2010 Annual Report
President’s Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities

Fall Semester—A time for learning.

We devoted the fall semester to learning about UNH’s historical commitment to people with disabilities and our role in relation to the work of the Office of Affirmative Action and Equity and the Office of Disability Services for Students. Additionally we learned about the work of Northeast Passage, the Institute on Disabilities, and the Disability Awareness Committee which was in place for about a decade during the 1990s.

We learned that it is in many ways easier to deal with the concrete things like physical access. Sometimes physical access is costly but it is usually easy to see and understand its importance.

We learned that truly changing attitudes and making inclusion part of everyone’s consciousness will be more a question of small steps taken over time rather than of large public events and programs. We see this happening as the conversation is expanded to include more people and offices on campus. Often it is the small things, like using the term accessible rather than handicapped, that are hard to change. And, we all make slips.

The commission has been a learning opportunity for the co-chairs. This has been an entirely new experience for both of us. We have had to look at the University through a much wider lens than we use in our daily jobs and have learned a lot in the process.

Spring Semester – The Work Begins.

The Communication workgroup (led by Carol) has developed the content for the Commission’s website so we will be ready to upload information once the infrastructure is created by IT. We are very excited that a filmmaker from UNHM will do a series of interviews with students, faculty and staff this summer that will be featured on the website. We also created the “elevator speech” the President requested to use when he is on the road (below). We look forward to getting feedback on whether this meets his needs.

- Disability status is not necessarily something you are born with. Eighty percent of people with disabilities acquire the disability after the age of 20.
- The UNH population of people with disabilities has more than doubled in the last four years.
  1. Over 500 UNH students are currently registered with the Office of Disability Services for Students.
  2. 800 to 1000 UNH faculty and staff are estimated to have disabilities.
- Yet we do not have fully accessible campuses. There are places on campus you can’t go for class, public presentations, or to use the rest rooms if you are mobility-impaired.
- UNH believes that people with disabilities add value and diversity to our living, working and learning community. To help address physical and attitudinal barriers, UNH established the Presidential Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities in 2009 to promote the inclusion of students, faculty, staff and guests with disabilities in all aspects of University life.
We have also begun to collect some data about the number of students with disabilities at UNH and will compare that to the other New England public universities. We will look at the trends in New Hampshire, particularly the numbers of students coming up through the K-12 system, so we know what to expect in the future. A goal for next year will be to start gathering retention data and graduation rates. This has never been done so it will take a couple of years to gather enough data to be able to make meaningful comparisons. Kathy Berger, the Director of Disability Services for Students, is working with IT to develop a data base that will enable her to track this information. The goal is to have it up and running for fall. Manchester will work collaboratively to see if the same data base can be easily adapted for use at UNHM so that the information gathered on the two campuses is in a consistent format.

The Programming workgroup (led by Dani) began by focusing their sights on work with the Diversity Banquet coordinators to see if we could incorporate disability into this year’s program. Although we learned that the Diversity Banquet does not specifically represent any one of the commissions, the planners invited UNH Para Olympian, Marlon Shephard to be a guest speaker.

Working with Dave Zamansky, we are co-sponsoring Marc Elliot to present “What Makes You Tic” – about living his life with Tourette’s syndrome. He will appear in the MUB during October which is Disability Awareness Month. The committee is planning a panel discussion with students with disabilities for the same day as the speaker. We will encourage faculty to include it on their syllabi as an assignment for students to attend.

We are also creating a list of faculty members who are doing research in disability related fields and hope to have them offer workshops for students, staff, and other faculty to attend. The Communication group also plans to include faculty research on the website.

The Student Academic Services division offers diversity related trainings to members within the division. Members of the programming committee within the division are creating offerings related to disability issues.

We have reserved a MUB Theater for one night every month to sponsor a monthly movie series with films related to different types of disabilities.

The Physical Access workgroup (led by Dirk Timmons in consultation and coordination with the Affirmative Action and Equity Office, ADA Compliance Officer, Donna Marie Sorrentino acting as interim while undergoing an ADA position search) is tackling four areas to start:

a. Transportation – this group decided to narrow their focus to “Parking Spaces” – adequacy of location and dimensions and “Wildcat Access” ease of access and utilization. (Wildcat access is the accessible transportation service for people with disabilities.) Working with Tim Sullivan and Sam Lingeman from Campus Planning, Dirk has completed an inventory of all the accessible bus stops and nearly completed the inventory of all accessible parking spots.
b. A complete updated inventory on the accessibility of emergency blue light/phones throughout the campus. Documented inventory supplied by the Affirmative Action and Equity Office (AA&EO).

c. Parking and sidewalks – we are working closely with AA&EO and GIS staff to develop mapping that will show topographical elevations (color coded based on grade, surface, and obstacles) to assist students/faculty/staff and visitors in getting around campus. We will also map the closest pathways/distances from building to building. (See “d” below)

d. Accessibility map - We are working with Tim and Sam (as mentioned above) from Campus Planning and Donna Marie (AA&EO) to create an accessibility map for campus (this work was in process with the previous ADA Compliance Officer, AA&EO). It seems feasible to have a first generation map ready for next fall. We are starting with information that is readily available but needs to be checked and brought together into one place. In April, sixty students from a therapeutic recreation class (thanks to Jill Gravink) helped by doing an inventory of stairways and curb cuts to check the accuracy of existing maps. We will continue to update it with information provided through Donna Marie’s office. The first map generated will not be interactive but will provide basic information so that users can make informed decisions about travel on campus. It will include:

- Pathways and color code by grade
- Surfaces and construction
- Elevators (without floor plans just an overlay of location in the building)
- Accessible bus stops
- Accessible parking spaces
- Accessible entrances
- Emergency phones

Our Vision for the Future

We are happy to report that all members have agreed to continue on the Commission next year.

We have come to see the work of the Commission as facilitating the transition from compliance to inclusion. We want to move beyond what “we have to do” to “what we should do” to be a more welcoming and inclusive campus. One of our primary goals is to plant the notion of inclusion of people with disabilities in the minds of everyone on campus as they design buildings and programs. We are appreciative that this work is not being done by just the commission and the two offices responsible for compliance. For example, the President’s presentation of the strategic plan included video clips of people with disabilities. Additionally the Institute on Disabilities brought Keith Jones, a nationally recognized public speaker, disability rights advocate, and artist to campus to speak in April. The Commission website will link to postings and advertising of any dis-ability related offerings around campus.
One of our members, Jill Gravink of Northeast Passage, talks about three levels of inclusiveness: accessible, usable, desirable. From the perspective of the person with a disability, a building could be accessible but is it usable or desirable? For example, the Whittemore Center is a wonderful facility. It was designed to be fully accessible. However, it is more than a question of getting in the door. If the equipment in the weight room is not usable by some people with disabilities we are excluding a segment of our population. If we run a special program for all people with disabilities, it may not be desirable for some of those folks because people with disabilities are no more homogeneous than the rest of the population.

Next year we will be moving forward with the activities described above, especially the trainings and public events to heighten awareness on campus and move toward usable and desirable.

Respectfully submitted August 2, 2010

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