

# Southwest State Welcomed Students with a Broad Spectrum of Disabilities

by [Luther Granquist](#) // December 10th, 2010



Southwest Minnesota State was touted as a college intended to accommodate students with disabilities when it opened in Marshall in 1967. Howard Bellows, the first president of the college, came from Emporia State College in Kansas, one of the few state colleges designed to be accessible to students with physical disabilities. He framed the specialized mission of the college to include “education of the physically-handicapped student.” College officials advised their architects of this special mission and directed them to modify the design of all buildings to eliminate barriers. And they sought out students with disabilities, including Vietnam veterans.

Saying it didn’t make it so. The three buildings completed in 1967 did have ramps and elevators, but barriers remained. In some buildings students using wheelchairs had to enter through a side door rather than the front door. Some bruised their knuckles wheeling through the narrow doors to the Central Academic Building. Other students encountered doors in the Food Service Building too heavy to open. In crowded dormitory rooms, the sinks were too low. The telephone was too high in the dormitory lobby. Some professors were reluctant to have students with severe disabilities in their classes.

The students with disabilities soon identified necessary changes. John Schatzlein, the first student body president, recalls that Bellows and key college administrators worked with and supported them. Willard Isfeld, the college’s plant supervisor, directed modifications that could be made at once. Before a second phase of building construction, college officials met with their architects to emphasize the need to follow national accessibility standards mandated by the legislature for state construction. After Bill Hopkins of the Minnesota Society for Crippled Children and Adults surveyed the campus and identified accessibility issues, Bellows formed an

ad hoc committee to recommend needed action. Students with disabilities served on that committee and a permanent committee which followed it. In addition to physical plant changes, they recommended that the college create a broad-based program of disability services and supports. The college pursued state and federal grants, facilitated arrangements for personal care attendants (PCAs), and hired a physical therapist, a work experience coordinator, and a coordinator for physical education activities, including the college's popular wheelchair basketball team. The number of students with disabilities increased from 30 when the college opened, five of whom used wheelchairs, to 90 in 1969, 26 of whom needed wheelchairs.

Today, when all schools and colleges must meet federal and state standards for both physical and program accessibility, Southwest Minnesota State University is no longer Minnesota's focal point for higher education for persons with disabilities, but wherever they go they benefit from the experiences of the men and women who worked together to make Southwest Minnesota State College more accessible.

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