

## The Long View

### *Law School Adopts a Holistic Approach to Accessibility*

by Denise McGiffin Hofstedt

**G**eorgetown University Law Center in Washington, DC has long prided itself in serving the needs of all of its students.

In the late 1980s when a residence hall/student center on the Law Center's campus was being built, Law Center officials, including Therese Stratton, now Assistant Dean, insisted that the

facility comply with the not yet in effect Americans with Disabilities Act standards. They welcomed the accessibility features offered by the proposed guidelines for the diversity it encouraged.

Like many schools, they have for years accommodated the

needs of students with disabilities one student at a time. Two years ago the Law Center created the Office of Disability Services and hired a coordinator dedicated to serving the needs of students with disabilities on the law school campus. But they haven't stopped there.

In early 2008, spurred by a student's expressed concern about opportunities for improved accessibility, school leaders quickly made operational and facility changes to enhance campus accessibility. The effort started them thinking about

going beyond the minimums of accessibility codes to become more proactive and adopting a more holistic approach to the issue.

In April, the Law Center leadership began formally exploring the idea of incorporating universal design into its facilities and programming.

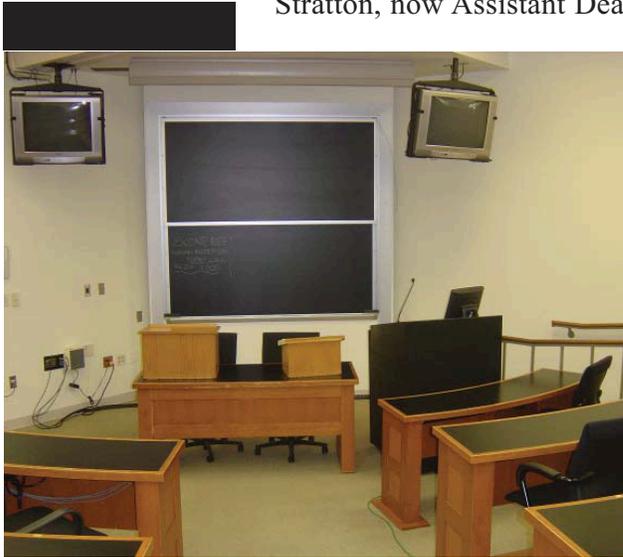
"As an institution of higher education, we thought that it was important to make this a learning experience both for us professionally and for the students academically," says Marianne Huger, Associate Director of Disability Services, Georgetown Law Center. "Therefore, we knew we would like to involve various staff members and students on the project. We wanted to find a consultant who shared our views of accessibility but that could provide a more comprehensive understanding to help us make decisions that would last to the future."

The Law Center hired Universal Designers & Consultants, Inc. to make a presentation on universal design and conduct a tour of key areas on campus with a group of students and staff. "It was an interactive event that had facilities staff sharing their challenges, students with disabilities sharing their experiences and everybody offering solid solutions," says John P.S. Salmen, AIA, President of UD&C and Publisher of *Universal Design Newsletter*. "It awakened everyone to what is possible with universal design."

Among the issues discussed during the presentation were:

- The importance and practicality of providing integrated seating for students who use mobility devices. It was suggested to disperse accessible seating positions to provide students more flexibility and choice. Also, to raise and relocate some desks to provide more convenient movement within the classroom.
- How helpful good signage is and the difficulties of keeping it up to date.
- Making food service items more reachable through vertical facing of products on shelves and providing more maneuvering space within self-service areas.
- The convenience and value of automatic doors.
- The importance of providing 36" clear width aisles in the bookstore to ensure access.

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A lecture hall teaching well before the initiative.

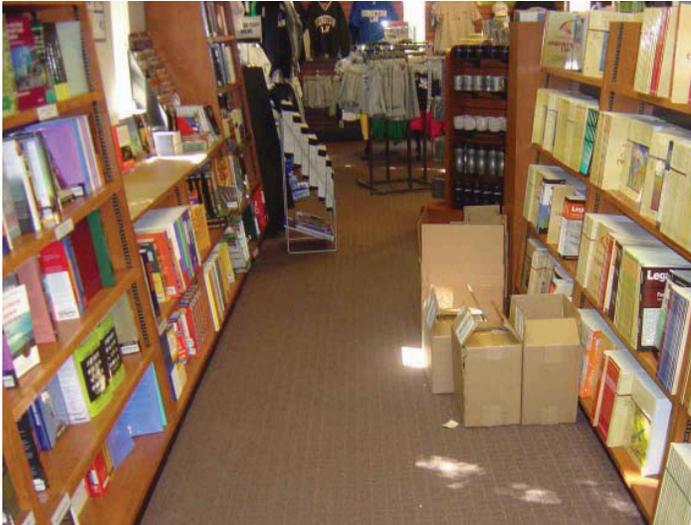


A reconfigured lecture hall teaching well allows more maneuvering space.

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Many of the changes identified during the process have already been implemented and are making a difference.

According to Stratton, “The simple act of letting the bookstore personnel know that it is not acceptable to use the aisles for stock storage” has



Some of the enhancements in the book store were a matter of educating staff about the impact of storing stock in the aisles.

made the store more user friendly for everyone.

Perhaps the most appreciated changes have been in the classrooms, says Huger. “Students have commented specifically on how much they

have appreciated the classroom changes that we made -- raising desks and moving them forward. I have been so happy that all members of the Law Center community that I have spoken to have been so receptive to the changes we are making. It is exciting,” she says.

The signage changes made as a result of the initiative have improved the ever important wayfinding on the busy urban campus that hosts a steady flow of visitors and prospective students throughout the year. Stratton says that one of the most fundamental changes that has come as a result of the presentation has been the approach of the staff members who participated in the universal design tour. “Those who went on the walk-through have now become some of the strongest advocates and regularly quote what they learned.”

Stratton is intent on building on the knowledge gained in this process. “There is much more to do,” she says. “But at the very least, I hope we can arrange an annual meeting with students with interest in this area so we can continue to engage the community in the quest for a better, more universally designed campus.”

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Therese Stratton,  
Assistant Dean  
Georgetown  
University Law  
Center

## DESIGN TIP

**PROBLEM: What’s the difference between using a 6-inch, 2-foot or 4-foot digital level to measure slope?**

**TIP:** The shorter the level, the more variations in the readings. At Universal Designers & Consultants, we like the 2-foot bar because it approximates the span between front and back and side to side bearing points of a wheelchair or walker. We find that with the vagaries of the way the rules are written that it is necessary to average at least three measurements in each direction on all parking spaces, access aisles, ramps and curb ramps.

We find the 2-foot level critical, and the discussion of tolerances/averages is based on the fact that

the standards call for rise over run, which implies overall rise v. overall run, and not incremental dimensions. People sometimes use 6-inch levels which can produce wildly divergent readings, especially on concrete or bituminous exterior surfaces.

*Question submitted by:* Richard Duncan, Housing Works/ R.L. Mace Universal Design Institute, [Housingworks2@earthlink.net](mailto:Housingworks2@earthlink.net)



Slope meter in action