

Lasell University's Accessibility Problem

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PHIL302: Ethical Reasoning

December 17, 2021

Introduction

Every school has the responsibility to look out for the general wellbeing of its students. However, schools have to decide which of the many possibilities for actions that can be done to help students are worth investing in. Some actions may be more widespread and effective in general, while other choices may only affect a small group of people directly but are still essential.

Lasell University is a relatively small institution in an old suburban town. The campus has many hills, uneven streets, and older buildings. Although your average able-bodied person would have no problem with these factors, people with physical disabilities at Lasell have to deal with the challenges that the campus presents them with and end up having much more difficulty getting around their own school.

Position

My argument is that people with physical disabilities should have the same ease of access as other students, so it is unethical for Lasell to continue to neglect the need for improvement of the campus's accessibility.

Argument

- (1) If Lasell does not have enough facilities to provide students with physical disabilities with the same ease of access as other students, then according to Justice Theory it is morally wrong for Lasell to not improve accessibility on campus.
- (2) Lasell does not have enough facilities to provide students with physical disabilities with the same ease of access as other students.

(3) Therefore, it is morally wrong for Lasell to not improve accessibility on campus.

Validity and Definitions

This argument is valid because it is presented in proper modus ponens form.

A *physical disability* is a physical condition of someone's body that limits their movements, senses, or activities (USDA Forest Service, Technology and Development). For the students with physical disabilities that I am discussing in this paper, I will be referring to those with a disability that may impact their movement directly and make it harder to physically get around on campus. Although not always the case, they often use mobility aids such as wheelchairs, canes, crutches, or braces, and may have difficulty getting around areas with stairs, steep hills, or uneven walkways. In order to best respect these people, instead of referring to them as "people with handicaps" as many people may be familiar with, I will refer to them as *people with physical disabilities*, because there are more negative connotations associated with the term "handicapped," and the majority of people with physical disabilities prefer not to be called people with handicaps. For the same reason, instead of saying something is "handicap accessible," I will be using the term *mobility accessible*.

When something is accessible, it is adapted to be easily used by people with disabilities (Merriam-Webster). *Accessibility* is the state of something being accessible and might be interchanged with the term *ease of access* when referring to the physical characteristics of an area that is mobility accessible.

Justice Theory refers to the ethical theory known as "Rawls's Theory of Justice." This theory is based upon the principle of justice meaning fairness for all, making sure everyone has a fair experience despite the ways they may be affected by the "biases of life" such as having a disability. Actions that would be considered unfair by a collective consensus would be morally wrong according to Justice Theory.

Justification of Premise 1

Premise 1 is based upon Rawls's Theory of Justice, with justice equating to fairness. According to this theory's "Difference Principle," disadvantages must be equally accessible to all, and to the benefit of all. If one group of people has a disadvantage that negatively affects their wellbeing and that doesn't affect the wellbeing of others, then according to Justice Theory it is immoral for nothing to be done to make things fairer.

This kind of situation would apply to people with physical disabilities being at a disadvantage compared to other people who are able-bodied. If Lasell doesn't have all the facilities that are needed to significantly improve the ease of access for people with physical disabilities, then their level of wellbeing while getting around campus is poor compared to people without physical disabilities. If this is the case, then Lasell is being unethical, since it is unfair for students with physical disabilities to have a much poorer experience on campus due to the University's own fault.

Justification of Premise 2

Premise 2 claims that Lasell does not have enough facilities to provide students with physical disabilities with the same ease of access as other students. This can be shown to be true with several cases across campus that are not easily mobility accessible. In general, the abundance of steep hills and cracked, uneven sidewalks and roads makes the general terrain difficult to get across for people with mobility aids. If a student with a physical disability ends up with classes right after each other at locations that are far away from each other, they will unfortunately have to take many difficult and winding paths and may be late to classes, which takes away from the quality of their education that they are paying for.

As for the buildings, many of them are difficult or even impossible to access if you can't deal with stairs or steep slopes. Most of the buildings that are not mobility accessible are residence halls. This makes housing options more limited for people with physical disabilities. This is especially the case if someone with a physical disability is looking to live in all-female housing; even though Lasell has several options for this, the only one that I have been able to tell is mobility accessible is the entrance floor of Van Winkle Hall. This only leaves a tiny selection of rooms for someone with these specific needs, and if something else were to get in the way of them living there such as conflict with a roommate, floormate, or Resident Assistant, then they would have no option to leave the area like the rest of the students on campus are able to do.

One example of a building that is not impossible but very difficult to access is the dining hall building. Considering that this is one of the most important resources on campus for most resident students, it is imperative that it is easily accessible, especially if one needs to grab a quick bite to eat before class. It has three entrances: one from the north, one from the south, and one from the west. The entrances from the north and south are exclusively accessible via stairs, so a person with a physical disability has to access the dining hall from the west entrance that has a long ramp. With the positioning of the ramp, a person coming from the east direction has a long way to go to get around to the very end of the west ramp and get into the building. This takes a long time for someone to get into such an important building.

Additionally, Lasell has their Covid testing center on the floor above the dining hall. This area is only accessible either up the stairs at the south entrance of the dining hall, or up one of the largest hills on campus leading up to Gardner house. If you can't make it up either of these ways, the only accommodation that Lasell has to reach this spot on campus is a reserved mobility accessible parking spot at the top of the hill. Considering that especially last year this was one of

the most important locations on campus, it is absurd that it should be so difficult for a person with a physical disability to be able to get to. It would be extremely helpful if an elevator was able to connect all the entrances and floors of the dining hall building.

Objection to Premise 1

Even though it is clear that unfair disadvantages can lead to immoral situations according to Justice Theory, some may think that other ethical theories prove that this is not immoral. For example, a Utilitarian argument may say that increasing accessibility across campus would not be an action of the greatest utility that Lasell could do. According to Utilitarianism, actions that promote the most utility are morally the most good.

Implementing measures for increased accessibility would be costly and would require funds that could be going to other aspects of the university that may be beneficial in more ways or for more people. This may include financial decisions such as paying for scholarships, materials for different courses, and teachers and helpers for different academic fields. Paying for these kinds of things might have a benefit for more people, as opposed to the few people with physical disabilities who would benefit from improved ease of access. Additionally, construction for improving accessibility may temporarily take away access from important spaces to everyone on campus while the construction work is being done.

Objection to Premise 2

Some people may say that Lasell actually does have enough facilities to provide students with physical disabilities with the same ease of access as other students. Most of the important buildings have elevators and ramps, such as class buildings and larger residence halls. For the general experience on campus, students with physical disabilities might not have a significantly

worse experience with getting to where they need to go. It may depend on the circumstances of each person on a case-by-case basis, and therefore not affect a very large number of people.

Answer to Objection to Premise 1

Even though there are a small number of people with physical disabilities on campus, providing them with better ease of access would result in a huge amount of utility. Since many areas of campus are so difficult to get around, it would make the lives of people with physical disabilities extremely better to have improved accessibility and take away the suffering they experience in these areas. Instead of improving the aspects of campus that already have a solid level of satisfaction with them as they are, it would make more sense to improve the aspects of campus that may affect fewer people but would improve the experience for those people from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, such as the accessibility of the campus. This greater contrast in improved satisfaction would result in the most utility overall.

Besides the fact that those people who do have physical disabilities would benefit from improved accessibility, many more people would end up satisfied with this change as well. With every individual on campus comes a network of more individuals who are friends with them and involved in their life. If a person with a physical disability ends up with an improved experience, then their friends will be happy for them and satisfied with the decision that the school made to fix the issue. This even applies to people who don't personally know people with physical disabilities; just knowing that the school has good ease of access can reassure people that their school cares about the wellbeing of people of all kinds on their campus, providing reassurance especially to people who might be in a minority. And especially for people who may be active in a sport, it would be reassuring to know that if they ever were to gain even a temporary physical

disability due to an injury, they would still be able to get around campus pretty well and adjust to the change easier.

Additionally, having improved ease of access across campus could help Lasell in the future. The reassurance mentioned previously that this feature brings with it can also affect prospective students. A prospective student with a physical disability who visits campus now may be dissuaded from choosing Lasell due to its poor accessibility, but if the school improved its accessibility it may attract more students with physical disabilities and other students who support this.

Answer to Objection to Premise 2

Even though Lasell does have quite a few accommodations for improved accessibility, they do not make up for the cases where accessibility is lacking. And there are other ways that other schools have provided accommodations to students with physical disabilities that Lasell could implement, such as giving them extra transportation services, allowing them to have a more flexible class schedule in order to adapt to their needs, and providing easy-to-access information that directs students with physical disabilities to the best mobility accessible spots in the area.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Lasell is not providing all the facilities that students with physical disabilities need to get around campus as easily as other students. This unfair treatment is morally wrong; therefore, Lasell needs to take a closer look at this issue and look into solutions to improve accessibility on campus.

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