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UMass matches students' disability needs

By CATHERINE BAUM
Staff Writer

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Daniel Warner, who has spinal muscular atrophy, is familiar with getting around in his wheelchair at Hampshire Regional High School. In fact, he started using it when he was in eighth grade there. Warner's disease has weakened his muscles over time, and his classmates saw him change as his condition worsened. He went from being physically exhausted while walking to using a walker to using a wheelchair at 13.

"You see the kids around him maturing about the challenges that he has," said Kimberly Hallet, who was Warner's eighth-grade Algebra teacher. "I think so many of them have become so close to him; it's nice to see that."

Meanwhile, Warner is set to begin his higher education this fall at the University of Massachusetts, a school comprised of many buildings, unlike Hampshire Regional's one building. What's more, Warner left the students who know him so well at Hampshire Regional to join thousands of more students who don't know him.

"UMass is going to be kind of a culture shock," Warner said.

To help make the transition smooth for Warner and other people with disabilities, the UMass Office of Disability Services works with students, faculty, staff and visitors to accommodate their needs. The university estimates that about 18 to 19 percent of its population are disabled, though not every disabled person registers at the Office of Disability Services.

"People who work in our office are very familiar with disability and are committed to do what it takes to have an employee, student or visitor have the experience that they are seeking," said Benjamin Ostiguy, a consumer manager at the office. The office has four consumer managers that work with the disabled and two assistant directors who do case work, according to Ostiguy.

Warner will meet with a consumer manager before classes start to discuss the extent of his disability and how the university can accommodate him. Many of the buildings have ramps and accessibility buttons next to the doors. If a student with a mobility problem is assigned a class in an inaccessible building, the disability services office will work with the scheduling office to relocate the course to an accessible location.

"That's a pretty simple thing to do; we do that before the class starts typically," Ostiguy said.

Many of Warner's classes will be held at the Isenberg School of Management, which was originally built in 1964 and added onto in 2002. Its two parts are connected, and the new one is fully accessible.

A van service is available for students who need special transportation. The vans have lifts to accommodate people with wheelchairs. A number of people use the service, making it imperative to have a schedule in place before the service is needed.

"It's not like a taxi service where you can just call and say, 'Come get me; I'm at this corner,'" Ostiguy said. "Sometimes they have to get picked up earlier than they like because several people have to be picked up. It's an eye opener to see there's not a lot of room for spontaneity."

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Warner said he hopes to live in a single dorm room, but has yet to confirm a place. Brett Hall, Brooks Hall and Knowlton Hall are accessible dorms for undergraduate students, and Prince Hall is accessible for graduate students. The North Apartments are also accessible, with a suite and kitchen, but they are available to students based on priority and seniority.

There are various apartment complexes, including Lincoln Apartments, that offer family housing for those who are disabled and wish to live with their family or caretaker.

- CATHERINE BAUM

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