

Christina Lopez

UT accessibility

Physically disabled students continue to struggle with accessibility on UT's campus

10/27/2022

### **Budget line**

Exploring whether or not UT is accessible for students with physical disabilities after advancements in accessibility

### **Interviewed Sources**

- Nancy Crowther, UT alumna class of '83, Bachelors of Social Work, Spinal Muscular Atrophy, interviewed at her home in South Austin
  - Phone: 512-808-7486
  - Email: [ncrowther21@gmail.com](mailto:ncrowther21@gmail.com)
  - Date(s) contacted: 10/12/2022 email, 10/21/2022 in person interview
  - We discussed her experience as a disabled student at UT in the 80s and how the school's accessibility has changed. We also touched on shuttle buses and Ferris v. University of Texas at Austin.
- Fabiola Amaya, UT freshman social work major from Houston area, Muscular dystrophy, interviewed in Duren residence hall
  - Phone: n/a
  - Email: [fabdaphamaya@gmail.com](mailto:fabdaphamaya@gmail.com)
  - Date(s) contacted: 10/23/2022 instagram DM, 10/24/2022 in person interview
  - We discussed what struggles she faces as a student trying to move around campus and what she wants to see the university improve.
- Emily Shyrock, D&A Director of Campus Collaborations and Access
  - Phone: n/a
  - Email: [emily.s@austin.utexas.edu](mailto:emily.s@austin.utexas.edu)
  - Date(s) contacted: 10/13/2022 online contact request, 10/23/2022 zoom interview
  - We discussed the purposes of Disability and Access, how they try to improve their system and what they are planning for the future.

### **Here's are the attempts I made and criteria I used to diversify my sources:**

I tried to get UT students or alumni that are physically disabled for my story. I tried to get sources that faced difficulty with mobility around campus from the past and present. I reached out to my aunt, who is disabled and a graduate from UT, and she got me in contact with Nancy, who went to UT and had struggles with moving around campus. I got into contact with Fabiola through a classmate who is in Texas Lassos with Fabiola. While getting the students, I also wanted to hear from university staff from offices dealing with disability and accessibility. I filled out a contact form to talk to a Disability and Access staff member and asked questions to get their point of view on the issues of mobility.

### **While reporting this story, this is how I worked to enhance my credibility**

When reaching out to sources, I told them that I am passionate about accessibility because of my upbringing with my aunt, and that I wanted to tell their stories and experiences of having a disability on campus. I told them that I was a student that wanted to learn more, understand and inform others about their experiences and efforts.

Students with disabilities struggled with mobility and access on the University of Texas campus in the 1980s, however, that struggle still continues today.

According to data from UT's Office of Disability and Access, 26 out of the 3,246 students who registered with the office in spring 2022 are physically disabled. The office offers academic accommodations for students with disabilities like more time for tests, flexibility for deadlines and ASL interpreters. However, they do not help with moving around campus like automatic doors, getting to and from class, accessible and operational ramps.

Fabiola Amaya, a first-year student with muscular dystrophy, said she receives help from the spirit organizations Texas Lassos and Texas Lonestars to get around campus. Despite receiving help, she still struggles with accessibility.

"Pretty much every building is accessible," Amaya said. "But a lot of times, the priority is aesthetic, or looks. And so the ramp is in the back, or you have to go a long way to get to it."

Muscular dystrophy affects Amaya's voluntary and involuntary muscles, including muscles in her arms, legs and lungs. Amaya is a "full-time wheelchair user," which she said affects her daily life. Amaya said the buttons for the automatic doors aren't helpful to her because her arms are affected by her disability.

"Most accessibility was created with a specific disability in mind," Amaya said. "I feel like if (the university) were to improve their accessibility and get input from disabled people, I think that would help a lot."

Nancy Crowther, a UT alumna with spinal muscular atrophy, is a wheelchair user and a disability activist in Austin. Crowther graduated from UT in 1983, and during her time at the university, she advocated for accessibility with the student organization People Against Barriers.

Crowther participated in the class action lawsuit, *Ferris v. The University of Texas*, which challenged the university's transit system for not having lifts for wheelchairs on shuttle buses. The court ruled the school was not legally obligated to provide accommodations because the bus system was not receiving federal funding.

"It just wasn't right," Crowther said. "It was so blatantly obvious that it was discriminatory."

Crowther called the lawsuit a "David and Goliath issue," but said it opened the door for improvements on disability inclusion.

"It was a historical case against a bar for putting lifts on buses, and then it became mandated under The Americans with Disabilities Act," Crowther said.

President George H. W. Bush signed The Americans with Disabilities Act into law on July 26, 1990. This act prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities and protects their civil

rights. The ADA helps 26% of people living in the United States have a disability, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

As a student, Crowther moved around campus by cutting through buildings and using elevators. During bad weather, she could not use the shuttle bus because of the lack of lifts for her wheelchair.

“A lot of students got to jump on a shuttle and get out of the rain,” Crowther said. “(The disabled students) were wearing ponchos and my pockets would fill up with water.”

According to Emily Shyrock, the director of campus collaborations and access for the Disability and Access office at UT, the law requires the university to be accessible for people with disabilities.

“There's very specific requirements, that we're held to and we're kind of audited for,” Shyrock said.

Shyrock said there is always room for improvement on accessibility across campus. Shyrock said the D&A office created a student and faculty advisory committee to hear from students and faculty on what they think needs improvement.

“We're always wanting to know how we can do better internally,” Shyrock said. “How can we do better externally, to support students, faculty and staff?”

Shyrock said their office received funding to start a Disability Cultural Center. The center will provide a place for disabled students to find community, learn about disabled history and critical disability studies.

“There's just so many things that disability is besides just a compliance issue,” Shyrock said. “The Disability Cultural Center is really going to enhance UT's overall recognition of disability in that way.”

Amaya said she hopes the work Texas Lassos and Texas Lonestars will expand to other disabled students and “have it be a university wide thing.” Crowther said accessibility is a never-ending job because of technology changes, which she said keeps accessibility on everyone's radar.

“It's an ongoing thing that we need to keep the attention alive to it,” Crowther said.

“Because if we stop, believe me, things will go backwards.”