

Money matters for UNL's accessibility

Accessibility for the physically challenged is a problem at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and according to one official, the real solution is a matter of dollars and sense.

According to Brad Munn, Affirmative Action officer, accessibility encompasses many areas of the university structure.

"...it means structural accessibility, program accessibility and within program accessibility, dealing with professors and staff," he says.

"If you're temporarily or permanently disabled at UNL, the university intends to provide you with accessibility, whether that always happens is difficult for me to prove."

Under section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act the university must be accessible to all students, Munn says.

By relocating classes to accessible buildings and/or accessible classrooms for the physically impaired, Munn says that UNL fulfills the accessibility requirement.

"Most people know that we have done as much as we can," Munn says.

In order to accomplish total structural accessibility, Munn says, it would be unrealistic to tack on an additional

\$100 to each student's tuition.

"We live in a state that is not blessed with an unending abundance of wealth," he says.

The best programming and accessibility UNL can provide takes a lot of money, Munn says, and the university doesn't have that kind of money.

Tim Engstrom, a junior news-editorial student who uses a wheelchair, agrees with Munn.

"The university does just about all it can with the money it has," Engstrom says.

If the state doesn't or can't appropriate the funds, then the university's hands are tied.

But Carol Inselman says that structural accessibility can be attained by working on the little things.

"I think it's deplorable (at UNL)," says Inselman, a graduate student in counseling psychology.

Inselman attended Wayne State College for undergraduate studies and according to her, most buildings and facilities in Wayne are accessible -- from the doors to the classrooms.

"Not many buildings (at UNL) are accessible," she says.

Many of Inselman's classes, she

says, are moved to Henzlik.

"There have been times when professors are angry because it's not the kind of classroom they wanted," she says.

But Inselman says that more often than not, the professors are helpful.

"Some professors are real sensitive and go out of their way to make things real comfortable," Inselman says.

Inselman says some professors aren't aware of the laws, and what the university is doing for accessibility.

"One professor suggested lifting students (in wheelchairs) up the stairs," she says. "It's embarrassing and talk about liability."

"I guess I'm concerned that not more is being done to renovate buildings on campus."

Inselman says the 3rd floor of Seaton Hall is completely inaccessible.

"Sometimes I do the steps anyway," she says.

Usually, Inselman says, her classes are changed.

"It's just things like that that make it difficult," she says.

According to Inselman, another hurdle that physically impaired students deal with are the restrooms.

Restrooms, for students in wheelchairs especially, are not adequately accessible, Inselman says. She recalls how at the break of one of her classes students in wheelchairs had to go to the bathroom in front of everyone. Because the stall was so small, they could not move from the wheelchair to the stool without leaving the door open.

"I don't think there's any excuse for that," Inselman says.

In the broader scheme, Inselman lists such things as educating the campus on rights and the university's obligation to providing overall accessibility as most important.

Munn says he concurs with many students that it may be embarrassing for the physically impaired to deal with some of the barriers.

"But for 40 students out of 24,000 we have to be realists in this society," Munn says. "If you and those students have a way to change that overnight... bring the money and it will be done."

"Sure it's humiliating, but isn't it better to be educated and have the class changed or is it better to gripe and complain that the class has to be changed?" Munn asks. "Where do you draw a reasonable denominator?"

"I'm not happy with... the situation at the journalism college. I think it's wrong that a student has to come in the back door."

Munn also says that the ramp connected to the west side of the Nebraska Union is another design flaw, because the slope is too steep and there is no overhead covering.

There are buildings on campus, particularly the greenhouses on East Campus, which are going to be difficult to make accessible, Munn says.

Munn says it may not be feasible to make the campus totally accessible.

"Is it proper to spend half a million dollars to get to one room at the top of one building if that class can be moved?"

"I'd rather see the half million dollars go into research so that some of the people who have been stricken by an ailment that created their disability could be conquered," Munn says.

"For every single classroom to ever be accessible, may not be in the cards,"

he says.

If there's not an elevator in the building now, Munn says an elevator has to be installed, and if there are only two rooms at the top of the building, it doesn't make much sense to have an elevator in the building.

Munn has worked to make some buildings completely accessible.

Munn says he was able to secure funds from the State Department of Vocational Rehabilitation and UNL that would renovate Selleck Hall and make it almost 100 percent accessible. The project, costing approximately \$600,000, which would cover costs of installing an elevator and air conditioning, may be completed as early as August 1989.

"I'm proud of that," Munn says.

"But I'm not proud that in order to get to and from Harper/Schramm/Smith residence complex, one has to cross railroad tracks."

"Going back to what we would all like," he says, "some of it's out of the question."

Inselman says it's a difficult task to satisfy everyone, but it is especially difficult for the physically challenged. There is only one person in charge of handling the problems and assisting handicapped students. According to Inselman, Christy Horn, coordinator of the educational center for disabled students, not only helps students, but she's a good listener and she can usually find an answer or solution to the problem.

Although he says he agrees, Munn insists that no single group should take credit for the improvements and successes of the program.

"The success of the program is by all the people of this community, the UNL community, who have done far more than the law or the spirit of the law requires," Munn says.

"The faculty as a group have to take credit, the chancellor has to take credit, students have to take credit."

"I've seen students help another student when they've had batteries run out on a chair," Munn says. "There are lots of students who need to be given credit for being caring individuals."

Engstrom says that he knows a few physically challenged students who are afraid to ask for help, but says he thinks that attitude is foolish.

"Asking for help doesn't bother me," Engstrom says, "we all need help from one time to another."

Munn says in addition to community support, realizing the limitations, such as money, have helped UNL and the Lincoln community.

"There has never been a charge of discrimination filed on accessibility by any individual with any external agency to the university, since I've been here," Munn says.

"If you look at Lincoln, and the accomplishments of this city and this university, for the disabled, then I'd like to know why so many disabled people want to come to Lincoln and to University of Nebraska-Lincoln."

"One of the reasons they (physically challenged) tell us, is that we're doing one of the better jobs in the state of Nebraska," Munn says.

"We're going to provide the services necessary," Munn says, "for them (physically impaired) to earn an equal education."

-- Lisa Donovan



William Lauer/Daily Nebraskan

Tim Engstrom gets help from student assistant Jose Rojas to access the laundry area of Selleck Quadrangle. Engstrom must leave the building, pass through the cafeteria and kitchen to ride the freight elevator. If Engstrom could walk he would need only to cross the hall to the stairs; the laundry room is located almost directly below his room. "It's a real pain when you have 50 pounds of laundry," Engstrom says.