

Going the Distance for **S**tudents



From their first day on campus to their last, Sooner collegians are finding the help they need in the new Lissa and Cy Wagner Student Services Center.

BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI
PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

From the day they enroll in their first freshman class to the day they throw their mortarboards in the air at Commencement, University of Oklahoma students can take advantage of a special new space devoted entirely to the pursuit of their academic careers.

In January 2009, the Lissa and Cy Wagner Student Services Center became an official hub of student activity when University College, as well as a host of student resources and programs previously scattered across the Norman campus, joined forces in the 34,500-square-foot, multi-purpose Lissa and Cy Wagner Hall.

The Wagners are longtime OU supporters who in 2004 made the lead gift for the building's construction. Cy Wagner, a Tulsa native, earned his OU bachelor's degree in geology in 1956.

Forming the academic cornerstone for OU's "student services district" in the heart of campus, Wagner Hall sits on the former site of Savoie Lottinville Hall, across the turnabout from the Oklahoma Memorial Union, where student organizations are located. The building also is close to Buchanan Hall, which houses the offices of admissions, records and the bursar, and the NEL Building, home of student employment offices.

The idea for the facility sprang from a project of OU's Graduation Rates Task Force, formed in 2000 to study factors affecting student graduation. The task force identified 24 universities with students comparable to OU's in terms of ACT scores and high school GPAs that were nevertheless slightly outperforming OU in graduation and retention. The task force found that many of those schools had specific programs that either did not exist or were not well-developed at OU: central tutoring programs, summer bridge programs, learning centers for study skills, learning communities and supplemental instruction programs.

"We had all kinds of efforts across campus, but they were largely decentralized and not well-coordinated," says Doug Gaffin, dean of University College and a member of the task force. "If we wanted to consolidate and build on those efforts, we recognized that we needed an additional space to house the offices and classrooms necessary to support them."

Once the need was identified, the idea quickly became reality as the Wagners' gift, coupled with state bond money, enabled the project to move forward.

The architect whose design ultimately was selected, Alan Moring, is an OU graduate who at the time was working at Oklahoma City-based Architectural Design Group Inc. "Alan understood the vision, focus and importance of the building. He really took a special interest in the project," Gaffin recalls.

Moring's grasp of the vision is evident throughout the spacious yet cozy building, which integrates seamlessly with other campus structures, both old and new. One of many special



details of which he is particularly proud is carved into each of the two south-facing gables of Wagner Hall's exterior. "As I thought about the purpose of the building—rearranging and growing campus resources to better serve students—I thought of a centriole, the center in a living cell that choreographs the cell's growth, organizing genetic material for cell division," Moring explains. "I thought it would be the perfect symbol for this facility."

The symbolism certainly was not lost on Gaffin, a professor of zoology. "The centriole is a wonderful metaphor for what's going on here."

What's going on in Wagner Hall is something to behold.

At the center of the first floor is a large, comfortable common area perfect for study or relaxation, complete with overstuffed sofas and chairs, shelves filled with great works of literature and walls and tables adorned with tasteful southwestern art. Surrounding the common area—Gaffin calls it "the living room" and admits to taking advantage of its ambiance in the early mornings—are the University College dean's suite and advising offices, Center for Student Advancement, Freshman Programs and five classrooms that transform in the evenings into supplemental learning and tutoring centers.

University College Advising Center • When University College, the University's academic unit focused entirely on meeting the special needs of new students, moved from Carnegie Hall on the North Oval to Wagner Hall last January, its 10 full-time academic advisers and its support staff finally had the space necessary to serve the nearly 3,500 freshmen they see each year.

"Academic advising is the primary function of University College. At any one time, we have more than 5,500 students, and we do only one-to-one advising," Gaffin says. "It's a big job."

In an effort to make that big job a little easier, the Advising Center was configured for logistics and flow throughout the year. During the summer enrollment program, for example, which runs for 52 straight days, students and parents can sit comfortably in a large, open area as they wait to be called—on a speaker



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system—for advising appointments. Those meetings take place in one of the 11 private adviser offices.

Freshman Programs • Across the hall from the Advising Center is Freshman Programs, which includes Gateway to College Learning, a hugely popular transition-to-college-life semester-long seminar. "The freshman year is the most critical as far as attrition is concerned. The idea behind Gateway is that if students can assimilate better, they will be more likely to graduate," explains Gaffin. "It's all about adapting to university life. Topics include how to take effective study notes, talk to your professor, maintain a healthy lifestyle, manage your money, use the library and find the health center."

Gateway is not a required course, but 1,200 to 1,300 freshmen take it each year. Those who do, Gaffin says, tend to perform better academically when they return for their sophomore year.

Freshman Seminars, taught by faculty in their specialties, covers a diverse range of subjects and is another Freshman Programs offering. Recent offerings include "Music in Film: From Beethoven to Star Wars," "Trigger: Military Operations in Afghanistan," "The CIA and Congress" and "Freshman-15: Weighty Issues of Self-esteem and Body Image."

Center for Student Advancement • Much like the idea for the Wagner Student Services Center itself, University College's Center for Student Advancement emanated from the Graduation Rates Task Force. The center's goal is to help "stop-out" students, those who literally get stopped out of their chosen major because of insufficient GPAs and must make alternative plans.

"There is a large group of students who should be successful but for whom things just didn't go right as they moved into their majors," Gaffin explains. "We used to send them a letter saying they needed to make other plans. Now that letter tells them to come to the Center for Student Advancement so we can have a conversation about new directions, opportunities and majors that might be better suited to their talents. I think we've saved some academic careers because of this change in approach."



ABOVE: Doug Gaffin, dean of University College, could not be happier with his new surroundings. Wagner Hall offers freshman-to-graduate services in a comfortable atmosphere with designer touches. BELOW: Academic adviser Brian Nossaman welcomes Lindsey Kite and her mom, Julie, to OU during freshman enrollment.



That approach also is exemplified by the Strategies for Success course, mandatory for freshmen who get off to a bad start with a GPA below 2.0 and are put on academic notice or probation. “We try to right the ship,” Gaffin says. Again, the effort is paying off. “We’re definitely seeing substantial gains in these students’ GPAs the semester after they complete the Strategies class. It’s a wake-up call.”

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The centerpiece of Wagner Hall’s second level is the west-facing atrium that offers a peaceful haven for reading, contemplating or just enjoying the view of the Price Hall fountain through a wall-to-ceiling picture window. This signature space, Gaffin says, communicates the spirit of the entire building. Plans call for the atrium to be named Savoie Lottinville Lounge in honor of the editor, historian and longtime director of the OU Press, for whom the building that previously stood on the Wagner Hall site was named.

Also on the building’s upper floor are the University College Assessment and Learning Center, Project Threshold, the Writing Center and the Graduation Office, as well as a number of individual study rooms.

Assessment and Learning Center • Before the move from Carnegie Hall to the new facility, Gaffin says, the Assessment and Learning Center’s emphasis was more on the former and less on the latter. “The task force found that comparative universities had centralized tutoring and learning centers,” he relates. “Wagner Hall is the perfect venue for a strengthened tutoring center for all students, not just those who are struggling.”

Those students are tutored by some 40 PLAs—peer learning assistants—all of whom have at least a 3.5 GPA and earned an A in the course they’re tutoring. They are trained to use Socratic questioning to draw out answers from their students to develop a better understanding of the material.

Small group tutoring and “action centers,” where faculty hold open office hours for two hours a week in a Wagner Hall classroom, also are available. “Students often are just scared to come to regular of-

five hours,” explains Gaffin, who, along with three PLAs, staffs a weekly action center. “In the action centers, we put students into small groups and wander around asking questions. They are comfortable in this environment.”

OU Writing Center • In the OU Writing Center, previously housed in the basement of Bizzell Memorial Library, students, faculty and staff can get help with writing projects or just gather

Students take advantage of every amenity offered in Wagner Hall, from tutoring services to a comfy place to relax and study.



to talk about writing in a coffeehouse-like environment. Using a cross-curriculum approach to writing, the center partners with departments and programs across campus, including the Provost's Advisory Committee on Writing, Program for Instructional Innovation, Office of Disability Services, Expository Writing Program, Department of English, McNair Scholars Program and University College Assessment and Learning Center.

The primary goal of the Writing Center is to help students meet the highest possible standards of excellence in writing. “Learning to write clearly is critical to success in life and to success in all other academic courses,” explains OU President David L. Boren, for whom the Writing Center long has been a priority.

Project Threshold • For 37 years, Project Threshold has helped low-income, first generation college students and students with disabilities succeed at OU. Formerly located in the Physical Sciences Building, the program now occupies the southwest corner of Wagner Hall's second floor. There, counselors offer academic advisement, registration and tutorial assistance, financial aid and scholarship information, referrals to campus and community resources, and career and personal counseling.

GRADUATION OFFICE • Finally, there is the Graduation Office. Students who begin their academic careers at OU in Wagner Hall most likely will end them there as well, especially in light of steadily increasing graduation rates.

The Graduation Office helps students stay on track toward graduation, develops new student success programming and, of course, plans and executes the annual pageantry-filled Commencement ceremony that celebrates the University's newest graduates each May.

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As for the Graduation Rates Task Force, the impetus for Wagner Student Services Center, it is still going strong, meeting every other week to identify and implement ways to continue to improve OU's retention and graduation levels. “We have realized some tremendous gains in graduation. We've been No. 1 in the Big 12 and in the top 10 or 15 in the country in terms of increases in graduation rates,” Gaffin reports. “We're going in the right direction, and President Boren wants to keep the foot on the accelerator. I wouldn't be surprised if the task force remains intact until we have 100 percent graduation.”

Such an accomplishment would be a fitting tribute to the centriole that symbolizes all that happens in Wagner Hall: organization, growth and direction to help ensure that students succeed in their academic careers from start to finish.

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Names to Remember

Working through the stack of papers on her desk one day, OU regional major gift director Karen Renfroe came across a profile sheet she had been given on a donor.

The profile stated that Ann Tankersley Richter had completed her course work but never received her degree. Intrigued, Renfroe enlisted the help of Graduation Office director Becky Heeney, who discovered that Richter simply had never filled out the card needed to get a diploma, having left for a graduation trip to South America just days before the 1952 Commencement. So Heeney and Renfroe completed the card and, with the help of Richter's daughter, Amy Richter Bankhead, surprised the newly diplomaed alumna with the certificate she had earned so many years before.

"After that reconnection, I got the news about naming opportunities for the new Lissa and Cy Wagner Student Services Center and immediately thought of Ann and Amy," Renfroe says. "I knew they were looking for a way to honor Ann's father, Dan Tankersley, a prolific engineer, builder and architect whose many projects included construction of the original OU football stadium and field house."

Renfroe's first thought, given Ann's diploma experience, was the Graduation Office. But when mother and daughter heard about the Center for Student Advancement, they knew that was the perfect fit.

"My dad believed in second chances," Richter says. "I had polio as a child, and he did everything in his power to make sure I would walk again, which I did. If someone he knew had cancer, he paid for treatment at the Mayo Clinic. If his employees wanted to go to college, he paid their way at OU or OSU. Dad wanted to help people help themselves."

That legacy lives on at the Dan Tankersley Center for Student Advancement in Wagner Hall, where students unable to proceed in their chosen major because of insufficient GPAs can get the counseling necessary to chart an alternative course.

Bankhead, an Oklahoma City attorney who holds a master's degree in public health from OU, says that despite her ultimate academic accomplishments, she could have been one of those students. "I worked very hard, and my moth-



Dan Tankersley, here with his wife and daughter, has been memorialized in the new Wagner Student Services Center.




Dan Tankersley

er always made sure I had tutors and whatever other extra help I needed to succeed," she relates. "The Center for Student Advancement gives students like me a second chance. My grandfather would have loved that."

More confirmation that this opportunity was the right one to honor Tankersley: Wagner Hall is just a stone's throw from the T. Howard McCasland Field House and The Gaylord Family-Oklahoma Memorial Stadium.

Other Wagner Hall areas that have been named include:

- Study rooms honoring OU President David L. Boren's first-grade teacher, Ruth Robinson, and speech teacher, H.B. Mitchell; longtime University College administrator Myrna L. Carney; retired Project Threshold director Anthony V. Bluit; engineering alumnus Louis Alexander; and OU mom Betty Lou Camp.
- The Larry and Patty Bartell Family Suite in Freshman Programs, honoring the contribution of these OU graduates whose children have all attended OU. Larry Bartell is the fourth generation of a rare five-generation OU family.
- The Jerome C. Weber Classroom, recognizing the Regents' Professor of Education and Human Relations, who previously served as dean of University College and vice provost for Instructional Services.

"When students use one of these spaces they know they're in a good place where people who have sacrificed, worked hard and had success are remembered," Renfroe says. 

—Debra Levy Martinelli

For more information about Wagner Hall naming opportunities, contact Karen Renfroe at krenfroe@ou.edu.