of these experiences, it communicates that inclusion is a core value of the institution. It suggests that some students must adapt to the institution, rather than the institution adapting to its students.

Importantly, designing for accessibility benefits everyone. Features like clear signage, thoughtful pacing, and well-planned routes improve the experience for all students, not just those with disabilities. This reflects the broader principle of universal design: when environments are built to be inclusive, they become more functional and welcoming for everyone.

In conclusion, Rethinking Customs Week tours through the lens of accessibility requires a shift in perspective. It means moving from a reactive model of accommodation to a proactive model of design. By applying Dolmage’s concept of structural ableism, this paper highlights how seemingly neutral practices can produce exclusion—and how they can be transformed.

Designing tours with accessibility as the starting point is not just a logistical change; it is a cultural one. It challenges assumptions about who belongs and how spaces should function. Ultimately, it offers a vision of a campus where inclusion is not an add-on, but a foundation.

Interview

1) Can you walk me through your experience during Customs Week tour? We walked around campus and stopped in front of locations with specific relevant history attached to them.

2) Were there moments where you felt included or excluded during the tours? Not particularly. The tours themselves tended to take accessible routes, although there were times I had to break from the group to use an elevator or ramp.

3) How did the physical layout of campus impact your ability to participate? Often times elevators and accessible entrances are somewhat out of the way, which means I have to separate from the group and can affect the sense of comradery.

4) Were there specific areas or routes that felt difficult to navigate? What made them challenging? The space between Hall and the library has steps but no ramp, which means me and anyone I'm with have to go out of the way. The bridge and path to the quaker meeting house is also difficult to navigate because the gap between where the bridge starts and the ramp ends is very large and the path is quite uneven.

5) Did you feel like the tours were designed with accessibility in mind, or adjusted along the way? I feel the tours around campus were designed with accessibility in mind, but other customs activities and events were adjusted along the way. For example, the scavenger hunt was very difficult for me because it required the group to take routes that are not accessible, and the walk into Ardmore was adjusted to be a bus ride so that it would be accessible for me.

6) What would an ideal campus tour look like for you? An ideal campus tour would focus on accessible routes, have places to stop and sit down or rest, and be generally designed with the assumption that people with mobility issues will be on it.

7) How did these experiences shape your first impression of the campus? These experiences were very important in making me feel like a valued and normal part of campus, as well as showing me how the college was going to handle access issues in the future, and how baseline accessible the campus was.

8) Did the tour affect your sense of belonging at Haverford in any way? While I think the tours and customs as a whole were decently well designed, I felt certain aspects of the week were not made with disabled students in mind and thus made me feel somewhat isolated. Things like being unable to enter with my customs group to the auditorium, being unable to participate in several of the dorm olympics events, and not being able to do the scavenger hunt made it difficult to connect with the larger group and feel like an equal community member.

9) What changes would you suggest to make Customs Week more accessible for future students? I would bake accessibility into customs instead of just adjusting for disabled students. While specific accommodations will likely always be necessary, the basics of taking accessible routes and planning events that do not rely on physical ability would make the experience far more comfortable for disabled students.

10) How important is it to you that accessibility is built into the design rather than added later? It is very important to me because it helps make disabled students feel more comfortable and at home. The more things have to be adjusted or added later, the more disabled students are made to feel like an inconvenience and like the campus and customs as a whole are not made for us. It also places a greater burden on us to advocate for ourselves and put in far more effort to be included.