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BC faces inquiry over accessibility of campus

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SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

From her wheelchair, a graduate student pointed out this new set of stairs during a recent tour of the campus.

By Matt Rocheleau

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT FEBRUARY 18, 2015

Federal and state officials are investigating Boston College for possible violations of accessibility laws, amid complaints from some current and former students with disabilities who describe navigating sections of the campus as a nightmare.

Problem spots, including numerous routes and ramps that are steep and others that lead only to stairs, force people with disabilities to travel longer routes or navigate “shortcuts” through a maze of building hallways and elevators to get across campus, the students said.

As of December, BC was the only college in Massachusetts facing such a federal investigation and one of just 23 nationally, according to the US Education Department.



“When I was in school at BC just over 15 years ago, I had better access to buildings on the campus than I do now,” said BC alumna Adriana Mallozzi, 37, who has cerebral palsy and uses her head and mouth to control a joystick on a powered wheelchair to get around. “All the new construction has changed the landscape of the campus and did not make it better for people with mobility issues, but made it worse.”

The university said it is assisting the Department of Education and the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board in their reviews, but declined to comment specifically about the inquiries.

BC lawyer Joseph M. Herlihy said in a statement that the school provides a “wide range of accommodations” for students with disabilities and has made “continual investment in accessible facilities, campus pathways, and technology.”

BC spokesman Jack Dunn noted that the hilly topography of the campus creates a unique challenge for the college. However, he said, the university “has worked diligently to address accessibility concerns, and during the past 10 years has invested millions of dollars in campus accessibility projects ranging from ramps, disability access routes, and automatic door openers, to dorm room reconfigurations, Braille signs, and audible pedestrian signals.”

A group of concerned students at BC recently created a [website](#) and [Facebook page](#) featuring photos, videos, and written descriptions documenting campus spaces that they contend are out of compliance.

Mallozzi and a current BC graduate student, who is also disabled and asked that her name not be published because she is worried it could affect her job search, recently led a Globe reporter around the campus.

Maggie Sheets, a research assistant and health care advocate at the nonprofit Disability Policy Consortium of Massachusetts, was along for the tour.

“We support these students wholeheartedly, and we are deeply concerned about anything that limits students’ ability to have a full and active life on campus,” Sheets said.

Complaints come not only from students.



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

“There are a lot of issues, and the school is rather careless about the whole thing,” said Rev. Raymond Helmick, a professor in the theology department.

The Rev. Raymond Helmick, a professor in the theology department, said he recently needed to use a wheelchair to get around after he tore a tendon in his knee.

But he said he often had a hard time getting to his office in Stokes Hall — a new, \$78 million academic facility BC opened two years ago — because few, if any, of the building’s heavy doors had push-button-activated openers.

“It was extremely difficult to get up to my office on the third floor, so I just stopped going to the office except on really rare occasions,” Helmick recalled. “There are a lot of issues, and the school is rather careless about the whole thing.”

Advocates acknowledged that, as BC officials point out, the topography of the campus adds a unique challenge. But they say that is not an adequate excuse.

“It makes me very sad that instead of progress they have regressed,” said Mallozzi, who graduated from BC in 2000, lives a few miles from her alma mater, and has helped current students advocate for better accessibility around campus.

The federal inquiry began in May after students said they filed a complaint with the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights.

The investigation involves reviewing more than a dozen facilities, including a mix of old, recently renovated, and new libraries, dormitories, academic buildings, outdoor common areas, and a parking garage, according to a department spokesman.

The inquiry is also exploring whether college administrators discriminated against people with disabilities by taking improper steps to address accessible parking issues and snow and ice removal; and whether the college failed to adopt grievance procedures to resolve disability related complaints, said the spokesman, who declined to disclose further details about the investigation at BC.

Students involved in efforts to make Boston College more accessible said that by speaking out and filing complaints with public agencies they've been able to increase awareness of the issues and, in some cases, have prompted the university to act.

The investigation by the state's Architectural Access Board was launched after a pair of complaints were filed in January 2014.

The board's review found that BC had locked a handicapped-accessible entrance to a campus library at times when the building and other entrances were open, according to Terrel Harris, a spokesman for the state board. BC has since vowed to keep that accessible entrance unlocked.

Harris said that the college has been responsive to the board and has worked to resolve issues found by the agency's investigations.



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Some doors on BC buildings lack automatic openers, making it difficult for those with disabilities to gain access.

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