SBU Board of Trustees tour the Warren B. Davis Family Physical Therapy Center

Physical Therapy department expands

University buys building and adds classroom to increase capacity

BY JENI FEHR, CLASS OF 2012

The physical therapy graduate program is expanding beyond the Wheeler Science Center this semester. A new classroom that can accommodate 60 new students has been added in the Jester Learning and Performance Center this semester, and the University bought a new building that should accommodate more.

"The goal is to expand to 80 a class, literally double each class," said Dr. Steve Lesh, director of the physical therapy department. "We've done a transition this year by creating the new classroom space over in Jester."

Until this semester, the program could only admit 40 new students a year, making a total of 120 students a year. Lesh hopes that by the end of the spring 2011 semester the new building will be ready for classes.

"We have applicants from all over the country," said President C. Pat Taylor. "This year we have two students from Alaska."

According to Dr. Taylor, nearly 400 students applied to be in the physical therapy program this year.

"We're in the process now of designing," said Lesh, "and so we're meeting with the architect, we're going through all that and we've got to get everybody happy in terms of our needs for PT and obviously the city, safety and security. Everybody has a say-so now on the process. I've been given an estimate of probably next summer [to move in]."

The process to expand the physical therapy department began over two years ago when the Board of Trustees met with faculty and students that were part of the physical therapy program.

"It became identified very quickly that we're landlocked," said Lesh, "We've outgrown our facilities [so] that we had waiting lists of students wanting to get in to our program, and so [we were] literally turning people away who might want to … have the opportunity to come to this campus. We are landlocked; our classrooms are physically locked in. We can't squeeze any more people into the classrooms. Our labs were locked in terms of physical space."

In the mean time, students have been using the new classroom in Jester. "There used to be a door, and you didn't know what was behind it," said Lesh.

"There's been a whole new area created there [now]... there's a new classroom that holds 60 students, and we're occupying that now as kind of a transition until they can get the new building [finished] for us. For the future, it's a new classroom, and the campus is always in need of new classrooms that are able to hold larger groups of students, so this is another nice thing for the University."

The building purchased by SBU is located at 2103 S. Springfield Ave. It currently houses a Dollar General store. The rest of the building is empty and will be remodeled for use by the University.

"The Dollar General store has one fourth of the building," said Dr. Taylor. "We plan to honor the contract and hope they'll be there eight or 10 more years." "[Dollar General] will stay unchanged … SBU becomes their landlord," said Lesh.

"On the empty space, the unfinished side, we'll finish about 25,000 [sq. ft.], and toward the back of it the physical plant will then use the unfinished space as storage." Dollar General had a long term lease agreement with the previous owner. The lease was transferred to SBU when the University purchased the building. The revenue generated from the lease will go toward paying for the building.

The building was purchased from the Warren B. Davis family and will be named the Warren B. Davis Family Physical Therapy Center. The purchase price was $1.6 million and SBU has budgeted $1.7 million to renovate the building. An additional $200,000 has been allotted for purchasing furniture and equipment, making the total cost of the project $3.5 million. According to Dr. Taylor, the University plans to pay the purchase and expenses off over the next seven years. Tuition will not be increased more than normal.

"We will double revenue by doubling enrollment," said Dr. Taylor. "The only additional cost we expect is adding new faculty."

This article first appeared in The Omnibus on September 1, 2010.