

third dimension

'Conscious attempt' studies handicapped students' problems

By Theresa Forsman

This fall, for the first time, UNL is making a "conscious attempt" to study the problems of the handicapped student, said Ely Meyerson, dean of student development.

Jan Kunasek, a blind graduate student studying vocational rehabilitation, is working with UNL's student development office to determine the needs of handicapped students, develop programs to satisfy those needs and increase faculty and student awareness of the handicapped student's special problems.

The lack of accessibility to some campus resources is a problem for many handicapped students, Kunasek said.

She cited revolving doors, turnstiles and the benches in the Nebraska Union mall as menaces to blind or wheelchair-confined students.

Using the skywalk

Nancy Erickson, who has been confined to a wheelchair since she developed polio at age 6, said that to attend class on the second floor of Burnett Hall she must take the elevator in Oldfather Hall to the second floor and use the skywalk which connects the two buildings.

"This wasn't bad," Erickson said, "But getting a key to operate the 2nd floor button of the elevator posed a problem."

Her wheelchair made it difficult for the 29-year-old graduate student to collect the key, which was issued from an office located under Memorial Stadium.

Erickson said that when she did her undergraduate work at UNL, she could not go to Love Library alone because there were steps to contend with.

Making Progress

The university is making progress in renovating many buildings so that they are accessible to the handicapped student, said Harley Schrader, physical plant director.

State law sets minimum accessibility standards for all public buildings receiving state funds. The law states that ramps, elevators and special toilets must be available to the handicapped.

Schrader said UNL is trying to abide by this law when constructing new buildings or remodeling existing ones.

Ramps built

Ramps have been built at Andrews Hall, the College of Business Administration (CBA), and the Administration Bldg., Schrader said.

A ramp now is being built at Sheldon Art Gallery, he added.

Flashing fire alarm signals to alert the deaf to danger will be installed in new buildings, Schrader said. New elevators have been installed in Ferguson Hall and will be put in at Andrews Hall soon, he said.

Buildings which are inaccessible to students confined in wheelchairs include Teachers College, the second and third

floors of the CBA, Architectural Hall and the old Law College, Schrader said. He added that plans for making some of these buildings attainable are being held back until the buildings can be remodeled completely.

Barrier-free design

Funds for meeting accessibility standards come out of the physical plant's Special Maintenance Fund, Schrader said.

While most buildings have to be renovated to be compatible to the disabled student, the Home Economics Bldg. on the East Campus was constructed with the handicapped in mind.

Lois Schwab, associate professor in the human development and family resources sequences of home economics, said she is concerned about the handicapped.

Schwab said she wanted the building, completed in 1973, to serve as a model for barrier-free design. The building which is equipped with electronically controlled doors, raised numbers on office doors and lowered water fountains and telephones.

The building features an auditorium and stage which are accessible to the student in a wheelchair.

One of the laboratories in the new home economics building features kitchens designed for the handicapped. Special features include lowered counters, adjustable cupboard shelves and counter-top ranges.

Marilyn Merchant, human development instructor at the Home Economics College, said the lab is available to handicapped persons who may need help in determining ways to overcome problems in a traditional kitchen.

"Obstacles mastered"

Universities which are almost entirely barrier-free include the University of Missouri and the University of Southern Illinois.

John Coyle, a blind 22-year-old junior at UNL, said that it may have been easier to go to one of these schools, but said that he attends UNL because the State Department of Rehabilitation Services pays his tuition and fees here.

Besides being less expensive, UNL is closer to Coyle's home and friends, he said.

"Most of what I considered to be major physical obstacles on the campus when I first came here are mastered now," Coyle said. I'm familiar with landmarks now so I usually know where I'm going. Coyle lives by himself in an East Lincoln apartment.

In addition to architectural barriers, handicapped students face special classroom problems.

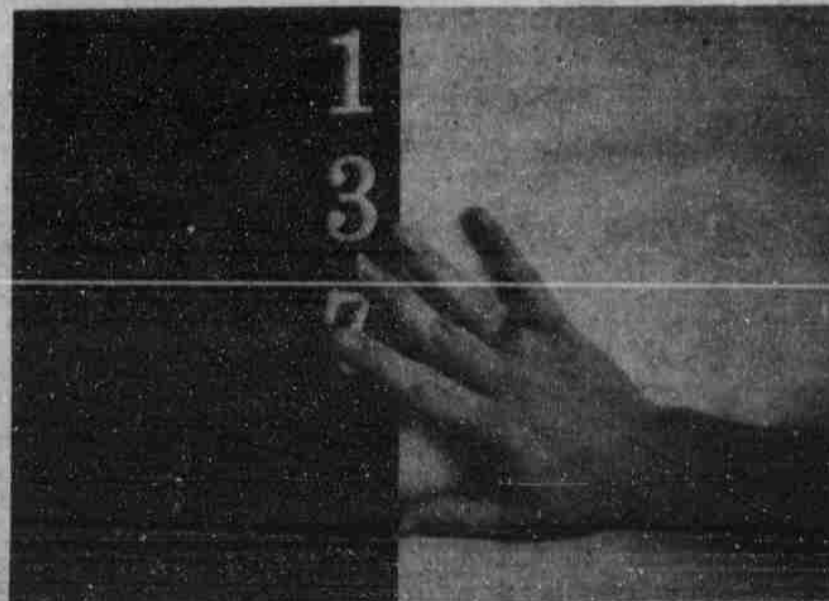
Coyle said it is usually necessary for the instructor to read tests to him.

Kunasek said handouts and other material which must be read in a short time pose problems for the blind student.

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New buildings for all students



New buildings on campus, such as the Home Economic Bldg. on East Campus are built to accommodate the handicapped student. The Home Economics labs include sit-down work spaces and special tools for the handicapped. Raised letters indicating room numbers are also a help.

Photos by Kevin Higley

