



Institute for Critical Disability Studies

3-21-2024

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Recommended Citation

Rogoff, Remi, "Disability Access at the Wade King Recreation Center" (2024). *Institute for Critical Disability Studies*. 1.
<https://cedar.wwu.edu/icds/1>

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Disability Access at the Wade King Recreation Center

Remi Rogoff

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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law by President Nixon in 1990 after a long uphill battle by disability rights activists. It promised to revolutionize the way disabled Americans could live their lives by requiring that they not be discriminated against because of their disability.

Under the ADA, businesses were mandated to provide reasonable accommodations to people with disabilities (such as restructuring jobs or modifying work equipment), public services could no longer deny services to people with disabilities (such as public transportation systems), all public accommodations were expected to have modifications made to be accessible to people with disabilities, and all telecommunications services were mandated to offer adaptive services to people with disabilities. With this piece of legislation, the US government identified the full participation, inclusion and integration of people with disabilities in all levels of society. (*A Brief History of the Disability Rights Movement*, 2017)

Unfortunately, the ADA has never been consistently enforced. Accommodations often have to be fought for by those seeking them, and making environments physically accessible is often treated more as a chore and an expense than an opportunity to allow more people to utilize the services offered.

At Western Washington University, roughly 20% of students receive some kind of accommodation through the Disability Access Center (Joseph Mogharreban, personal correspondence, November 14, 2023). With that many disabled students, accessibility should be a priority, and to some people it is. Some professors go above and beyond to be accommodating, the Disability Access Center works tirelessly with students to meet their individual needs, and there has been recent construction trying to address some of the more glaring accessibility issues like the crumbling brick stairs at the south end of Red Square. Unfortunately, there is still a neverending list of physical and non-physical accessibility concerns that go unaddressed.

Every quarter, Western Washington University students taking six or more credits are required to pay a Student Recreation Fee. In Winter Quarter 2024, this fee was \$113.84 (“Tuition and Fee Schedule”, n.d.). This fee is to “[support] bond debt payments for the construction of the ongoing facility maintenance, repair and replacement and the ongoing personnel and program operations of the Wade King Student Recreation Center” (“Fees Explained”, n.d.). Every student is required to pay more than \$300 each year to keep the Wade King Student Recreation Center operating, but is every student able to access it?

As an urban planning pre-major and a critical disability studies minor, I am very interested in how built environments are or are not made accessible to people with disabilities. It is often the case that accessibility is not considered a priority during planning, and is only brought into a project because the ADA requires it. This is obvious in the design of many buildings. While the argument can be (and often is) made that many buildings were built before the ADA was passed in 1990, there are many buildings that have been built since then that still do not seem to have accessibility as a priority in their design. The Wade King Recreation Center is one of these buildings. It was built in 2003, well after the ADA initially passed.

I have decided to do a limited survey of the physical space with a focus on drinking fountains and ramps, but the main focus of my paper will be disabled students’ experience of the Wade King Recreation Center.

One of the things that the ADA outlines very specific requirements for is drinking fountains. For the safety of blind or low vision people using canes to navigate, an object that protrudes more than four inches into a public walkway must have a leading edge no higher than 27 inches so that it can be detected by a person using a cane to navigate. If the leading edge is higher than 27 inches, it must be recessed into an alcove so that it protrudes no more than four inches. For accessibility to people using wheelchairs, a wheelchair accessible drinking fountain must have at least 27 inches of clearance beneath it. In order for a drinking fountain that protrudes more than four inches into a

public walkway to be ADA compliant, it must be exactly 27 inches above the ground (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

When I went into the Wade King Recreation Center with a measuring tape, I found that multiple drinking fountains do not seem to be ADA compliant. By the front desk, at the bottom of the ramp leading to the basketball and volleyball courts, and at the bottom of the stairs by basketball court A, the leading edges of the low drinking fountains were all higher than 27 inches, and the drinking fountains were not recessed into alcoves. They protruded between 17 and 18 inches into the circulation paths. One of them could easily have furniture placed so that they are detectable by a cane, and two others are near corners, though I have not found an exemption for this circumstance. The fountain by the front desk is between two bathroom doors with no easy solution that I could find. The fountains that were not too tall to be detected by a cane were too low to be accessed by a person in a wheelchair. They all seemed to be 26.5 inches above the ground, which is close enough to the standard that my guess would be that the floor was finished slightly higher than they expected it to be.

The drinking fountains are not the only features in the Wade King Recreation Center that do not comply with ADA standards for accessible design. Once again using my measuring tape, which made me look very official and cool, I measured two of the ramps on the first floor of the Wade King Recreation Center. According to the ADA, a ramp should have no more than one inch of rise for every twelve inches of run (a 1:12 ratio). The ramp should not exceed thirty inches of rise without a landing (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990). From my measurements, I found that the ramp leading down to the basketball courts and volleyball court had a rise of thirty inches exactly, which is the absolute maximum rise without a landing being required. The surface is 29 feet and 8 inches (or 356 inches) long. I got to use the pythagorean theorem for the first time since the 7th grade to find the ramp's run is 29 feet and 6.7 inches (354.7 inches). This means that the ratio is 1 inch of rise for only 11.8 inches of run. While it is close, the ramp is too steep to comply with ADA standards. The

ramp that leads to the multi-purpose court was somewhat better, with a rise of 24 inches, a surface of 24 feet and 4.5 inches (292.5 inches), and a run of 24 feet and 3.5 inches (291.5 inches), the ramp is ADA compliant, but just barely with a rise to run ratio of 1:12.1. It is worth noting that a ramp that does meet the 1:12 ratio exactly is still considered very steep, and the UN recommends a ratio closer to 1 inch of rise for every 20 inches of run (“Accessibility Design Manual”, n.d.).

What I observed visually, but was unable to measure, was that the placement of movable furniture and equipment was inaccessible. The tables and chairs in the lobby were close together and did not seem to have enough room to maneuver a wheelchair, walker, or service dog around. The same was true for the exercise equipment on the second floor. All of this furniture and equipment is placed by the staff of the Wade King Recreation Center, and it was clear that disabled people were not being considered.

It is also clear that students using the Wade King Recreation Center are not considering disabled people. While I was exploring the building, I took the elevator up to the second floor. I was pleasantly surprised by the elevator at first - it was much larger than many of the elevators on Western Washington University’s campus - but when the doors opened, I was greeted by several free weights blocking the door. The student who had put them there looked up when the elevator doors opened, but did not move the weights. I would like to think that if I had been visibly disabled she would have moved them, but as it was, I had to step over them.

It’s one thing for me, with my individual experience and tape measure, to walk around the building and assess what is and is not ADA compliant. It is another entirely for people who actually use the space - or want to use it - to try to access it. I was able to interview six individuals, four current WWU students who for the sake of privacy are named AR, CL, EL, and NO, and two former WWU students named AN and MA, who all identify as disabled about their experiences with the Wade King Recreation Center. I interviewed one over Zoom, two over email, and three in person. I

have included brief descriptions of the interviewees in Appendix A, and the interview questions used in Appendix B.

Once I got to know each interviewee, I started by asking them if they utilize the Wade King Recreation Center and if they feel welcome there. The answers that I got for this question were definitely not representative of the general student population, as I met five of my six interviewees at WWU's Adaptive Sports club which meets once a week in the Wade King Recreation Center to play wheelchair basketball, but it was very interesting to see how they responded to the question.

CL, who is not a part of the Adaptive Sports Club, does not use the Wade King Recreation Center at all. They do not have experience using gyms, and they are afraid to go by themselves. The few times they have visited, they were intimidated by large crowds of people who all seemed to know what they were doing. CL did not feel welcome there, stating that “ [the Wade King Recreation Center] does not provide any guidance for people who don't know what to do at the gym”. They do not want to be in the way of people with more experience (CL, personal communication, March 11, 2024).

AN and MA both still visit the Wade King Recreation Center center once a week when they attend wheelchair basketball. AN said that she used to use the space more when they were a student (AN, personal communication, March 5, 2024). MA told me that she was asked by a friend from high school to join him in working to make the Wade King Recreation Center more accessible, including starting a wheelchair basketball club (MA, personal communication, March 8, 2024). AN and MA are the coaches of wheelchair basketball, but are not club officers because they are no longer enrolled at WWU.

The three remaining interviewees all reported pretty much only using the Wade King Recreation Center during wheelchair basketball once per week. AR has gone rock climbing twice (AR, personal communication, March 9, 2024), and NO tried to do cardio there a while ago (NO, personal communication, March 7, 2024), but neither of them go to the Wade King Recreation

Center regularly outside of attending the Adaptive Sports Club, and none of the other interviewees do at all.

A likely reason that the disabled students I interviewed do not use the Wade King Recreation Center is that they do not feel welcome there. All six interviewees told me that they do not feel welcome at the Wade King Recreation Center. While the five of them who visit the Wade King Recreation Center for Adaptive Sports Club said that the staff is generally accommodating and respectful, the other students make them feel unwelcome.

MA explained that because there is limited space in the rooms with exercise equipment, they often feel like they are in the way with their mobility aids or service dog. She does not feel welcome to use the courts outside of the one hour of club time per week because they are used exclusively for inaccessible sports. They feel unwelcome in the pool because of the amount of space she needs in order to swim. They also said that there is “a general vibe from a lot of the other students that utilize the Wade King Recreation Center that still makes [her] feel uncomfortable”. Despite this, she said that they feel much more welcome at the Wade King Recreation Center than she used to. It used to be that in order to enter the Wade King Recreation Center, you had to push through a set of turnstiles. This was extremely difficult or even impossible to do with a mobility aid or service dog, and it communicated to MA that the space was not made for them, and that she was not welcome there. MA brought up this barrier throughout her time at WWU, and the turnstile was eventually removed. After they graduated. AR also said that the architectural accessibility issues make them feel unwelcome there. Particularly the very steep ramp down to the courts.

AN also described feeling unwelcomed by the other students in the Wade King Recreation Center. They said that while wheelchair basketball is a very welcoming and accepting environment, she feels unwelcome in the weight and cardio rooms. They said that nobody has made explicit comments, but as a fat, queer, disabled person, the other students stare at her. NO also said he gets

stared at as a fat guy at the gym, and they described a noticeable social hierarchy that feels very exclusionary to anyone who isn't a stereotypical gym-goer.

When I was interviewing EL, they described an incident that I had the misfortune of actually being present for. After wheelchair basketball, the club has to wheel all of the chairs across two active courts to reach the storage closet where the wheelchair basketball chairs are kept during the rest of the week. Once there, we have to remove the wheels and arrange the chairs so they all fit. This process takes about five minutes, throughout which we must stay right next to the volleyball court. There is no barrier. One night as we were putting away chairs, a stray ball almost hit several club members, EL included. Since multiple members of the club are fall risks or would be in extreme danger if we were to be hit in the head, EL asked the team to please be careful while we finished putting our equipment away. Two volleyball players responded to this. One of them was very polite and apologized immediately, but the other crossed their arms, rolled their eyes, and glared at EL. Because EL did not want to make the respectful player uncomfortable or make a scene, they decided not to press the issue then, but did end up filing an incident report. EL said that “nowhere in [their] life feels quite as hostile as the rec center” (EL, personal communication, March 9, 2024).

The staff at the Wade King Recreation Center seem to be a bright point in all of this. The general consensus from the interviewees that use the Wade King Recreation Center was that the staff overall do their best to be helpful and accommodating. MA said that it has been great to see the change since the beginning of her time here. When wheelchair basketball first started, they said they were looked at as a burden. It seemed like the staff were obligated to include them but did not know how, and did not want them taking up space from the nondisabled students. “I felt that we constantly had to fight for the right to take up space. As the president of the club at the time, I was always negotiating with staff over storage space for the chairs, court time, and assistance getting the chairs set up or to be moved to a more easily accessible location”. Now, the staff are welcoming and advocating for the club and its members.

AN told me that in the past seven years that she has observed, staff attitudes have changed significantly for the better, and they are “killing it” right now, especially the building supervisors. NO said that staff were great at an adaptive climb night. AR described them as being “shockingly good” at being helpful and accommodating.

When I asked what specifically was accessible to my interviewees at the Wade King Recreation Center, I got mixed answers. MA said that not much was accessible to her at all because of how uncomfortable navigating the space and other students’ attitudes makes them. AN listed a number of accessible features that they are happy with, including chair lifts in the pool and hot tub, a storage closet for students to keep mobility aids in while they exercise, and a large shower stall in the locker room. AR told me that while the ramps inside the Wade King Recreation Center are very steep, the ramp outside is one of the best ramps on campus because it has a switchback that allows it to be much shallower.

Talking about features that are inaccessible, NO pointed out that there is nowhere to fill a water bottle on our end of the courts, and to get to one you have to cross all three courts. EL brought up the very steep ramp to the courts, and AN and EL both said that the wheelchair height drinking fountain at the courts has been broken for over a year, despite AN submitting countless maintenance requests for it to be fixed. AR and AN both talked about the climbing wall, which has a tall, squishy mat underneath it that is very difficult or impossible to navigate with mobility aid or mobility impairment.

MA explained that while all areas of the Wade King Recreation Center are technically physically accessible to her, almost nothing is functionally accessible. Once they get to an area, she can’t really do anything there. They can get to the courts, but adaptive sports are only one hour a week, and it can be dangerous for her to cross the courts to get from the ramp to the far end where wheelchair basketball is. They can get up to the second floor, but can’t really get anywhere without needing to ask people to move out of her way. AN said that even though there is an accessible

shower stall in the locker room, people will often remove the shower stool or place the shower head out of reach, rendering it inaccessible.

CL shared that while they do not have a physical disability, their ADHD and anxiety make the Wade King Recreation Center inaccessible to them. It is too loud and chaotic there for them to tolerate, and they are extremely anxious to go into new situations without guidance. They also have trouble knowing where their body is in space and need someone experienced to help them exercise, which is not available to them at the Wade King Recreation Center.

I asked my interviewees what they would change about the Wade King Recreation Center if they could. WWU's Adaptive Sports Club meets once a week, but EL and AR wish that it could be more often, even just twice a week, so that people who can not attend the one narrow timeslot we currently have could still participate. EL also said that they would love to be able to check out one of the basketball chairs and play open hoops, even though they would be nervous about how other students would react. AN said she would like to improve the gender neutral locker room, which only has one toilet and one shower, and no bend or double doors from the main entrance so the locker area is immediately visible when the door opens. NO said that he would add a center handrail to the large staircase to the second floor, and they would love not to be a human shield for stray volleyballs while the club is putting chairs away after practice. CL would add exercise classes for beginners that would teach students how to use the rec center. Overwhelmingly, the people I interviewed wanted nondisabled students' attitudes toward disabled people in the Wade King Recreation Center to improve.

Despite all of the accessibility issues that the Wade King Recreation Center does face, it has also improved over the years. One of the turnstiles at the entrance was removed, which eliminated a huge physical access barrier. Staff have become more accommodating and educated, and they have become more aware of the Adaptive Sports Club's existence. It went from being a fight just to get a time in the courts to practice to being a celebrated part of Monday nights! Overall the attitude of the

staff has changed drastically over the years, which has helped make the Wade King Recreation Center a more welcoming environment.

It is my belief that physical segregation reinforces attitudinal segregation. When a physical space excludes a specific group of people, others in that space don't see the excluded group around, and they begin to believe that the excluded group does not belong there, even after that group is no longer technically excluded. An example of this is racially restrictive covenants. "Racially restrictive covenants refer to contractual agreements that prohibit the purchase, lease, or occupation of a piece of property by a particular group of people, usually African Americans... Racially restrictive covenants became common after 1926 after the U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Corrigan v. Buckley*, which validated their use" (*1920s–1948: Racially Restrictive Covenants*, n.d.). While they have not been enforceable since 1948, the impacts are still present and visible in the populations of different neighborhoods (Thompson et al., 2021), as well as the lack of opportunity for Black Americans to build generational wealth through property ownership. In predominantly white neighborhoods, people of color may feel excluded or be discriminated against, even though it is no longer legal to exclude someone from a neighborhood because of their race.

On a much smaller scale, this is happening at the Wade King Recreation Center. While there are architectural and organizational issues that make the Wade King Recreation Center less accessible than it should be, it is much more accessible than many other buildings on Western Washington University's campus. The primary issue that the students I interviewed brought up was that they felt unwelcome to use the space. Because the Wade King Recreation Center used to be much more inaccessible, and because attitudes of the staff at the Wade King Recreation Center used to be worse than they currently are, many students who are physically able to access the building are still not utilizing the space.

Some options to make the Wade King Recreation Center feel more welcoming to disabled students could be to host more adaptive events, more events for beginners, place posters encouraging

students not to block accessible features, and allow students to use adaptive equipment like sports wheelchairs outside of specific events. The Wade King Recreation Center should strive to be as welcoming and accessible to disabled students as it possibly can be. Not only is it illegal for a public space to be inaccessible, but Western Washington University has a thriving disability community that should be welcome in all spaces on campus, including the Wade King Recreation Center. The staff at the Wade King Recreation Center are generally very accommodating and welcoming of disabled students, and the Adaptive Sports Club has created a warm and friendly environment, but it should not end there. The Wade King Recreation Center should be made as physically accessible as it possibly can, and there should be an effort to help the student population there become more welcoming to disabled students. As of now, efforts to make the Wade King Recreation Center accessible stop short of encouraging its nondisabled patrons to be respectful of its disabled patrons, and that has created a barrier for disabled students to use the space as they want to.

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Appendix A

Interviewees

- CL: she/her, current student, ADHD and generalized anxiety disorder, able-bodied
- MA: she/they, former student, has cerebral palsy and uses mobility devices including wheelchairs and canes, is a service dog handler
- NO: he/they, current student
- AN: she/they, former student, coaches WWU Wheelchair Basketball Team
- AR: they/them, current student, library employee, physically disabled
- EL: they/them, multiply disabled with physical and learning and developmental disabilities

Appendix B

Interview Questions

- Do you utilize the rec center? If no, why not?
- Do you feel welcome to use the rec center? Why or why not?
- Are the staff at the rec center generally accommodating?
- What is accessible to you in the rec center?
- What is not accessible in the rec center?
- What is supposed to be accessible, but is not functionally accessible to you?
- What would you like to change about the rec center to make it more accessible?
- What are ways you've seen the rec center change to become more accessible?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about accessibility in the rec center?