

Everyone could use a lift

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An nonfiction piece written for Washington State Magazine about the hills and shortcuts on Washington State University's campus in Pullman, Washington.

It's 9:58 a.m. and Josie Tarr is running late for her 10:10 digital storytelling class.

Getting off the bus in front of the new Northside Residence Hall, the digital technology and professional and technical writing double major sprints up the stairs between Bohler and the PE Building to get ahead of the crowds heading in the same direction: the CUB elevator.

Too late. She groans. A crowd of about 35 is already waiting.

Briefly considering her alternatives, both lengthy sets of stairs, one running up near the elevator structure and the other wrapping around it, the junior from Tacoma drops the idea as the weight of her books digs her backpack straps into her shoulders.

She'll wait.

"How did they manage to do those stairs before the elevator went in?" she says. "They must've just sucked it up."

After watching two more groups use the elevator before her, she pushes in with a crowd that includes four super-sized athletes, a bike, and a bundle of odors. She notes a fragrant plume of lavender perfume, a bit of workout sweat, and a men's body spray that shouldn't be used after middle school.

Crossing her fingers that the elevator doesn't break down mid-ascent—it sometimes does—Tarr and her fellow sardines finally make it to the top and peel out of their can. "It really is a hassle," she says. "But it's worth it to get up onto campus."

It's no secret that WSU's a hilly site. In this town, even the hills have hills. Spanning a massive mound characteristic of the Palouse, the campus landscape allows all graduates to tell their children that to get to class they hiked uphill in the snow both ways.

Some hills are steeper than others, of course, but it seems like no matter the point of origin or the destination, the elevation change is a brutal reality that students and faculty must face daily. But this generation of students has developed some tricks, tactics, and techniques to skirt some of the steepest of climbs.

A few are unavoidable. Off of Stadium Way, B Street, with its uneven sidewalks and lengthy route through Greek Row, clocks in with a grade of 14 percent at its steepest. The hill up from Reaney Park, appropriately named "Suicide Hill" because of its sporadically staircased sidewalk and overall unpleasantness, is made especially painful by its average 11 percent grade. Those who continue up this path all the way to Thompson Hall face a grade of 13 percent.

On campus is no better. With an average grade of 8 percent, Wilson Road, between Martin Stadium and the Fine Arts Building, is a slope that just does not meet ADA regulation. Coming up from Stimson, Library Road only passes ADA requirements if travelled a very specific way, achieved by zigzagging up the ramped areas. Otherwise, straight up you face a grade of 12 percent.

While no one is quite sure why WSU was built on top of a rather steep set of hills, Dave McCarroll, campus planner at Capital Planning and Development, says that, in general, buildings are placed on top of a hill as a sign of importance, but also for the practical reason of being out of the way of flooding.

Aesthetically speaking, it's wonderful. As you drive into town from the west, WSU seems to gleam in the sunlight on a distant hill.

But that comes with the steep price of a physically challenging campus. Still, if anything, Cougs are resourceful. To avoid the hills, or at least their steeper parts, many students and some faculty have adopted a series of shortcuts so they don't have to dash into class breathless and sweaty, or spoiled by the elements. Some involve climbing aboard a bus and skirting campus instead of hiking over the hill. Others include cutting through buildings instead of walking around them. And quite a few involve elevators.

The elevator from the parking lot beneath the Fine Arts building, and its sister transport next door in the CUE building, provide an excellent means of shooting up the east side of campus.

Joleen Magers, program coordinator at Maintenance and Utilities Services, said the CUE elevator sees the most traffic. "CUE has classrooms that are used throughout the day, large groups of students are coming and going at the same times as classes start and end. It's in the heart of campus so students use them to go up or down the hill to get to their next class, and there's only one elevator in the building to accommodate everyone," she says.

Tarr's favorite, the CUB elevator, runs from the football practice field up past a steep slope and two stories of the CUB. But this elevator can be crowded and temperamental, especially if people try to be courteous and hold the door too long.

Some of the most resourceful have discovered an alternative, a special secret elevator that originates deep inside the parking garage under Terrell Library and goes right up to the mall, one of the highest outside points on campus. While the physics and geography of this elevator may confuse riders the first few times—it seems that you enter the elevator on the north side of campus and exit in the center—eventually they just accept the Cougar magic.

When traveling from Webster Physical Sciences Building to Glenn Terrell Mall, many consider rocketing through Todd Hall in its elevator. However, the wise are wary of the building's heat during the colder months; they soon develop a habit of removing their jackets during the ride.

Some elevators are just elevators, while others have their own character. Rather than take the seemingly endless stair to the fourth floor in Bryan, students and faculty opt for the elevator across the foyer from the portrait of Dr. E.A. Bryan. Much like its similarly aged friends in Avery, Johnson, and Commons (the oldest elevator on campus, installed in 1924), this elevator could be in a horror movie. Creaky, with flickering lights and old carpet, riders are left thinking, "When will they find my body?" Tearful attempts at phone communications are sometimes met with an unsympathetic no signal warning.

While it takes a few years, and the development of a good set of “Cougar calves,” eventually students learn the best routes to almost everywhere on campus.

“I think by now I have all the shortcuts figured out,” says Tarr. “But I’m always amazed by the places people will go just to avoid the hills or stairs.”