Renovation of Bear Down Gym brings the Student Success District closer to completion

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Many of us have not been on main campus for the last year. But one central construction project – the Student Success District – has been moving forward the whole time. To help you get caught up, here is the third installment in a series of articles about the new spaces and centralized resources students and employees will find as they return to campus.

One of the most iconic buildings on the University of Arizona campus is Bear Down Gymnasium. When flying into or out of Tucson, airplane passengers see the rallying cry “BEAR DOWN” emblazoned in blue letters across its barrel roof.

Campus tours for prospective students have long included a stop at Bear Down for a rendition of the University’s fight song, “Bear Down, Arizona!”

When discussions began around creating a student district at the heart of campus, campus leaders knew Bear Down needed to be part of it – and that preservation of the historic structure had to be a priority.

Soon, renovations throughout the 60,000-square-foot building will be done and a wide range of offices that offer programs, services and resources for students will move in to complete the Student Success District.

Development of the district began in 2019. Over the past few years, campus has seen a transformation of the Main Library, the Albert B. Weaver Science-Engineering Library and Bear Down Gymnasium as well as the addition of the new Bartlett Academic Success Center.

Within the buildings are centralized academic, career and health services for students, plus unique spaces for collaboration or quiet study. And connecting all four are outdoor walkways, shaded patios and a healing garden for contemplation.

Back in the day

Built in 1926, Bear Down was called the “Gymnasium and Armory” since it was also housed the Department of Military Science and Tactics. The building continued to serve the department and ROTC cadets for years and even provided dormitory space for military troops and students during and after World War II.

In the fall of 1926, quarterback and student body president John Byrd “Button” Salmon – a promising and popular student and athlete – was seriously injured in a car accident. The coach at the time, J.F. “Pop” McKale, regularly visited Salmon in the hospital, said Salmon's last message to the team was, “Tell them, tell the team to bear down.”

Students embraced those words and memorialized Salmon by painting them on the roof of Bear Down.

It wasn’t until 1983 that the building was officially named Bear Down Gymnasium.

Generations of alumni played intramural sports, registered for classes, lifted weights and attended dances inside the historic building. For nearly 50 years, Bear Down Gym was the home of Wildcat basketball teams, moving when McKale Memorial Center was completed in 1973.

In recent years, Bear Down Gym housed student advising and tutoring services. Those offices have moved into the new Bartlett Center for Academic Success.

The two-story brick structure, which is famous for its curved roof, large semicircular terra cotta entrance, deeply recessed entry and copper-clad window frames, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990.

It will remain on that list, thanks to the University's commitment to renovating and preserving Bear Down Gym in strict compliance with the Secretary of the Interior's guidelines as administered by the State Historic Preservation Office.

The design-build team of Poster, Mirto McDonald and Sundt Construction, along with Planning, Design and Construction, were responsible for the 2014 renovation of Old Main and are leading the refurbishment of Bear Down Gym.

“Modern technology, utility infrastructure updates, and safety and accessibility improvements will be installed so this treasured building can continue to serve the University for many years to come,” said Peter Dourlein, assistant vice president and university architect. “The renovation will fully respect the historic character and fabric of the original building by preserving the iconic elements of the building exterior, maintaining the historic interior volume of space, and retaining essential elements of the bow trusses, suspended mezzanine bleachers and gym floor.”
Bear Down Gym’s future

When Bear Down Gym – the final component of the Student Success District – is completed in spring 2022, it will be home to a wide range of services and spaces for students, including:

- Academic support and career services
- Health services
- Physical and mental wellness services
- Meeting and gathering spaces
- Dining areas

Campus Health, nationally recognized for the services it provides to students, will expand from its main location on the south edge of campus to Bear Down Gym, where it will provide medical and mental health care in addition to health education.

"Campus Recreation is most looking forward to seeing the enjoyment that we will receive when we have recreational users back in Bear Down for the first time in over five years," said the director of campus recreation, Troy Vaughn. "Campus Recreation has gone to great lengths to work with student leaders to include a recreation center in the Student Success District. An 1,800-square-foot fitness room equipped with the latest cardio equipment and gear and other amenities – such as meditation rooms and cabanas – will serve our students as well as faculty and staff who have memberships."

Follow the renovation on the project webcam [2] and read the other stories in this series:

- 5 things to know about the Student Success District[3]
- A look at the services and spaces offered in three Student Success District buildings[4]

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