

PSH Disability Services strives to accommodate individual needs

By **DEB MASSIC**
Staff Reporter

Imagine missing class because of a broken elevator. Think about what it is like not to be able to hear what the professor says and to rely on someone else for help. What if it took several hours to read a chapter of a textbook that takes most people half an hour? Students facing these situations can successfully attend Penn State Harrisburg thanks to Disability Services and the American Disabilities Act.

Students with disabilities must notify Disability Services Coordinator, Lynne Davies, early in their first semester. They have to provide current documentation of their disability from a treating/diagnosing psychologist or physician, and the impact it will have on their ability to function in a college setting. Then Davies establishes accommodations for the student based on recommendations from the ADA Review Committee. If a student's condition changes from semester to semester, the student can meet with Davies so that new accommodations can be made.

"It's designed to be a fairly fluid process," Davies said. "It falls on the student though to say, 'Here's my request.'"

According to Davies, the vast majority of disabilities that students face are psychological or medical disabilities that affect learning. Students may have a medical condition such as depression, or a learning disorder, in reading, writing or arithmetic, that affects the speed at which they learn.

There is very little that can be done to change the essential nature of the class itself, but one solution that can help students is to give them more time to take a test.

Some students might find it unfair that some classmates are allowed extra time for a test. Davies said that according to a recent

Things meant to assist Hiestand in everyday mobility can often turn into obstacles. For instance, the elevator buttons are too high for her to reach. The curb cuts that are lowered for wheelchair access are difficult to get over, and when it snows, it is even harder to get around.

The computer labs can also be a challenge to navigate through and the computers are inaccessible to her, except for two in the library. While these accommodations meet ADA guidelines, there is still room for improvement.

"Next time they plan to build or redo something, they should ask one or two people who deal with a handicap everyday," Hiestand said. "These things can be fixed easily."

Julie Kearney, writing instructor, uses a wheelchair and sees some of the same problems. Curb cuts and the ramp up to the front of Olmsted are difficult for her to maneuver. The bookstore aisles also get a little cramped for a wheelchair. Otherwise, Kearney is satisfied with the school's accessibility. She teaches in a computer lab and Toni Moore, who works in Information Technology, set up the lab before the classes started. Moore made sure Kearney could reach the board and have access to the students.

"It's much better than most places," Kearney said. "The physical aspects of the building are better than most places I've taught. The staff is more aware of disability issues. In the past, I've had to make do."

"I think Kearney gets the respect and consideration that she deserves because she is in a position of authority," Hiestand said. "I think it is much different being a student."

Having only one elevator in the Olmsted building can pose a problem for mobility impaired students. If the elevator breaks, the class can be rescheduled to the first floor, but in some cases, the student may have to miss class and get the notes from a classmate.

In the event of a fire, a person in a wheelchair must wait in a staircase for firefighters to come.

The newly renovated student housing and cafeteria followed ADA guidelines during construction, including counter heights and door widths. The new student housing has 19 handicap-accessible apartments that can be assigned based on a student's needs.

"It's not something we take lightly," said JoAnn Coleman, director of Housing and Food Services. "We're small enough that we can meet student's individual needs."

There are eight tables in the cafeteria that a wheelchair can fit underneath. The tables can end up pushed together though, and it is difficult for a handicap person to adjust them. Coleman said they reconfigure the tables often, but students move them around weekly. Aside from putting a sign that designates a table as "handicap only", there is no guarantee any of the handicap accessible tables will be available during the busy lunch and dinner hours. None of the tables in the Biscotti Coffee Bar or along the corridor are designed for a person in a wheelchair.

An important part of Disability Services is education. According to Davies, a person in a wheelchair or walking with a cane has an obvious handicap, but a learning disability or psychological disorder cannot be seen and often effects how a student functions in a university. For any student with a disability, though, it can be more difficult for them to get through school. Disability Services strives to make the necessary accommodations so that students with disabilities can have a positive school experience.

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disability services
coordinator**

study, extra time does not increase a non-disabled student's grade, but it will increase the grade of a student with a disability.

Davies encourages faculty suggestions on ways to help students with disabilities in the classroom.

Students facing hearing impairments or deafness have the option of using a sign language interpreter or TypeWell, in which a trained transcriber goes to class with a student and types what the instructor and other students say and the text is instantly viewed by the student on a laptop. Three students are currently using the TypeWell system at Penn State Harrisburg.

Visually impaired or blind students can purchase textbooks in alternative forms, such as electronic versions. Text can also be enlarged, or scanned to auditory format where students can choose the voice that reads the text.

"One thing that is real frustrating is getting alternative forms of textbooks," Davies said. "The publishers are required to provide K through 12 with them, but in higher education, it's not a priority. It can take eight weeks to order one. It's important to educate the faculty about how long it takes to get books. Students can get real behind if they have to wait an extra month for a textbook."

For mobility-impaired students, the school must meet ADA guidelines when renovating buildings or designing new ones. The ADA requires that public entities make specific accommodations of accessibility for disabled persons. Some of the things that must be considered are the height of sinks in bathrooms, the rate an automatic door opens, flashing fire alarms and insulation under a sink to prevent hot water from dripping onto the lap of a person in a wheelchair.

Even if these basic standards are met, some individuals may still find everyday tasks difficult when it comes to things like the height of doorknobs or elevator buttons.

"Wheelchairs are all different," Davies said. "They might be three inches higher or lower."

Carey Hiestand, applied behavioral science, uses an electric wheelchair. She does not see herself as handicap until she encounters specific barriers, or notices things that might cause difficulties for other disabled students.