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New digs

Tech's Natural Resources Building boasts state-of-the-art equipment
By Nick Gevock - 01/09/2010

Robin McCulloch recalls that through the years the researchers with the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology had to scramble around at times to find their equipment.



Computers are being installed in preparation for petroleum engineering students who start back to school this Wednesday for the spring semester

"We've got equipment scattered in every rat hole and corner of people's houses," he said Friday. "We've never had space for it." Not any more.

Montana Tech is putting the finishing touches on its 56,000-square-foot Natural Resources Building on the west side of campus. The \$14.5 million building will house the bureau as well as the petroleum engineering departments.

Michael Barth, operations director of the Tech foundation, said the space was needed for the most popular major offered at the school.

"This space is critical for that department to support growth and allow for its continued growth," he said.

Students in the petroleum engineering department will start classes in the new building Wednesday, when the spring semester begins at Tech. They will find state-of-the-art labs, new computer rooms and better space for the graduate students.

It's a dramatic step up from the old location across campus, said John Getty, petroleum lab director and instructor.

"The old building was 60 years old," he said. "Technology has changed dramatically." Modern labs and equipment in the new facility will help enhance teaching and learning at Tech, he said.

Construction began in March 2008. The building has two wings: one for the petroleum engineering side and the other for the bureau.

Modern labs, high tech equipment The petroleum side includes six modern labs. It is there that the future generation of petroleum engineers receives hands-on training, as well as conducts research.

Getty said about 30 percent of the equipment is new.

He added all of the facilities are crucial to turning out petroleum engineers who are ready to hit the ground running in the industry.

"It's critically important that they have some experience with actually taking measurements," he said.

The improvements, however, don't stop with the hands-on labs. The petroleum wing has two new computer labs, including one with 40 terminals and a projector.

The second lab is even more high tech, with an instructor station that has three monitors to run different programs, pressure plates that are tied to cameras that track

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a speaker and microphones in the ceiling to pick up students' comments.

It will be used for classes as well as guest speakers, Getty said.

Bureau space better designed On the Bureau of Mines and Geology side of the building, the improvements are just as dramatic.

Bureau director Ed Deal said while the total space is the same as the old building, it's much better laid out. That's because the bureau gained needed lab and storage space.

"We had no lab space, and we had no central storage space," he said.

Instead, the bureau's researchers were forced to do those things in their offices. One of the people who will notice the difference the most is Mike Stickney, director of the Earthquake Studies Office.

In Main Hall, Stickney shared his space with lots of computer and seismographic equipment.

"After living with all of those computer servers in my office, I'm amazed at how quiet it is," he said. "I never thought my computer screen could be so loud." Yet the staff at the bureau won't be the only ones to benefit from the new building, Barth said. The bureau's popular publication's office, which sells maps, is just inside the doors.

"It's much more accessible than where they were in Main Hall," he said.

Reporter Nick Gevock may be reached at nick.gevock@mtstandard.com.

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