

# Library Accessibility Focus Group Report

## Overview and Mission

A focus group was held on February 5, 2008 to learn about use of the library by our students with disabilities, with emphasis on any concerns they might have about using the library. The group lasted a little more than an hour. Seven students with disabilities were in attendance as well as one facilitator and one assistant facilitator

The following topics were addressed by the group:

1. Barriers to access the physical building (LRC) where the library is located.
2. Barriers to access physical resources within the building.
3. Barriers to access the electronic resources provided by the library.
4. Perceptions on the library as a place to study and “hang out.”
5. Existing rules which affect use of library resources (or rules which would help if they were in existence).
6. Ways the library could be better, for studying or recreational activities.
7. Things the library does well now that should be continued.

## ACCESSIBILITY

The library strives to offer equal access to all to use the resources housed here, to gain research help from the librarians, to use the Tutoring Learning Center, and to enjoy the facility for studying, meeting with groups for projects, sharing a study break with others in the café, or just having a look around at what is offered. Resources should be available to all students, both physically within the library, and electronically. The following topics were discussed.

### **Barriers to access the physical building (LRC) where the library is located.**

Students were in agreement that the two biggest barriers to accessing the physical building (LRC) are lack of timely snow removal and ramp problems. People with mobility issues said it is not uncommon for them to be unable to access the library **and** classroom buildings for up to three days before snow and ice are removed well enough for them to make it to classes.

The ramp on the west side of the building is terribly difficult to use as the slope is steep. Participants said it takes more strength than the average person has to move a wheelchair up the west ramp. In winter people lock their bicycles onto the railings of the ramp because the snow is not shoveled away from the bicycle racks. People using wheelchairs said the bicycles make it more difficult to use an already dangerous ramp. All of the participants in wheelchairs have experienced crashing into the railings because they cannot hold back their chairs well enough on the way down the west ramp. This is made worse by bicycle handlebars sticking out in the way of their descent. Also, sometimes people use the ramp to walk up because the stairs on the west side of the building are closed during winter. Then wheelchair users have to wait for the walking people to get off the ramp as it is not wide enough to accommodate more than one wheelchair or one person. A participant who had been on crutches for a time agreed with those speaking, that the west ramp is very steep and hard to navigate with any physical impediment.

The east ramp is better than the west one; however, the railing on the west ramp does not continue to the flat area of sidewalk, meaning there are several feet of ramp without a guide rail to hang onto. This is especially problematic when there is ice on the ramp.

### **Potential Solutions**

Suggested changes to remedy the snow and ice problem:

1. Have people begin removing snow as soon as it begins snowing. (24 hours a day)

2. Use the big brush machine to sweep and remove snow from sidewalks and ramps and provide places to cross streets.
3. Remove the snow before it turns to lumpy ice and/or ankle-deep slippery slush.
4. Use more salt on icy/slippery areas.

Suggested changes to remedy the ramp problems:

1. Remove snow from around the bicycle racks as people still ride bicycles to campus in the winter. Then they won't need to lock their bike to railings.
2. Put signs up saying not to attach bicycles to the ramp railings. (People don't realize they are inconveniencing others.)
3. Fine people \$10 each time they put their bike on the railings (after signs are up).
4. Redo the west ramp to make it easier to use. (People wondered if that ramp is ADA compliant.)
5. Have an elevator at street level to take people into the library so they can bypass the stairs and ramps.
6. If necessary, use a horizontal elevator to get people into the library.
7. In winter, clear the stairs on the west side of the library (keep them open) so people don't have to walk further to get to stairs up to the building. (This is to help walking people stay off the ramp intended for wheelchairs.)

### **Barriers to access physical resources within the building.**

All were in agreement that the most disruptive interior access problem is the lack of open elevator access to the basement. Asking for a key to use that elevator is time consuming, annoying, and makes people feel embarrassed about their inability to use stairs. Once in the basement, there are also some stairs leading to an even lower area (in the hallway to the east after getting into the basement hallway near the elevator area).

Other problems with stairs include using them when others are crowding to get up or down, especially when a person is carrying a heavy load of books. Another problem was the open area around the staircase from first to second floor. This visual openness is also a problem with the large windows on many floors, as this "open" visual field is disruptive to people with balance issues. Too much open visual space makes it harder for them to stay balanced.

Also, people in wheelchairs are unable to browse books in the stacks on tall shelving. While they have assistive tools like "grabbers" or "helping hands," these still do not help them to see the titles of the books, and the books are so close to each other that the tools could probably not grasp them anyway.

Most of the participants also find the call number system to locate books challenging. They don't know how the call numbers work and have trouble finding things using them. They do get help with this from library workers.

### **Potential Solutions**

1. The one solution everyone could agree on was to **get a regular button to access the basement in the elevator.**
2. Floors other than the basement should be marked numerically to avoid confusion.
3. Some participants would like lockers to put things in so they don't have to carry all of their books around.
4. Students with disabilities should be consulted **before** buildings are constructed and before remodeling is done.
5. No solution for the call number problem was offered.
6. No solution for the browsing problem was offered. People acknowledged that others (library staff) are willing to help with accessing books on upper shelves. It is again, a matter of being able to help oneself rather than relying on others, and difficulties related

to the time this takes and how it disrupts the ability of the individual to browse for themselves.

### **Barriers to access the electronic resources provided by the library.**

People with visual impairments have had some problems with e-reserve because some of the scanned items are “difficult to convert” if the quality of the copy is less than excellent (“clean copies”). Both highlighting and marking on pages prevent assistive technology software from converting the text. Even when people with visual impairments can view the e-reserve items, some have difficulty reading copies which are “crooked” on the pages. How to get into e-reserves is sometimes hard to remember, especially if people don’t need to use it every semester.

No one expressed other problems with accessing the library website during the session.

### **Potential Solutions**

1. Make certain e-reserves are scan-friendly to allow use of assistive technologies.
2. Before new materials are added to the library’s website, test them with students with disabilities so they are known to be usable by all.

### **Perceptions on the library as a place to study and “hang out.”**

Most of the responses to this question dealt with studying in the library. About a third of the people present said they need a private area to study where they will be both uninterrupted and not overheard. Some need quiet to concentrate, some to use voice-recognition software, and some to avoid feeling anxious as others talk and pass by them. Ambient noise causes interruption of study and thought processes, and voice recognition software is disrupted by background noise like other people talking as they walk by.

Cell phones are a source of upset for most of the group when they are trying to study in the library. Overhearing cell phone conversations makes it difficult to concentrate and the sounds used as “ringing” for cell phones can startle people and cause disruption of thought processes.

Loud conversations between people using computers also create problems. Some computer labs have signs saying “no cell phones,” and if people are talking too loudly (for any reason) the lab assistant may ask them to leave.

People also need to have computer access in areas where they can study alone. If they **can** find a small room to use on their own, it is unlikely to have computer access.

People do like to “hang out” in the library (other than studying), especially in the café for a study break, or for group study sessions to work on projects.

### **Potential Solutions**

Suggested changes to remedy not enough quiet areas to study:

1. Use ear plugs to get enough quiet to study.
2. Allow individual users to have access to study rooms by themselves.
3. Provide computer access within these quiet study rooms.
4. Post more areas as “quiet study.”
5. Designate lounge areas devoted to quiet study.

### **Existing rules which affect use of library resources (or rules which would help if they were in existence).**

Some people used to use the study rooms on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor by themselves, but policy changed and they are no longer available to individuals studying alone. People were **visibly** distressed over this. Inability to study in areas where they will not be interrupted or overheard has led about a third of these people to avoid the library unless they have a need to do research or are looking for help. Others comment that there is no quiet place to study in the library, or on campus.

**Potential Solutions**

1. Allow access to quiet study rooms to individuals so they can study by themselves.
2. Use the lobby space on first floor and second floors to create cubicles for individual study.
3. NO CELL PHONE policy for the library, including computer labs and lobbies.
4. Signs on computers in the library saying no cell phones or conversing allowed.
5. Time limits on how long cell phone conversations can be.

**Ways the library could be better, for studying or recreational activities.**

The first floor women's bathroom has a handicapped stall, but it is too small for a wheelchair to work in there. The men's is ok on first floor, but many floors have no handicapped accessible bathrooms.

It was also noted that some of the 4<sup>th</sup> floor study rooms are too full of tables to allow maneuvering of wheelchairs. Upper floors are too loud because of linoleum rather than carpeting.

**Possible Solutions**

1. Fix the women's bathroom on first floor so it is truly accessible for those in wheelchairs. (First floor seems especially important to people.)
2. Have accessible bathrooms for both genders on all floors.

**Things the library does well now that should be continued.**

1. Participants like the helpfulness of the library staff.
2. The reference computing stations allow access for wheelchair users.
3. Doors are easy to use and get through in the library.
4. Assistive Technology is appreciated, and they would like more staff, more equipment, and more space in Assistive Technology.
5. Laptop checkouts are very helpful when their own computers are being repaired.
6. Access to library materials online allows them to work from home.
7. Computer lab being open 24 hours a day is helpful.
8. Have more focus groups. They are happy to be asked for input.