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# Interrupted Access: A Photo-Ethnography

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# Interrupted Access: A Photo-Ethnography

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In my sophomore year, I was conducting an Admissions tour and while introducing myself to a group of prospective students and their families, I noticed that one young man was in an electronic scooter. Immediately, I began running through the tour route in my head and it seemed that at every turn there was another obstacle or inaccessible path to overcome. For the first time at Trinity, I realized how truly inaccessible the campus was. The young man's mother approached me before the group left the Admissions building and graciously told me not to worry if her son wasn't able to see everything and that he understood that the campus wasn't fully accessible. This conversation made me feel so disappointed with Trinity, for I knew that on multiple times during the tour I would have to explain that there was no handicap-accessible entrance or, worse, that I didn't know where it was. I didn't have to wait long for Trinity's inaccessibility to become apparent. Within the first ten minutes of the tour, while explaining the collegiate gothic architecture of the Long Walk, I realized that the classroom reserved for tours was located on the second floor of Seabury and would certainly be inaccessible to the young man in the scooter. As we approached the entrance, the young man asked, "Is there anyway I can see the classroom?" to which I had to respond, "I'm so sorry; it isn't handicap accessible." I couldn't think of any way to make the situation better and knew that it would be the first of many apologies I would offer on the tour.

That tour served as a reality shock to me and permanently changed my perception of accessibility on campus. I had never given a second thought to handicap accessible entrances or exits before I met that young man. His presence served as a catalyst for my interest in handicap accessibility, which was further enhanced by my experience with the Day-In-A-Wheelchair event held in the fall of 2012 and 2013. The event served the dual purpose of promoting disability rights and encouraging a culture of understanding around disabilities in a college setting. The event proved to be an eye-opening experience for me and gave me a greater appreciation and awareness of the many barriers that impact students in wheelchairs and scooters on campus.

**Table 1**  
**Handicap Accessibility in Residence Halls**

<b>Residence Hall</b>	<b>Fully Handicap Accessible</b>	<b>Partially Handicap Accessible</b>	<b>Not Handicap Accessible</b>
Anadama Hall	x		
Boardwalk Hall			x
Clemens Hall			x
Cook Hall			x
Crescent Street Townhouses		x	
Doonesbury Hall			x
Elton Hall			x
Funston Hall	x		
Goodwin-Woodward Hall	x		
Hansen Hall	x		
High Rise Hall		x	
Jackson Hall		x	
Jarvis Hall			x
Jones Hall		x	
North Campus		x	
Northam Towers			x
Ogilby Hall			x
Park Place			x
Smith Hall			x
Stowe Hall			x
Summit Suites East	x		
Summit Suites North	x		
Summit Suites South	x		
Vernon Place	x		
Wheaton Hall		x	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>

This photo-ethnography presented me with a wonderful opportunity to learn more about what Trinity could do to better improve its handicap accessibility and identify problem areas on campus. My research attempts to shed light on how the built form of academic and residential buildings at Trinity College limits and inhibits people in wheelchairs and scooters.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study combines aspects of an ethnography, including close observation and interviews, with images to provide a more holistic view of wheelchair and scooter accessibility on campus. I used photographs as a methodological tool to document situations and enhance my observations.

I performed my research strictly on Trinity’s campus and split my efforts between academic and residential buildings. Given the small number of individuals on campus that use wheelchairs or electronic scooters, I opted to

Table 2

**Handicap Accessibility in Academic Buildings**

<b>Academic Building</b>	Fully Handicap Accessible	Partially Handicap Accessible	Not Handicap Accessible
Albert C. Jacobs Life Sciences Center	x		
Allan K. Smith Center for Writing and Rhetoric		x	
Austin Arts Center		x	
Clement Chemistry Building		x	
Gallows Hill			
Halden Hall		x	
Williams Memorial		x	
Raether Library	x		
McCook Academic Building		x	
Roy Nutt Center	x		
Seabury Hall		x	
Trinity Commons	x		
Total:	4	7	0

research the campus by visiting every academic and residential building with the limitations of a wheelchair. I only entered buildings that were handicap accessible through the use of ramps or elevators. I made note of how far out of my way I needed to go to enter certain buildings, which often led me to retrace my path to find ways around staircases. Through my observations I determined the number of buildings both residential and academic that are fully handicap accessible, partially handicap accessible, and not handicap accessible. Table 1 and Table 2 provide a comprehensive list outlining the handicap accessibility of residence halls and academic buildings, respectively.

With regard to my use of photography, I took over 50 pictures with my iPhone 4, from which I selected 28 images to include within this photo-ethnography. I combined zoomed aerial perspectives of the campus using the Trinity College Admissions map with ground level photos to show how, in many cases, the handicap accessible entrance is a significant distance from the “regular” entrance. By taking pictures of the path students in wheelchairs and scooters use to enter buildings, I hoped to convey the interrupted access that is characterized by delay and inconvenience.

I interviewed six individuals with varying experiences and knowledge of handicap accessibility to illustrate different perspectives of wheelchair accessibility on campus. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the anonymity of all participants. My informants included the following:

- An employee of the Health Center (Joanne)
- An employee of the Office of Residential Life (Keith)
- A Day-In-A-Wheelchair participant (David)
- A student with a disability who uses a wheelchair or scooter (Robert)

- A student with a disability who does not use a wheelchair or scooter (Louise)
- A student without a disability (Amanda)

All informants chose our meeting location, to maximize their comfort level during the discussion. I explained all possible risks and rewards associated with the study and obtained consent through the signing of a consent form. I used a semi-structured interview format, which allowed me to have a much more dynamic and fluid conversation. To encourage elaboration on responses, I used extended pauses between questions. My interview schedule was comprised of two lists of questions, a set of general questions, and a set of questions specific to the person I was interviewing. I used mainly free-form questions as a tool to guide the direction of the discussion. During the interview, I took notes on a writing pad and then afterwards typed up a more in-depth summary of the interview on my computer.

Beyond interviewing and assessing residential and academic buildings, I participated in the second annual Day-In-A-Wheelchair event on Tuesday, November 12, 2013. The event provided a wonderful opportunity to partially experience what moving around campus in a wheelchair is like. This participant observation gave me a different perspective and a greater appreciation for students who use wheelchairs and scooters.

### III. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

When I look back at the residence halls that I have lived in on campus I realize that only one of the four was handicap accessible. This experience is not unique; eleven out of twenty-five residence halls are not handicap accessible. Of the remaining fourteen residence halls only eight are considered fully accessible (Table 1). While all academic buildings are at least partially handicap accessible, only four of thirteen buildings are fully accessible (Table 2).

A student in a wheelchair or scooter cannot access the Dean's Office, the Office of Residential Life, and a multitude of departments and professors' offices. While neither academic nor residential buildings, these offices should promote a sense of inclusion and accessibility, but fail on both counts.

During my interview with Joanne, an employee of the Health Center, I was pleased to learn that the Health Center is conducting an informal study of handicap accessibility. Joanne is currently surveying all academic and residential buildings on campus to determine which buildings require changes to enhance handicap accessibility.

Most of the people I interviewed were unaware of the level of inaccessibility on Trinity's campus. Even individuals in positions of responsibility, who understood that Trinity had a long way to go in terms of handicap accessibility, were not aware of the many challenges students in wheelchairs and scooters face on a daily basis. While the majority of people realized that

the campus wasn't fully handicap accessible, they were not cognizant of the degree of inaccessibility.

Trinity's old architecture plays a major role in its handicap accessibility. While the Americans with Disabilities Act is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination based on disability, it only applies to the construction of new buildings. Renovations or improvements to existing structures don't have to follow the same ADA guidelines. Keith, an employee from the Office of Residential Life, referred to the 2008 Renovation of the Long Walk during our interview. He explained that no one from the Office of Residential Life was included in renovation discussions for Jarvis or Northam Towers, both of which are residence halls that are not handicap accessible. In fact, the topic of handicap accessibility was never discussed in relation to revising the dormitory layout. Keith explained that he was in favor of installing an elevator in one of the Jarvis Towers so that students with wheelchairs or scooters would have access to the residence hall. The renovation of the Long Walk was an attempt to preserve the aesthetic beauty of the collegiate style architecture exemplified on the historic section of campus. Unfortunately, Trinity's aesthetic aspirations didn't align with the interests of handicap accessibility on this occasion.

My interviews with Joanne and Keith were particularly helpful in understanding the process of placing students with wheelchairs and scooters in residence halls and classrooms. I would have liked the opportunity to interview someone from the Registrar's Office but no one was available. Despite the Registrar's unavailability, I still was able to get a good understanding of how the college makes accommodations for students in wheelchairs and scooters. All disputed decisions are brought up with the College's Disability Council, which evaluates requests and decides whether or not they are reasonable.

I learned that residential spaces deemed handicap accessible are identified upfront and presented to the student before the rest of the student body is placed through the housing lottery system. There are handicap accessible rooms located in a few residence halls across campus; but more often than not there are rooms that can be fitted to accommodate the needs of a student in a wheelchair or scooter. Joanne explained that, "While many buildings on campus are considered partially handicap accessible, they are not actively handicap accessible because they do not have automatic doors or proper signage. Buildings are evaluated and updated only when a demonstrated need arises."

Similar to residential buildings, specific classrooms in handicap accessible academic buildings are identified upfront and held for students in wheelchairs and scooters so that the Registrar doesn't run into accessibility problems while scheduling. Unfortunately, professors often fail to take handicap accessibility into consideration and switch classrooms without notifying the Registrar. On multiple occasions, students in wheelchairs or scooters have been unable to attend class after the classroom was unexpectedly switched.

For the current 2013-2014 school year, only two students out of the entire student body use a wheelchair or scooter. Just last year, four students that used wheelchairs and scooters graduated, which significantly decreased the presence of students in wheelchairs on campus.

This trend begs the question: Is Trinity doing a poor job of attracting students with disabilities? Joanne answered this question when she said, "I am brutally honest with prospective students and parents in saying that Trinity is not fully handicap accessible. There are many other schools that are better equipped for students who use wheelchairs and scooters." What a disheartening and embarrassing reality that such a disclaimer has to be placed on every discussion with prospective students with disabilities. These sentiments were reaffirmed in a later interview with Keith when he explained, "Trinity is on the wrong end of the spectrum when it comes to handicap accessibility." The lack of handicap accessibility on campus is not only a deterrent for prospective students but also for prospective employees with disabilities. According to Joanne only one staff member in the past twenty years has used a wheelchair or scooter.

Perhaps the most enlightening interviews were those I had with students without disabilities that required the use of a wheelchair or scooter. There was a real disconnect between students who use wheelchairs and scooters and those who do not. Louise said, "Sometimes, I wonder how people in wheelchairs or scooters get into buildings and then I push it out of my mind." The phrase 'out of sight, out of mind' seems appropriate for this statement. Handicap accessibility does not directly impact most Trinity students and therefore rarely enters their consciousness.

Another interview revealed a moment of gratefulness when an able-bodied student, Amanda, reflected, "I never appreciated the detours people in wheelchairs have to take until I wasn't able to go directly to my dorm. Every day for a month I had to take a ten-minute detour because of construction and it was so frustrating. I can't imagine what it's like for someone in a wheelchair who deals with that everyday, multiple times per day." Witnessing this appreciation and empathy was encouraging.

My discussions with another Day-In-A-Wheelchair participant reflected many of my personal experiences. David said, "Being in a wheelchair was so challenging that I had to stop... I wasn't able to get back to my dorm room or participate in my Chemistry lab in my wheelchair." The physical layout of the chemistry classroom coupled with high lab desks made it impossible for David to take part in lab work while in his wheelchair. This barrier to lab work needs to be addressed; students should be able to participate in all academic activities, regardless of their disabilities.

My interview with Robert, a student in a wheelchair, provided informative anecdotes that described a perspective I could never have achieved alone. Robert said, "Whenever I go to a new place, my first thoughts are: where

are the elevators, are there ramps, are there handicap bottoms for the doors, and are the bathrooms accessible?" The questions Robert described have never crossed my mind when I entered a building. This able-bodied student privilege is often accepted unconsciously because we view our own experience as the norm. Able-bodied students enjoy a list of privileges not limited to the following:

- I can get to any classroom that is assigned to me.
- I can schedule classes or meetings back to back, because I can get across campus easily.
- My mental ability is never questioned because of my physical appearance or qualities.
- I am never asked to define or explain my "able-bodiedness."
- I receive feedback unfiltered by pity; there is no association between my physical vulnerability and my intellectual status.
- I am not considered or called "an inspiration" for being a student.

The above list is modeled off of Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* and altered to apply to able-bodied privileges.

During my interview with Joanne, I discovered that Trinity, in accordance with ADA regulations, hires students to provide assistance to students with disabilities during academic hours. "All disability related-costs during the academic day are covered.... Beyond that, students are on their own." I found this quote to be disheartening as it wrongly assumes that a full college experience is fulfilled within the confines of the academic day. Many events, both academic and extracurricular, occur after the designated school day and according to the college aren't considered worthy of coverage. This disconnect displays yet another barrier imposed by the college. Whether intentionally or not, Trinity has effectively inhibited social interaction outside the academic day of students with disabilities. The lack of funding for students with disabilities after the academic day serves as a reason for the high preponderance of commuting students with disabilities.

During the course of this study I faced several challenges that impacted my ability to collect data. Chiefly among them was the very small sample size of students who use wheelchairs or scooters on campus. As noted earlier, only two students that use wheelchairs currently attend Trinity. Another problematic revelation was the lack of handicap accessible maps or online resources outlining which Trinity buildings are accessible. The lack of material on handicap accessibility on Trinity's campus was an immediate red flag for me. I realized that I would have to personally survey all the academic and residential buildings. A further limitation I faced was not being able to secure an interview with someone from the Registrar's office. I believe their insight into how the college places students with disabilities would have been of great value. Fortunately, my other interviews were able to compensate and provide me with some degree of understanding of the placement process.

#### IV. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

After deciding to research how the built form of academic and residential buildings at Trinity inhibits students in wheelchairs and scooters, I was intent on participating in the Day-In-A-Wheelchair event. Unfortunately and somewhat ironically, two of my classes on the day of the event were located in classrooms that were not handicap accessible, making it impossible for me to fully participate in the event. I opted to have an abbreviated experience and spent a total of four hours in a wheelchair. Starting at 1:00pm, after my last class, I spent the remainder of the day in a wheelchair, which provided me first-hand experience and allowed me to act as a participant observer.

It was incredibly difficult to traverse the campus in a wheelchair. From the moment I sat down in my wheelchair, in the Community Service Office in the basement of Mather, I experienced a lot of challenges and obstacles. Merely getting through a doorway was exceedingly hard as it required a high level of precision; there was barely enough room for my wheelchair to fit within most doorways. Something I had never before considered, though once in a wheelchair became immediately apparent, was the slight bump over the threshold of a doorway. While it can't be more than three-eighths of an inch, it proved a large obstacle for me. I found the front wheels of my wheelchair getting consistently stuck on that small bump. I also noticed that while a building may be deemed handicap accessible, not every door within that building is placed under that same classification. Within "accessible" buildings, surprisingly few doors were equipped with a handicap button to facilitate automated opening of the door. As a result, opening doors became an incredibly awkward experience. Not only do you have to manage to hold open a door from the sitting position, but you must wheel yourself in with only one free hand. This proved virtually impossible and I required assistance on many occasions. Even doors that were handicap accessible did not fully alleviate the problem of accessing a building or room. The Roy Nutt Center's northwestern entrance provides such a small window to get from pressing the handicap accessible button to making it through the doorway that I failed to make it through in time on my first attempt and got stuck on my second attempt.

Another challenge of using a wheelchair that I had not foreseen was how significant the smallest incline was for pushing myself around. While using my arms to propel myself forward was difficult, doing so at a fifteen degree incline was physically taxing. My forearms were sore the next day and I developed blisters all over my fingers from constantly pushing and braking. Outside of McCook there was a lot of uneven pavement that I had never noticed before; I was immediately aware of how much more complicated navigating the wheelchair became under such conditions. The same was true for fallen leaves; more than once I felt my wheelchair slipping on leaves strewn on the ground. It is easy to imagine that the challenges I experienced would be tremendously

exacerbated in the winter when there is a combination of ice and snow and only limited areas are ploughed regularly.

Something that I expected, but didn't truly appreciate, was the roundabout ways handicap accessible routes took me when moving about campus. The newly renovated Gates quad, while aesthetically pleasing, was an absolute nightmare to traverse. The pathways are winding and take you out of your way from your desired destination. While someone on foot could compensate by taking a shortcut through the grass, that was not a viable option for me in the wheelchair. The campus layout made it so difficult to get around. The many graphic compilations I have included display how far out of your way you must go if you are in a wheelchair and require handicap accessible entrances.

An understated part of the experience was how other students viewed me in my wheelchair. Some of the looks I received can be attributed to the fact that I am not normally in a wheelchair. What I am surprised by is the lack of tact many students exhibited; passing students openly gawked at me and made me feel self-conscious.

#### V. CONCLUDING REMARKS AND THE IMPACT OF ACCESSIBILITY ON THE COMMUNITY

My research was somewhat of a melancholy experience. Assessing residential and academic buildings, interviewing members of the Trinity community, and taking part in participant observation revealed many of the college's failures to provide accessibility to all its students. The format of the campus physically and socially inhibits students in wheelchairs and scooters from interacting with the rest of the community. During an interview with Robert, he explained, "I've never been to Cook... I didn't feel great about myself not being able to get into Cook; but I realized that things like that shouldn't be taken personally and seen as a personal flaw, but as an issue of society and structure. Basically, it's not me; it's you... meaning architects and builders weren't thinking about my needs." This quote perfectly characterizes the apathetic nature that plagues Trinity. When building Cook Hall, handicap accessibility was not seen as a priority and thus was not addressed.

There is a lot for Trinity to work on with regard to reconfiguring the campus to be more accessible to students using wheelchairs or scooters. Some possible solutions that I have formulated include the following:

- Add ramps to provide accessible routes to the first floors of buildings.
- Install special hinges to widen doorway openings.
- Add paper cup dispensers to water fountains so that people in wheelchairs and scooters can use them (Livingston, 2000).
- Retrofit a Jarvis tower with an elevator on the parking lot side.
- Comply with ADA regulations going forward and make sure new structures are completely handicap accessible.

None of the above ideas are groundbreaking solutions to the challenge of making a campus more accessible. Enacting these proposed solutions won't solve every problem, but making an effort to make the campus more accessible through addressing existing issues can make a difference for students in wheelchairs and scooters.

I will be forwarding my findings to the Trinity College Health Center in hopes of assisting them in their informal study of the college's handicap accessibility. I think that my perspective as a student provides valuable insight into the impact of accessibility on the Trinity community. While there may be overlap between the two studies, as a current student I have a better perspective on what the student body values and cares about than would most employees, who witness only a small portion of life at Trinity. Contrary to Trinity's policy of providing assistance to students with disabilities, college life extends beyond the academic day. Students with disabilities who can't partake in activities that occur outside the academic day or on weekends are being robbed of the full college experience.

Ableism, discrimination or social prejudice against people with disabilities thrives on the isolation and invisibility of people with disabilities (Livinston, 2000). Trinity College would do well to promote community among people with disabilities and help them to increase their visibility on campus. This tactic may be unpopular. According to my interview with Joanne, "Students with disabilities, more often than not, want to fly under the radar and not be identified as different." I believe progress takes place when those differences are discussed openly. Only continued advocacy will erode barriers and challenge the stigma associated with physical disability. Exercises like A-Day-In-A-Wheelchair have the potential to change able-bodied students' perceptions by addressing the built environment and often-unconscious discrimination against people with disabilities that occurs in the college environment.

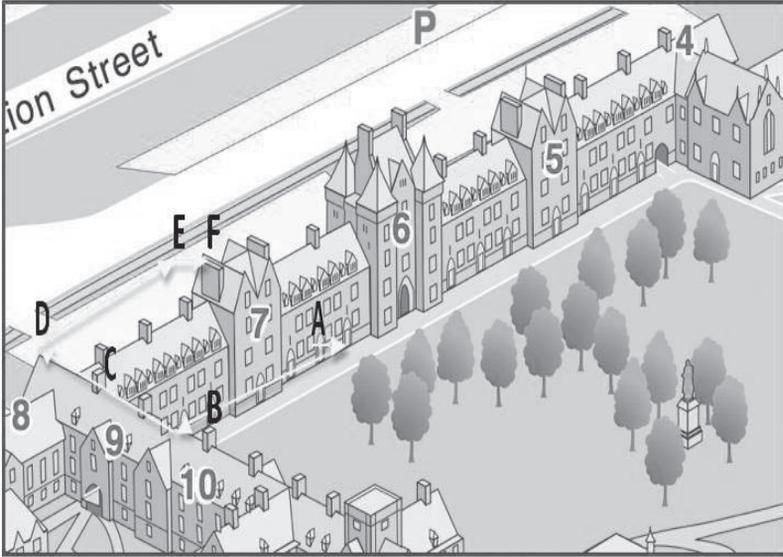
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APPENDIX

Graphic Compilation #1

The Long Walk – Seabury Hall (Academic Building)



A



B



C



D



E



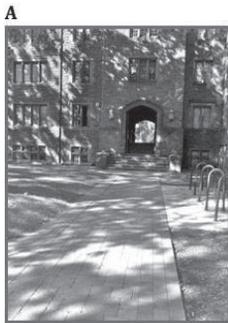
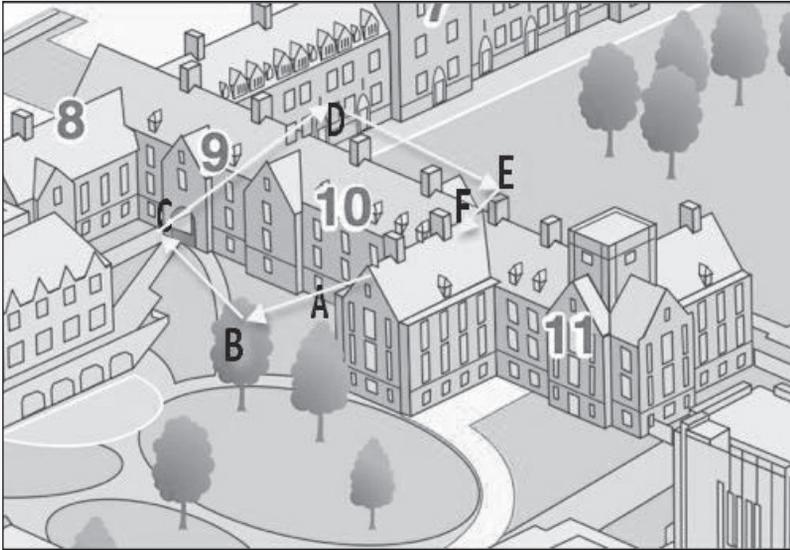
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APPENDIX

Graphic Compilation #2

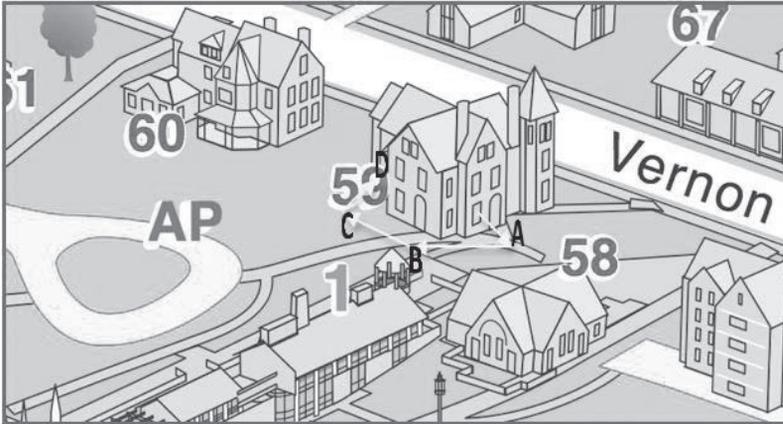
The Main Quadrangle – Goodwin-Woodward Hall (Residence Hall)



APPENDIX

Graphic Compilation #3

The North End – Allan K. Smith Center for Writing and Rhetoric (Academic Building)



A



B



C



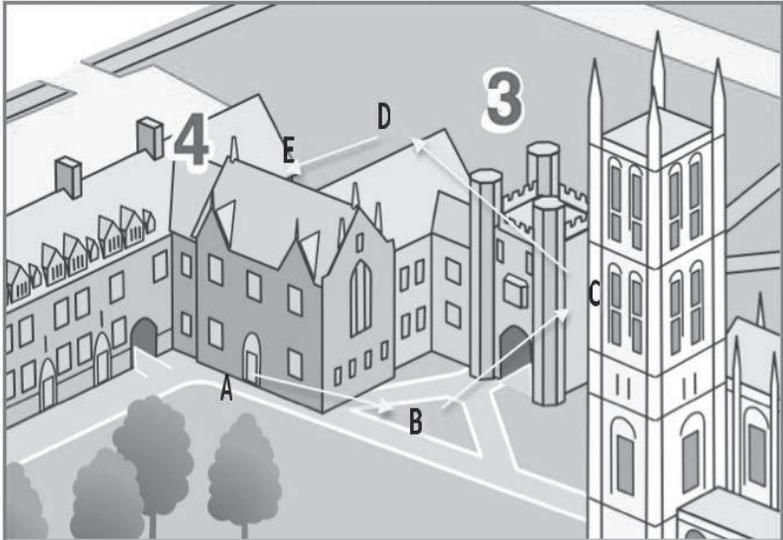
D



APPENDIX

Graphic Compilation #4

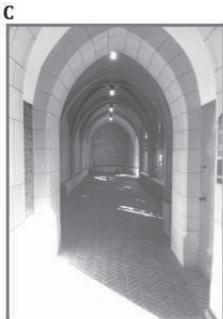
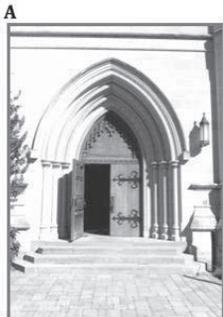
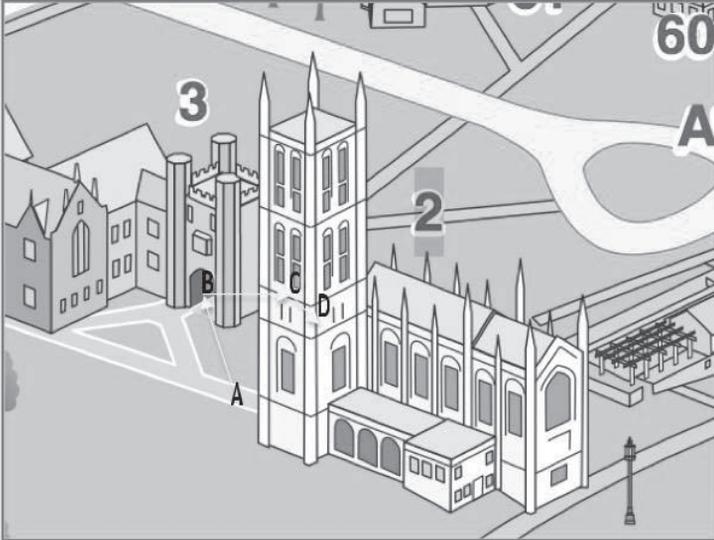
The Long Walk – Williams Memorial (Academic Building)



APPENDIX

Graphic Compilation #5

The Long Walk – The Chapel (Religious Building)



## APPENDIX

### Photo #1

The Long Walk – Seabury Hall Parking Lot  
“No Parking – Wheelchair Access”



This image speaks to the apathetic nature of Trinity students. This Land Rover is parked right in front of the only handicap accessible ramp to Seabury, making it impossible for students in wheelchairs or scooters to enter the building.

APPENDIX

Photo #2  
The Long Walk – The Chapel (Religious Building)  
“Handicap Access”



This image portrays the theme that students with disabilities are compelled to use alternative entrances. Rather than being able to enjoy a direct route, they experience delays and inconvenience.

APPENDIX

Photo #3

The Long Walk – Northam Towers North Stairwell (Residence Hall)



This image is taken from a seated position on the floor of the South stairwell in Northam Towers. I took it from this perspective because it visually represented the challenge students in wheelchairs and scooters face.