

Renovations improve accessibility

BY ARRON HUSTEAD
for the Index

Everyone on campus has to cope with what seems like constant construction, but for some, the renovations have even greater effects.

The University currently is in the process of remodeling Blanton, Nason and Brewer halls and the Student Union Building, finishing the remodeling of Missouri and Barnett halls, making repairs to Magruder Hall and planning renovations for the Pershing Building and Dobson, Ryle and Centennial halls.

Construction can cause problems for people with disabilities as they make their way across campus.

"The construction can affect people in multiple ways," said Vicky Wehner, coordinator of students with disabilities. "One, the construction vehicles being out and about on the sidewalks can cause some major problems for those trying to get around that area to their classes. Then there are noise issues that everyone has to deal with."

As buildings on campus are remodeled, the University is making changes to improve accessibility for people with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act does not require the University to retrofit older buildings, but as renovations occur, it does require the University to make buildings accessible in accordance with ADA guidelines.

Those guidelines include providing an appropriate number of handicap-accessible parking spaces and appropriate signage to direct people to accessible entrances and creating at least one handicap accessible route from the parking lot and one accessible route to other buildings. Also, objects can't protrude more than four inches into walkways, the ground needs to be stable, firm and slip-resistant, and buildings that are three or more stories tall are required to provide an elevator.

"As we remodel the dormitories, we are making all of the remodeled areas ADA-compliant or adaptable to someone with disabilities," Campus Planner Mark Schultz said.

Once the renovations in BNB are complete, the rooms will be easily adaptable for those with disabilities, Schultz said. BNB and Dobson halls also will have elevators installed.

Schultz said the elevator in BNB will cost about \$500,000 and



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index

Campus construction eventually will create better facilities on campus, but renovation equipment can present challenges for students, faculty and staff members with disabilities.

will be paid for out of student housing fees.

As more residence halls become ADA-compliant through renovation, more rooms will become available for disabled students. The University has had to change room assignments to fit the needs of students with disabilities in the past. However, the number of ADA-compliant rooms will limit the number of similar changes in the future. The majority of ADA-compliant housing accommodations are located in Fair Apartments, West Campus Suites and Missouri Hall.

"Students have been really good and patient with us trying to find places to accommodate them," Wehner said.

Wehner said there always have been places to accommodate students with disabilities but that it has been a juggling act to place everybody in an appropriate room.

Another circumstance in which room assignment changes might be made is if someone experienced an injury and had temporary mobility problems. Wehner said this

could cause problems if the injured person lives on the fourth or fifth floor because he or she would have problems getting off those floors in case of an emergency.

These concerns can lead to temporarily relocating students to emergency rooms on lower levels.

"We always seem to work it out," Wehner said. "It just may take us a day or two to figure out what we are going to do for the students and the student's best interests."

Wehner said there are about 20 students on campus who need specific housing accommodations. Junior Megan Norlin lives in Missouri Hall and is a wheelchair user. Norlin said she still has a few issues with accessibility.

"It's just a bunch of little things," Norlin said. "Like the doors in a lot

of the buildings don't work. The microwave in the kitchenette is way too high, so whenever I want something to eat late at night, I have to wait for someone to come to the lounge and ask them

to use it for me, which is weird. I shouldn't have to do that."

Handicap accessibility is the most pressing concern regarding residence hall renovation, according to the Student Senate's Truman Tomorrow: Arete. Accessibility will be a big concern for the University during the next five years as each residence hall is updated, according to Arete. The Senate's constitution estab-

lishes a Campus Environment Sub-Committee that considers any handicap accessibility issues students might have. The committee strives to ensure that "decisions affecting the campus environment will receive appropriate student, faculty, staff and administrative

input prior to implementation," according to the constitution.

Missouri Hall went through the renovation process last year and now has 100-percent handicap accessibility and automatic doors.

"One of the first things you'll notice is the automatic doors that have been installed for the building," Missouri Hall Director Zac Burden said. "The front door has a vestibule with two automatic doors, which is really nice. It's convenient for folks with disabilities, but it's also convenient for folks who just have their hands full."

Access to the back of Missouri Hall from the parking lot also has improved greatly since the renovation. Construction crews removed old concrete and installed a low-grade ramp and automatic doors.

"The true handicap entrance to the building prior to the renovation was the back door on the south side," Burden said. "They had built a small concrete ramp, but it was pretty narrow. If you went a little bit to the left or a little bit to the right, it was really easy to take a wheelchair off of that ramp. It just wasn't a good ramp."

Despite Missouri Hall's recent renovation, some changes had to be made after it opened.

"The biggest issue — and it's gotten better — is the shower that I use," Norlin said. "It was supposed to be a roll-in, and it originally wasn't. They responded to that issue very quickly, so I have no complaints about that."

Norlin said she was surprised at how quickly the University fixed the problem.

"Considering that this building was just renovated, and I moved in, and my family and I said, 'Wait, this isn't right,' and then in October it's fixed," Norlin said. "I wasn't expecting that. I was expecting maybe next semester or maybe next year. The fact that they responded to it in a matter of two months is really awesome. I've never experienced that before."

Students are not the only ones who are affected by the ongoing construction. David Wohlers, professor of chemistry, has a visual impairment and said he has to adapt constantly to the changes being made on campus.

"When they fix sidewalks, it's always blocked off," Wohlers said. "It's sort of a moving target. You always have to be really careful. You get used to certain things being certain ways most of the time, and so you lax up on your travel technique, and you bump into stuff."

Wohlers said the renovations in the SUB have had a large effect on him because the arrangement is different from what he is used to. He said he anticipates that the arrangement in the SUB might cause problems in the future.

Wohlers said he thinks the renovations are just something that you have to live with and adapt to. He said it makes things easier when people are good about pointing things out and the work areas are taped off.

Norlin said she thinks the University will need to do even more to help students with more severe disabilities in the future.

"Eventually, it would be good if Truman found a way to accommodate other people who are not able to take care of themselves," she said. "Maybe have that be someone's student job or something. Maybe a student could come and help someone getting dressed in the morning. I don't need that kind of help, but I think that Truman is going to get to the point where they get that kind of attention."

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Vicky Wehner
Coordinator of
Students with
Disabilities

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