

Open for business

MU's College of Business moves into the newly completed Cornell Hall.

By STEVE FRIEDMAN
of the Tribune's staff

It's a move that Bruce Walker has envisioned since the early 1990s.

Today, Walker, dean of the University of Missouri-Columbia's College of Business, and the rest of the college's faculty and staff go to work in their new digs: the \$30 million Cornell Hall.

Cherry-stained wood panels, spacious technology-rich offices and classrooms and a neogeorgian design are just some of the features of the elaborate six-level, 153,000-square-foot building. Contracted movers will be shuffling about 4,800 boxes early this week from the college's former home, the 75,000-square-foot Middlebush Hall.

In a time when budget cuts have created a gloomy financial state for MU, Walker classifies the new building as a ray of hope for the university's educational mission. Cornell Hall is the visible piece of a plan by Walker and his staff to make the College of Business one of the top 20 business programs in the nation for publicly funded four-year institutions.

"The building is not an end to our commitment, it's a means to a better, higher education experience for our students," Walker said.

Cornell Hall, which will have summer classes starting June 11, will meet the growing needs of the college's 3,300 students. But Walker will have to make due without expanding his faculty of about 50 full-time professors. MU's current financial straits means Walker won't be able to add more staff anytime soon.

"Yes, we have the space, but you need to have the human resources to ensure that the students get the education they demand from us," Walker said.

As Art Jago walks around Middlebush Hall, he enters a room that dates back to the Eisenhower administration. Wood and steel seats are bolted into the floor in a configuration that forces most students to crane their necks to see the instructor. The room has electricity but no data ports for technology-based teaching through portable computers.

"This facility just presents a challenge to quality business education," said Jago, professor of management who served as project liaison on the Cornell Hall building for the last three years.

At Cornell Hall on the South Quadrangle of MU's campus, Jago shows off what he terms a 21st-century classroom, complete with comfortable seats, electric and Internet data ports at each desk and built-in ceiling-hung projectors. Jago then joyously goes up to the instructor's table, opens up a hidden crank and adjusts the table to his height. "That's a simple pleasure," he said.

The hall also sports a 125-seat lecture hall, a 500-seat auditorium, 13 breakout rooms for student group meetings and \$2 million worth of information technology equipment.

Even with all its amenities, Cornell Hall is serving a practical purpose of centralizing all of MU's business instruction. Including Middlebush, business courses have been taught at four buildings across campus. Offices for teaching assistants and research assistants were in McReynolds, making it difficult for students to get in touch with those instructors, Jago said. "At least now we can provide an opportunity for all these folks to be at one location and have better access to us for the students," he said.

The new building also solves a fundamental problem with Middlebush: Its eight interview rooms that visiting recruiters use to talk with graduating seniors are in the basement, which is prone to flooding from rusting pipes. Cornell's 13 interview rooms are all connected to the college's career services center.

"We'll have a chance to build better relationships with the recruiters who come here," said Karen Shelton, director of the career center. "Imagine is everything in business. When we got surveys back from visiting recruiters, one of the top suggestions was the interview rooms need to be updated. They should be surprised when they come back now."

As he diligently documented the 58 moving boxes in his narrow basement office last week, management Professor Dan Turban took a practical view of leaving the 52-year-old Middlebush. "If you have a dated 1950s building, the impression is that you provide a 1950s-type education," Turban said. "Middlebush unfortunately was giving an image not representative of the training we're giving students. Now, we'll be in a facility more representative of the way we teach in a new century."

Both Jago and Walker know how important timing is in getting a new facility.

When Jago was at the University of Houston in the early 1980s, that university got appropriations to build a spacious new business college. The economy was great and tax collections high because of the Texas oil boom. Just a couple of years later, the oil market collapsed and Houston's economy tanked.

In the late 1990s when MU got \$17.1 million from state lawmakers to help build Cornell Hall, Missouri's and the nation's economy was booming. Today, a recessed economy has led to a statewide budget crunch with cuts galore for higher education institutions.

"We had that one window of opportunity to get funding, and if we would've encountered any delays, I don't think this project would have been accomplished," Walker said.

While initial planning for a new business college started in 1991, Walker believes what sold lawmakers and Gov. Mel Carnahan on the project was the level of private donations they received. About \$12 million was raised from alumni and friends of the college. The largest gift — \$3.5 million — came from 1950 graduate Harry Cornell and his wife, Ann. Harry Cornell heads Carthage-based Leggett & Platt, a Fortune 500 company that makes mattress springs and other furniture components.

If there is one worry Walker has, it's being able to keep the level of instruction high without being able to expand his faculty because of MU budget cuts. The college had 3,300 majors this past school year, a 10 percent increase over 2000-01 levels. From surveys of entering freshmen and transfer students, interest in business instruction will be up at least 10 percent from the past fall, Walker noted.

"We've added additional faculty in recent years, but the way the budget situation is, it's going to make that utterly impossible to add more in the foreseeable future," Walker said. "We have to protect the quality of the education experience for the students while also maintaining a work environment where the faculty can remain productive."