HE GREAT PLAINS AMERICANS WITH disabilities Act (ADA) Center has joined the HES Department of Architectural Studies, paving the way for closer collaboration with researchers and students in a field key to providing accessibility for people with disabilities.

“It just made more sense for us,” says Chuck Graham, Great Plains ADA Center associate director. “Obviously, the ADA has a lot of architectural components in it.”

The Great Plains ADA Center was formed in 1991 to provide information, technical assistance and training on the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, a landmark civil rights law that protects people with disabilities from discrimination and guarantees equal opportunity. It is funded by a five-year, $5 million federal grant last awarded in 2011. The center, which in the past has been affiliated with MU’s School of Health Professions as well as the University’s College of Education, serves people and organizations within Missouri, Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska.

Department and center administrators aim to work closely together to promote architectural designs that serve everyone. Architectural Studies chair Ruth Brent Tofle believes the two groups have a “natural synergy in promoting good design.”

“With their robust expertise, we are able to energize our teaching with experiential learning, enrich our research lines of inquiries, and broaden our outreach with MU Extension continuing education,” Tofle says.

One area of design on which the two groups may collaborate involves how people with disabilities use hotel rooms. Even lodgings considered accessible by their owners may present barriers to people with disabilities, Graham says, including features such as 30-inch-high beds that people in wheelchairs may not be able to get into or electrical outlets placed behind furniture that blocks wheelchair access. Already, Graham, who uses a wheelchair, has worked with the HES Department of Textile and Apparel Management researchers to help develop clothing that meets the needs of people with disabilities. He notes that there are a lot of little things to consider. For example, dress shirts often are frayed by a wheelchair’s moving parts, or jeans may need to be designed to accommodate restrictive stockings underneath.

In general, Graham says the center’s experts are becoming more ingrained in the department’s educational culture. They’ll be more likely to take part in class lectures and contribute their perspective as well as collaborate on faculty and student research projects, he says.

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