

# Improving accessibility is limited by funds

by Michele Greene

"I want York to set the standards for other universities to follow," says Michael Lanphier, McLaughlin College master and chairperson of the York University Committee on the Handicapped and Learning Disabled (CHLD).

Lanphier added that York is trying to meet the accessibility needs of students with disabilities but it is a "continuing struggle" against a lack of funds.

York is one of the more accessible universities in Ontario for people with different types of disabilities, according to Ilanna Yuditsky, co-ordinator of the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). However, Henry Graupner, director of facilities and management, says "more could be done."

Yuditsky says there is an "open atmosphere" at York for improvements, but implementing them is limited by funds. York needs more equipment, such as braille signs and doorjams, closed captioning for lectures and more telecommunications devices for the deaf (TDD) phones, she says. Medical attendants, like those at Ottawa's Carleton University and many American universities, and a van to drive students with disabilities around campus are also needed. Students who experience invisible disabilities such as heart conditions and shortness of breath would also benefit, according to Yuditsky.

Unfortunately, York's proposal to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities for medical attendants was turned down due to the cost.

Students also experience general accessibility problems. Floors of some of the buildings on campus, such as Tait MacKenzie, Winters College and the original fine arts building are not accessible since there are no passenger elevators. To use the library, Yuditsky says, the eleva-

tor behind the Scott Reserves Circulation Desk must be used, but is operated only by staff key. Also, the key hole is too high to use from a wheelchair. As well, the electronic door opener for Atkinson was locked recently and a student was not able to enter to study. Security was phoned and as a result, the door is now left open later in the evening. Also, during the construction at the south exit of Central Square near the Jewish Students Federation portable, the post with the electronic door opener was blocked by the safety fences. And last month, two students in the Stedman Lecture Halls were unable to leave the building after their class since the elevators had not been turned back on after repairs, says Yuditsky.

These incidents are "unbelievable," occur "on a fairly regular basis" and "points to the need for full accessibility," says Yuditsky. Until full accessibility is achieved, an alternative needs to be created to serve the needs of students with disabilities.

CHLD is an advisory committee to the administration that makes recommendations to improve accessibility on campus for students with disabilities. The committee, made up of faculty, students and staff, submits its recommendations to the provost, who then gives the proposals to the Committee of Vice-presidents. The CHLD attempts to find the funds wherever possible. The CHLD's proposals are rarely turned down, says Lanphier, but may be postponed due to inavailability of money. Proposals that are not accepted for one year are resubmitted the next.

The CHLD is not yet functioning this year. Lanphier says the committee is waiting for the provost to reconvene the organization and decide how it will operate this year.

However, York provost Elizabeth Hopkins says she does not know why they have not already been meeting and submitting proposals.

The university last year received \$407,000 from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities as a part of the \$4.1 million distributed to post-secondary institutions in Ontario for operational costs, such as special needs offices, equipment such as braille printers or tactile signs (raised lettering on signs for low vision people), or professional development (sessions to train staff to be more sensitive to students with disabilities). The money is not intended to be spent on capital costs, which would include building ramps. Hopkins says the money will be spent on equipment for the library, improvements at Glendon and a lot of programme support. To make a university totally accessible is expensive and York is doing what is possible within its financial means, says Yuditsky, which is "understandable but not accessible."

Last year, the ramp in Atkinson was installed. Proposals now being considered, says Lanphier, are equipment that enlarges typeface, voice synthesizers and equipment that turns text into braille. York has older models but they are becoming obsolete. The shuttle van is being considered says Yuditsky.

A proposal to add an elevator to Tait MacKenzie was turned down, says Lanphier, because the building would have to be reconstructed to accommodate an elevator, and this cost, in 1985, would have been \$200,000. Michael London, director of construction, says that an extension is being planned for Tait which includes an elevator, however one floor of the original building still would not be accessible.

Winters College also suffers from similar architectural problems that would not allow an elevator, says Lanphier.

Lanphier is concerned about the construction on campus which has "severely undercut our accessibility." Until this, he feels, "We were making improvements." Footpaths and access routes have

been changed, thus disorienting students, and some paths are now gravel instead of pavement which makes mobility difficult. Lanphier feels that the construction project is distracting the administration and has "gotten in the way" of other programmes. As a result, the needs of students with disabilities, who he feels are "suffering silently," are not being met.

However, Hopkins says this is not the case since most of the administration is not directly involved in the project.

Debbie Kee, York construction communications officer, says that York Builds is conscious of the needs of students with disabilities during the construction period. She has worked closely with the OSD and with students on a one-to-one basis to help meet their needs by showing them the new access routes. For example, a paved path from 22 Moon Rd. to the north doors of Atkinson has been constructed.

Neither Kee nor the OSD said they were aware of the blockading of the electronic door opener button at the south entrance of Central Square. Kee says "The nature of the project has made it difficult to maintain constant convenient access routes," but any problems that have arisen have been quickly remedied.

The new buildings on campus are going to be more accessible to students with disabilities than the existing buildings, according to Rob Castle, general manager of the Student Centre Corporation (SCC). Careful plans were made to ensure the centre would be more accessible because "this is a building students are paying for [and the SCC] wanted to make sure all the students can use it," said Castle. Yuditsky saw the plans and approved them. The ramps in the Student Centre, which make the mid-levels accessible, are an intricate part of the architecture and are visible, rather than being a backways route. The building goes beyond the provincial code for accessibility in that tactile signs and braille

are planned to be installed by opening.

The new fine arts building is more accessible than other buildings on campus, says executive officer of the faculty of fine arts and CHLD member Brian Forsyth, and is especially better than the original fine arts building, erected in 1971, predating accessibility requirements. Improved accessibility in the new building was discussed and planned in the dean of fine arts' office before the architects began work. The teaching areas for the new building are on the ground level. Also, there is no passenger elevator in the original fine arts building which is the main accessibility problem. The hope was to make the elevator, planned for the new building, serve both buildings. However, the offices are on opposite sides of the buildings and those of the old building would still not be accessible by elevator. Currently, the new fine arts building has tactile signs and braille at the elevators is now being looked into.

York is receptive to improvements and awareness seminars. The OSD conducted awareness seminars for departments within the university. Yuditsky says the staff was open to the idea and especially those departments who have a lot of contact with students like Admissions and the Advising Centre. Also, an awareness guide was published and distributed to faculty members—a large group that is difficult to get together at once — to familiarize them with what students with disabilities experience and classroom equipments available to help with what the students with disabilities experience, and Yuditsky said the OSD received requests for more copies. She added that the Department of Physical Plant goes out of its way to assist students with disabilities. It has been purchasing many of the electronic door openers on campus during the last two years, says Yuditsky. Also Scott Library, she says, is helpful and open to improvements.

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