

Not Built for Me: Exploring Student Perspectives on Accessibility and Inclusion at UCSD

Sophia Davit, Daniela De La Torre, Vianca Zavala



BACKGROUND

- The number of students with disabilities in higher education has grown from 6% to 19% in the past 30 years¹
- Studies show that students with physical disabilities had significantly lower four-year graduation rates compared to those who did not report having a disability^{2,3}
- Campus infrastructure can hinder academic participation
 - 28% of UC undergraduate students with disabilities have considered dropping out, compared to only 17% of undergraduate students without disabilities³
- Lack of accessibility on college campuses can limit students' social engagement, and negatively impact their mental health (eg., increased anxiety, isolation, lower self-esteem)¹
 - 17% of students with physical disabilities rated the general climate for students at UC as more hostile than friendly³
- Studies reported 60% of top NIH funded universities in the U.S. received failing scores in accessibility⁴

OBJECTIVES

- Identify areas on the UCSD campus that may pose a challenge to students with mobility related disabilities
- Evaluate the impact of these challenges on students' academic performance, social participation, and mental well-being
- Assess students' awareness and use of accessibility resources (eg., OSD, Triton Mobility, accessibility signage)

METHODS

Study Design: Cross Sectional Study

Population: Undergraduate and Graduate UCSD students

Recruitment Tools:

- 22-item online, anonymous Qualtrics survey
 - Collected demographic data (age, gender, academic level, race/ethnicity, housing, mobility status)
 - Exposure:** Perceptions of accessibility (physical barriers, awareness of resources, accessibility within various campus areas). Measured through Likert scale questions and a ranked order question of UCSD campus areas from easiest to most difficult to navigate.
 - Outcome:** Impact on Student Life (academic performance, social life, mental well-being). Measured through a series of Likert Scale questions.
- Survey distributed via email, Instagram, Reddit, and flyers around campus residential spaces and high traffic areas
- Interviews with UCSD Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and a student impacted by a mobility related disability

Data Analysis via SPSS: Chi-Square Test and Multiple Linear Regression

RESULTS

Table 1. Participant Demographics (N = 101)

Characteristic	n (%)
Age (years)	
18–20	42 (41.6)
21–23	43 (42.6)
24–26	8 (7.9)
27–29	2 (2.0)
30+	6 (5.9)
Gender Identity	
Male	31 (30.7)
Female	66 (65.3)
Non-binary	4 (4.0)
Academic Level	
Undergraduate	85 (84.2)
Graduate	16 (15.8)
Mobility Status	
Permanent Disability	4 (4.0)
Temporary disability/ Injury	10 (9.9)
No Disability	87 (86.1)

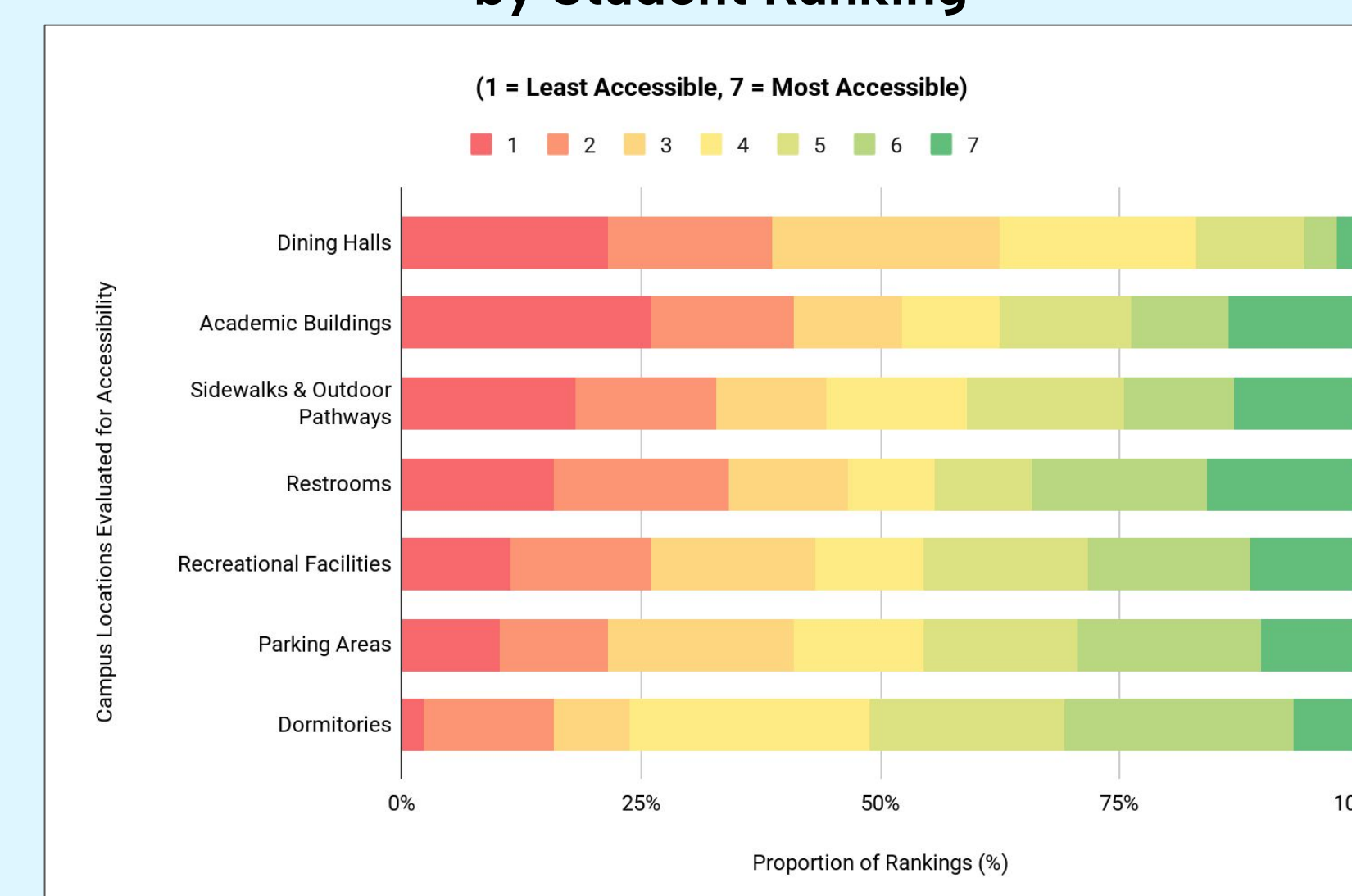
Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis of Student Impact of Accessibility on Campus

Student Impact	Predictor	Standardized β	p-value
Academic Performance	Mobility Status	-0.602	<0.001
	Perceived Accessibility	-0.217	0.012
Social Participation	Mobility Status	-0.599	<0.001
	Perceived Accessibility	-0.224	0.009
Mental Well-being	Mobility Status	-0.612	<0.001
	Perceived Accessibility	-0.130	0.143

Mobility status was significant predictor of academic performance ($p < 0.001$), social participation ($p < 0.001$), and mental well-being ($p < 0.001$).

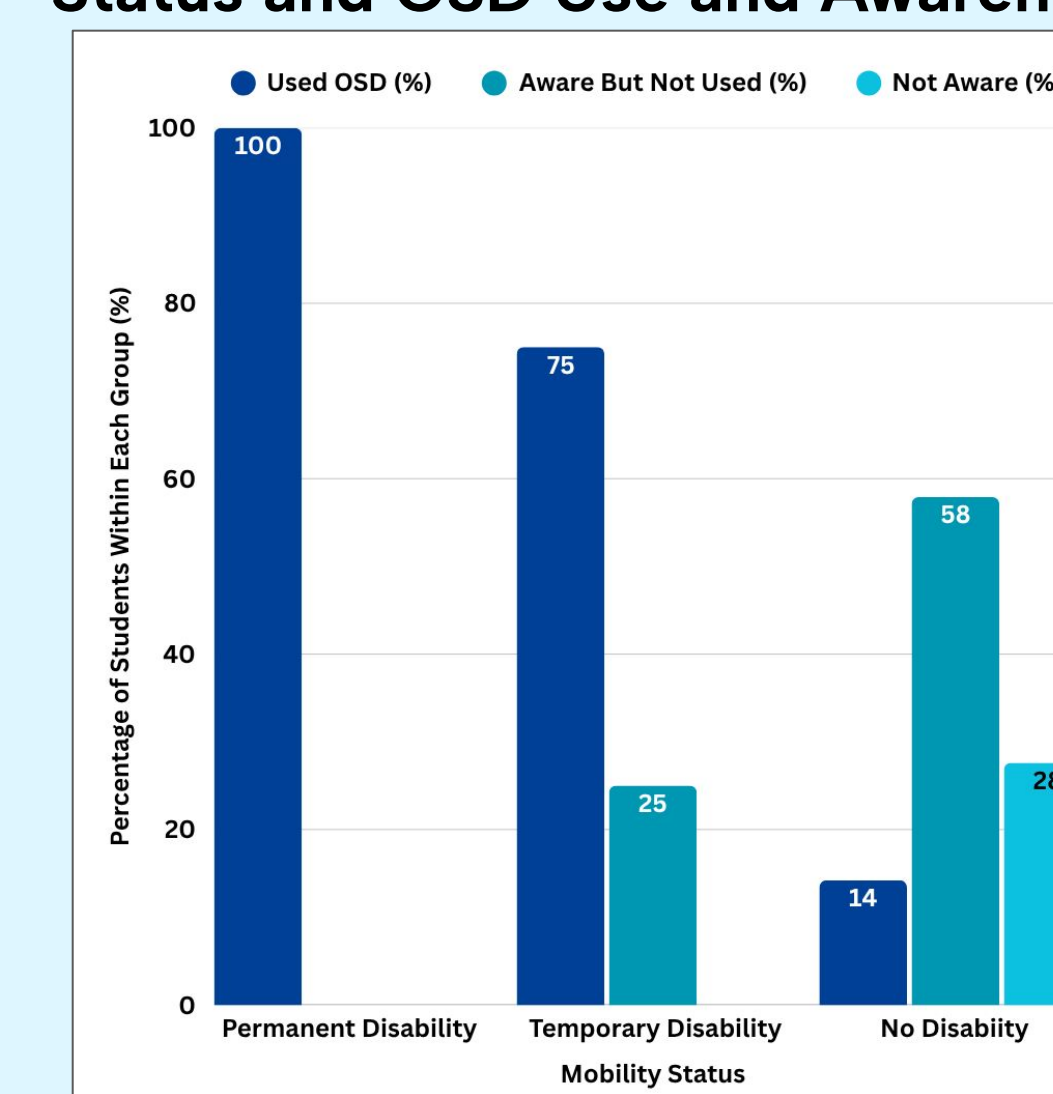
Perceived Accessibility was a significant predictor of academic performance ($p = 0.012$), social participation ($p < 0.009$), but not for mental well-being ($p = 0.143$).

Figure 1. Perceived Campus Accessibility at UCSD by Student Ranking



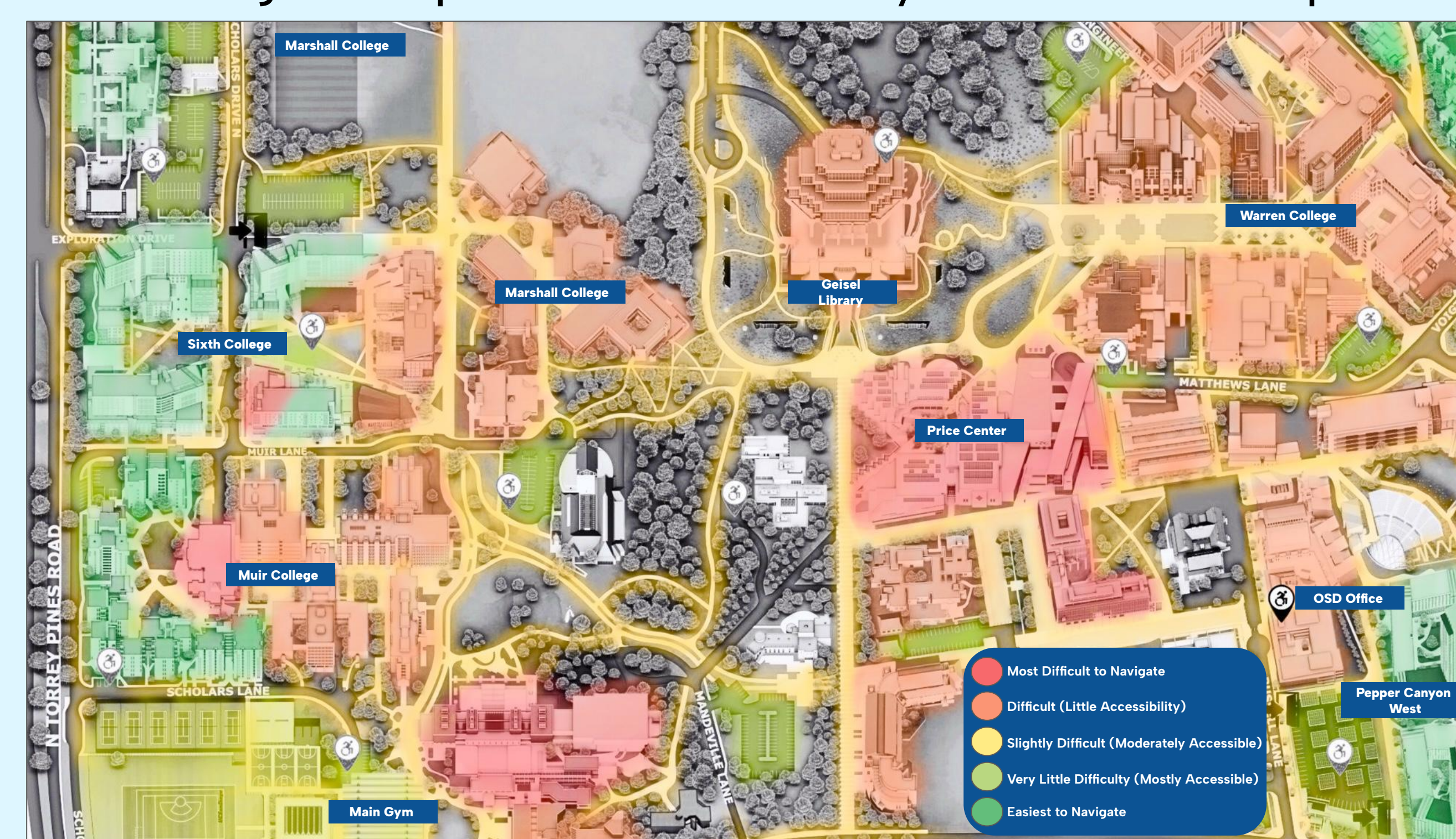
Dining Halls, academic buildings, sidewalks and outdoor pathways were ranked the most difficult to access and posed the greatest mobility challenges on campus. Dormitories were ranked most accessible.

Figure 2. Chi-Square Analysis of Mobility Status and OSD Use and Awareness



There was a significant association between mobility status and OSD use and awareness ($\chi^2 = 28.30$, $p < 0.001$)

Figure 3. Map of Perceived Accessibility on UCSD Central Campus



This map visualizes the average accessibility rankings of various campus locations as reported by student participants. Areas shaded in red and orange indicate locations perceived as most difficult to navigate. Areas shaded in yellow indicate somewhat accessible areas. Areas indicated in green (light or dark green) were perceived as easy to navigate/ accessible areas.

Figure 4. Notable Quotes from Interviews

"I'm constantly calculating how much energy it's going to take just to get to class, and that wears on you."
- UCSD student

"Campus has a very large footprint and has several steep hills, so students have challenges traversing campus especially between classes."
-OSD

"Inclusion doesn't stop at ramps, it's about creating a space where people with disabilities don't feel like outsiders for needing access."
-UCSD student

"The biggest challenge is due to construction and the movement of accessible pathways and signage."
-OSD

CONCLUSIONS

- Although students with permanent disabilities used OSD services, 25% of students with temporary disabilities did not, and 27.6% of students without disabilities were unaware of these services, indicating a **gap in outreach and support awareness**
- Students with **mobility-related disabilities** report:
 - Greater academic disruption (e.g., missed classes, schedule changes)
 - Reduced social participation (e.g., avoiding campus events, difficulty maintaining friendships)
 - Heightened mental health impacts (e.g., stress, anxiety, isolation)
- Qualitative data suggests accessibility challenges go beyond physical spaces; social factors such as stigma and lack of inclusive campus culture must also be considered

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Collaboration between OSD and college orientation programs to ensure incoming students are informed about accessibility resources and how to request accommodations
- Integration of accommodation procedures into course syllabi across departments
- Facilities Management can improve campus accessibility by enhancing ramp availability, ensuring timely elevator maintenance, and increasing signage in areas such as dining halls, academic buildings, and outdoor pathways

REFERENCES & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



We would like to thank Dr. France Nguyen-Grozavu and Luan Nguyen for their guidance and encouragement in our project, as well as our collaborators and the students that participated in our study.