

# Accessibility

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fully accessible because of its location on a hill, which gives it a large, sloping terrain.

The geography makes handicapped people become more resourceful in navigating the campus. Avoiding large hills, steps and construction are common parts of some students' daily routines.

To avoid traveling the hills, for example, people will often use routes that go through buildings, using elevators and power doors to avoid the long gradual inclines of campus.

"The wheelchair users become pretty adept to getting around," Koontz said.

UAC also marks accessible routes on campus maps, showing the location of accessible entrances and power doors.

"We do identify what we can," Koontz said.

In the future, Ritzman said UAC hopes to create an online map marking accessibility that could be updated in real time, showing alternate routes in case of construction that disrupts accessible paths.

Hantz has experienced some of the university's trickier problems. But because there is an open line of communication between disabled students and the university, any issue he has can be quickly resolved.

A path in front of Old Main, near Henderson Building, used to have steps and made Hantz's trip to class longer and more difficult than it should have been. Rather than cut across the lawn, he had to go up and around Old Main.

But Hantz mentioned the problem to Penn State, and soon after a ramp was added to the path.

"They had no problem putting that in for me," he said.

For Redden, the transition has also been pretty smooth. The first week of classes was a little difficult. Often, she would allow herself extra time to get where she needed to go — to find the power-door operators, to find the elevators.

But she was well prepared. Redden made a couple visits to Penn State before moving in for her freshman year. She went on campus tours, and she knew what things would be like moving about campus. The hills are difficult.

She's gotten stronger, though. Just pushing herself around has helped, as have her friends. During a visit in high school, Redden met Hantz and decided to get involved in disability track and field, of which Hantz is a member.

Now she has a small group of people who she can talk to and is close friends with.

"Everybody is really helpful," she said. "I'm having a good time."

Ritzman said he hears few complaints regarding accessibility.

"Most of the interactions I work with are misunderstandings," he said. "It could be something that isn't an access issue."

The presence of Centre Area Transportation Authority (CATA) buses also aids in maneuvering around campus. Eric Bernier, director of services, said CATA has made efforts to make riding easier for disabled riders. Thirty-four of the service's 50 full-sized buses are low-floor, which eliminates hydraulic lifts found on most buses.

CATA also offers a paratransit service, which compliments the regular Centre Line service. The paratransit service can pick up travelers who are unable to make it to a bus stop for a par-

ticular reason and take them to their destination on the route.

Bernier said despite the area's large population, CATA's regular lines see few wheelchair riders. On average, the number of riders in wheelchairs is between two and four per day, he said.

Not everyone, however, uses CATA as an alternate means of traveling around town and campus. Some people will drive and park, Ritzman said, while others use a university shuttle that provides service to the disabled.

"[How to get around] is an individual choice," he said. "It depends on the person."

## MAKING CHANGES

Each year, UAC receives \$400,000 to spend on making Penn State campuses more accessible for the disabled, and it is Koontz's job to decide where the money is spent.

The committee finances projects according to a priority system. Attention is focused toward immediate needs to maintain access to all facilities, he said, including areas such as Shaver's Creek Environmental Center, which is handicap accessible.

Two years ago, the university completed a state-funded project to improve the accessibility of campus, which included adding elevators to some buildings, such as Pavilion Theatre.

Before the installation of the elevator, wheelchair users had to go across the street to Borland Lab to use restrooms because the facilities in the theater were located in the basement.

Handicapped patrons at Schwab Auditorium were faced with similar circumstances, until the renovation of the 100-year-old building. Included in the remodeling was the installation of handicap-accessible bathrooms in the lobby of the building.

But now that the project is complete, the university is continuing to try to make the campus more handicap-friendly.

"We're trying to make the main entrances to all of our buildings accessible," Koontz said.

In addition to fixing building entrances, Penn State is also trying to make restrooms more accessible by installing sensors on the toilets and putting lowered buttons on power-door operators. The university is also moving to remodel ramps built before the passage of ADA, especially those that have steep slopes.

## COST OF ACCESSIBILITY

According to Koontz, UAC completed 14 projects on the University Park campus last year, totaling \$189,000. They tackled projects ranging from bathrooms to wheelchair ramps.

Additionally, 12 projects were completed at all of the Commonwealth Campuses at a cost of \$186,000. Sixteen "small jobs," such as the installation of grab bars, were also completed university-wide at a cost of \$8,400.

The money for all of these remodeling projects comes from the university's yearly budget.

Remodeling older buildings for accessibility can be costly — the installation of a handicap-accessible bathroom can run in excess of \$55,000. Elevators and new ramps at the fronts of old buildings can also add up, making it difficult to complete a large number of projects each year.

"Obviously, we could use a lot more [money]," Koontz said, "but we're thankful for what we get."

Nonetheless, both Koontz and Ritz-

man say Penn State's administration is very supportive of making the campus more accessible and tearing down barriers.

In fact, Ritzman said concern for accessibility comes from the top down — starting with President Graham Spanier and Vice Provost Rodney Erickson.

Penn State spokesman Bill Mahon said the university has put millions of dollars into ADA, and would like to put more. Funding, however, is a concern.

"On campus, we know there are places we'd like to do more work on," he said. "But funding is an issue."

## OFF-CAMPUS ACCESSIBILITY

State College Mayor Bill Welch, who also spent time in a wheelchair after kidney transplant surgery in 2001, said the borough is examining ways to make downtown more accessible — including the possibility of on-street handicap parking spaces.

After hearing a complaint last year — the first and only of its kind — the State College Borough Council has begun exploring on-street spaces so disabled downtown patrons can park closer to where they want to go.

Because handicap spaces are currently located only in parking lots and garages, Welch said it could be difficult to get around town. However, putting handicap spaces on the street could be more difficult.

Depending on the type of handicap, the amount of space needed for a spot can vary, causing more problems for the borough, which is already struggling with providing available parking downtown.

But getting around can be frustrating — even after parking — Welch said, because some places have not been adapted to meet ADA requirements.

He has not, however, heard complaints about wheelchairs on the sidewalks. To give the borough the feeling of "hustle and bustle," Welch said planners contend smaller sidewalks are necessary.

Because curbs can be an obstacle for the handicapped, the borough is lowering them as more curbs are rebuilt throughout town.

## HELPING HAND

Although both campus and downtown are mostly accessible, those involved agree that getting around, at times, can be difficult and inconvenient. The passage of ADA, however, has helped to make everything easier for handicapped people.

The university has worked to make the campus accessible enough that students don't really mind it. There are some places that are difficult, but knowing that there is an open line of communication between them and the university, Hantz and Redden realize things can be fixed.

"The university is great," Hantz said. Even downtown, which has some less-friendly areas, is accessible. Hantz recalls a night he and friends wanted to go to the Shandygaff Saloon, rear 212 E. College Ave., one weekend. However, they were afraid he wouldn't be able to get up the steps.

Turns out, it wasn't a problem. While people carried his wheelchair up the stairs that night, Hantz walked up them with the aid of a handrail.

Despite the extra assistance necessary, the bar's owner and its employees were more than willing to help Hantz — characteristics that are representative of both the university and the borough.



Alyson McCrum/Colegian

Adam Fabian, Collegian staff writer, experienced life in a wheelchair for three days.

# Reporter uses wheelchair, sees life from another view

By Adam Fabian

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It isn't enough just to be able to get around for anywhere to be labeled 'accessible.'

The best way to understand anything is to become familiar with it, to drown yourself in it and let it become a part of you. While researching this story, I wondered how I would be able to write about a subject matter — the handicap accessibility of campus — that I am completely unfamiliar with.

I decided the best way for me to learn was to live it. To rent a wheelchair and spend some time — in this case three days — in the chair and live my life, but with a handicap. I took certain measures, however.

I didn't use the chair in my apartment; I don't live where I do based on its accessibility. I didn't spend all day, every day in the chair. Although I would have liked to, it just wasn't possible for me to do.

What I did do: go around campus to places that I normally wouldn't go but many other students would, such as Sackett and Hammond buildings, and the HUB-Robeson Center as well. I also went out downtown, just to a few bars, to see how living downtown compares to living on campus, on top of attending Monday's classes.

The first thing I learned is that moving around is hard. Granted, my arms aren't strong (or as strong as they could be), but that wasn't the issue. The issue was the amount of strength needed to overcome obstacles I never noticed before, such as bad curb cuts and bumpy sidewalks. I can't even count the number of times I almost fell out of my chair because of a curb being on the curb cut, or from a bad sidewalk.

I normally had a friend by my side, but that's abnormal. Nor can I tell you the number of times I almost lost control of the chair and went into the street because the cut to get into a parking lot was too steep.

The first night with the wheelchair, I decided to attempt to go around the block, just to try and get the hang of using the chair. I quickly noticed that

the alley I walk down on a daily basis is otherwise unfriendly — full of potholes, gravel and puddles — the alley was my first real challenge.

Then, after making it to the sidewalk in front of my house, I got stuck on the sidewalk. A young woman walked toward me and offered her help, but I declined.

I realized that the difference between my experience and those of Jeff Hantz and Maggie Redden is that I can walk. That, whenever I wanted to, I could stand up and walk away from the chair. I can walk down steps, curbs and even cut through a field carrying the wheelchair.

What I thought in mind, I went around campus, exploring those areas I rarely frequent. I found that some places are difficult to get to and use, such as the third floor of Sackett Building, which has a ramp so steep my roommate could barely push me up it. But most other places are easier, the key difference being the inconvenience. Only certain doors have power openers, curb cuts are only in certain places, and ramps may be only in the back of the building.


Going to class was really no different than usual, outside of classmates asking why I was in a wheelchair. But it's the little things I noticed most. Having difficulty getting soda from a machine or a water fountain, going to the bar to get my own drink, or stepping over a curb were some of the problems that gave me a true sense of what accessibility is.

It isn't enough just to be able to get around for anywhere to be labeled "accessible." It must allow everyone to live.

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