University of Delaware graduate student Danny Moore’s own experience with diversity is featured in our Question & Answer section. Moore’s personal perspective on diversity extends beyond the accessibility of buildings and services. By focusing on individual strengths rather than weaknesses, our society becomes increasingly diverse by enabling more people with disabilities to live and work in the community.

Pastor Israel Figueroa’s personal story of Iglesia De Dios Maranatha in Seaford, Delaware, would probably not describe himself as an advocate for children or adults with disabilities; however, for some members of his congregation and community, he often facilitates the connection to the services or supports they need. Providing individual members of his congregation with informal services on site is part of Father Figueroa’s daily work.

Finally, the personal story of William Gomez and his family illustrates how William’s transition into school in the United States has impacted him and his family. Frederick’s Spanish-speaking services in Sussex County has facilitated William’s entering Howard T. Ennis School in Georgetown and provided William and his family with a new understanding of independence.

These individual stories examine diversity from different perspectives. We hope they will provide you with an understanding of how providing services to people with disabilities, based on individual preferences and needs, creates a more diverse community for all of us.

Sincerely,

Tracy L. Mann
Editor

Understanding and Embracing Diversity in Our World

We live in a world where “diversity” has become a popular topic for academic exploration as well as dining room conversation. As defined by The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (4th ed.), diversity is “the fact or quality of being diverse; difference.” A point of respect in which things differ. All human beings are diverse; there is diversity within and among cultures, essentially, diversity exists among individuals, the families and groups that associates with, and the communities we all share. Diversity among people with disabilities is undeniably vast. Cognitive, physical, and mental health disabilities affect approximately 22% of North Americans of all races, ages and genders. Some disabilities are congenital and others are developed during one’s lifetime. In 2000, nearly 50 million Americans over the age of 5 were reported to have either a severe or functional disability. According to World Health Organization estimates, between 7% and 10% of the world’s population (approximately 500 million people) have a physical, sensory, or cognitive disability. Acknowledging diversity requires education, training, and acceptance on all levels of services, including policymaking, administration, and practice. Cultural competence is defined as a set of values, behaviors, attitudes, and practices within a system, organization, program, or among individuals, which enables them to effectively provide high quality, individualized services. It refers to the ability to honor and respect the beliefs, language, interpersonal styles, and behaviors of individuals and families receiving services, as well as the people providing the services. In other words, achieving cultural competence, embracing diversity, and successfully managing issues across diverse populations is a dynamic, ongoing, developmental process that requires long term commitment. The implementation of a culturally competent system that embraces diversity results in a system that eliminates barriers to services for underserved populations and provides high quality, individualized care.

To value diversity is to respect human worth. A system is strengthened when it recognizes and appreciates the varied backgrounds of those it serves, as well as those working in the field.

Tracy L. Mann, Center for Disabilities Studies; Amy V. Dolan, Graduate Assistant, Center for Disabilities Studies; Copy Editor, Nina Lederer; Reporters: Amy V. Dolan, Carla Koss, and Tracy L. Mann; Design & Production: Cindy Dolan.

delAware is sponsored by the Center for Disabilities Studies, University of Delaware and the Delaware Developmental Disabilities Council. If you would like to contact us, please call (302) 831-6974 or TTY at (302) 831-4689, fax (302) 831-4690, email to Tracy L. Mann, tlm@udel.edu, or write to delAware, University of Delaware, Center for Disabilities Studies, 166 Graham Hall, Newark DE 19716.

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Bridging Communities

“Diversity means bringing different people together, people with different backgrounds, different abilities, different education levels, people with different skin color, everything, all levels of income and ability, bringing them all together and helping the people who need help.”

When Maria Mendoza talks about “helping the people who need help,” she is sharing her unique understanding of Sussex County’s system of supports and services. As the mother of a daughter with a disability, Mrs. Mendoza knows firsthand how families can feel overwhelmed because these frustrations for other families by working as the community coordinator for the Center for Disabilities Studies, Family Support Initiative. Every day, Mrs. Mendoza tries to close the gap between available services and those needed by members of the community.

As an immigrant, Mrs. Mendoza has also struggled with the discrepancy between needed and available services in the Georgetown Hispanic community. “To share hard earned knowledge, Mrs. Mendoza does double-duty as a parent consultant at the Parent Information Center (PIC) of Delaware, Inc. PIC is the training and information center for parents in Delaware that helps families communicate more effectively and professionally to meet the educational needs of children and youth with disabilities.

Part of Mrs. Mendoza’s role is to identify cultural differences that can cause challenges when they are not acknowledged. The majority of immigrants in the Georgetown area came from small Central or South American villages, where systems and services were not part of village life. In addition, not speaking English is an obstacle to obtaining services in the United States. Therefore, these families do not readily seek services for family members with disabilities.

“My job is to put people in contact with the right resources,” explains Mrs. Mendoza. “Hispanic families are our focus. I teach self-advocacy one step at a time. I offer direction. Because the concepts are new to some people, my job is more time consuming than it would be in another population. I need to spend more time with each individual in order to help adequately.” The challenge of respecting Hispanic and Latino values has been frustrating, at times, for Mrs. Mendoza. She was aware of her grandson’s disability as well as his vision, hearing, and mental health issues, but health care and disabilities advocacy is rarely available in San Miguel. “I tried to look for help, like when William had seizures. I didn’t know what to do. I just lived with it. It was hard because I love William as if he [were] my own child.”

After seeing American children like William going to school, Mrs. Diaz approached the primary resource in her community, the pastor of her church. The pastor contacted the Parent Information Center of Delaware in Georgetown and enlisted one of the center’s bilingual parent consultants to guide the Spanish-speaking Mom through the educational process.

A year and a half ago, William came to America from a small, rural town in El Salvador. For the first 16 years of his life, no services had been available to him aside of the supports provided by his family. Since his arrival, William has been a student at the Howard T. Ennis School and has received training in carpentry and gardening. Proudly, he has already brought in some income. Mrs. Diaz and her family have also received training that helped them to understand William better and encouraged them to give William credit for his capabilities.

Accustomed to providing for her family, Cecilía Gomez, “especially for the help William gets because he has special needs other children don’t have.”

“Stand William better and I am grateful for the people who help my family,” says Cecilía Gomez, “especially for the help William gets because he has special needs other children don’t have.”

“I am very pleased,” adds Maria Diaz, “that, in this country, there is a system with programs that help children with disabilities. Most of these programs are free and available. I want the people who read this article, some of whom may be working with families like mine—I want them to know that I am very grateful that these professionals are willing to do this work. Every day I pray to bless these people.”
Two hands-on courses in the University of Delaware’s College of Human Resources, Education, and Public Policy (CHEP), designed by Dr. Carol Denson, group 4-6 university junior and seniors with students from the Transitional Partnership Program (TPP). A collaborative project between the Red Clay Consolidated School District and the Center for Disabilities Studies (CDS), TPP encourages 18 to 21 year old students, who have moderate to severe developmental disabilities, to develop independent living skills. In Dr. Denson’s course, “Leadership and Disability Policy,” university student teams work with transitional students to develop their Individualized Education Program (IEP). Teachers, state agency representatives, and other service providers usually help to plan the IEP short and long term goals for the students. Each student team works collaboratively with the transitional student to develop a presentation on the student’s strengths and future goals for the IEP group. Engaging the transitional students in activities outside the classroom, such as taking walks on campus, having lunch together, and working together on the computer, is integral to the course model. The ultimate goal is to prepare both student groups for the challenges of making the transition from school to adult life. This unique peer interaction is a structure for the students to compare upcoming transitions: junior and senior university students leaving the university and transitional students completing high school and moving to employment or further schooling. Professor Carol Denson emphasizes, “I don’t focus on the differences. The focus is on individual strengths and the similarities among the students.” Students compare transitions and inquire, “What are the choices you have to help you? What is your support system? Do the transitional students have the same choices?” Jackie Gallagher, co-director of TPP, says, “The class is such a wonderful experience. For the TPP students to work with same age peers is quite powerful and provides the students a greater feeling of acceptance and belonging with their university peers.” The university students come from a wide variety of degree programs. These diverse perspectives enrich the educational experience of the younger students with disabilities. “We tend to focus on the educational aspects of working with the students,” says Gallagher, “however, the UD students are from many different colleges and see the transitional students’ ‘people strengths,’ which provides a better perspective of the student as an individual.”

“Analysis of Consumer Disability Issues” is a particular course that examines resources used by the transitional students. For example, both student groups learn about campus mobility issues including, using buses to go from apartments to class, work, and dining facilities. The transitional students gain independence through transportation training on the campus, and the university students learn to look more closely at accessibility challenges. Often for the university students, these courses are electives and are their first personal experiences with people with disabilities. The experience in these courses often remains with both student groups long after the semester is over. Students have reported the profound impact of this course experience, says Dr. Denson. While he was a management intern at a financial institution, a former student created a work place seminar on Peopel First Language. This student attributed his awareness of acknowledging an individual with a disability as a person and not his or her disability to his educational experience at the University of Delaware. Another UD graduate told Dr. Denson that because of the Disabilities Studies classes, he deliberately devoted time getting to know two employers with disabilities in his department at work. In his view, UD opened a door to developing friendships he probably would otherwise have missed.

The social and personal benefits of breaking down the barriers to approaching people with disabilities are far reaching.

This unique peer interaction is a structure for the students to compare upcoming transitions: junior and senior university students leaving the university and transitional students completing high school and moving to employ-ment or further schooling.

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Donny Moore was born with arthrogryposis, which is a rare congenital disorder that reduces joint mobility. Born in Wilmington and raised in Smyrna, Donny relocated to Newark in 1990. Now a graduate student in Ancient History at the University of Delaware, Donny answered a few questions concerning diversity and his experiences as a person with a physical disability.

Q: What do you think of diversity in the terms of people with disabilities within the state of Delaware?

Donny: There is a huge lack of education that creates a gap between the able bodied population and the disabled population. “Diversity,” to me, is just difference, so I don’t know if that is the right word to use. I think that accessibility is a more appropriate/suitable word for what you are trying to know about. There is willingness to be diverse and make things accessible but only as far as learning what is needed.

Q: Can you elaborate?

Donny: The more advanced the structure is, the better it is. For example, around the university, things are very accessible because the university is always on the cutting edge, but if you move south in the state, there is a huge lack of accessibility as far as housing for the people with disabilities.

Q: What do you think of diversity as far as housing for the people with disabilities?

Donny: There is absolutely no independence in an institution. There are so many people throughout the state who are in institutions but really don’t need to be. They have perfect minds to be able to pay bills, to be able to live independently, get along in life, and be a constructive part of their area around them. They could work and be a part of something positive, but they are stuck in an institution for one reason or another.

Q: What is being done?

Donny: There is a movement, and it is growing daily, to get these people out on their own so they can be independent, so they can create a life of their own, work like most people, so they can retire, so they can live how they see fit, and not how some institution sees fit. I know people who have to eat when they are told; they can only shower when they are allowed to shower. They can’t choose to do whatever because they are in an institution and it is very structured. There is a huge movement to get these people out of these areas. And some of those places are not nice to live in. There is a lot of neglect and a lot of mental abuse, but just the fact that you are not allowed to be independent is mental abuse. It may not necessarily be inflicted purposely, but I know if someone told me tomorrow that my independence is done, I would fight like you wouldn’t believe to keep it.

Q: What about services for those who do live independently?

Donny: When you live independently, there are a lot of services available. You have to do the research yourself; that is good, you should have to do the research. There is home health care, state transportation, that yes, is less than perfect, but it is a start. We need to build upon things that are already there to tweak the system. And it is not an easy life, but it is better than no life at all. Diversity, as a whole in this state, is probably consistent state to state from what I have seen. People are as diverse as they allow themselves to be.

Q: Can diversity be taught?

Donny: I don’t know if it can be taught. You can have classes on diversity, and you can make up theories and put it all in a book; but you have to live it to learn it, and you have to be accepting of it. And part of that starts when a person with a disability obtains a degree in college and goes job searching, and if they are qualified, give them the job. The institution must be accommodating to that.

There are a bunch of laws that stipulate how accommodating, and the American Disabilities Act has outlined a bunch of things, but you have to give us a chance like, when anyone applies for a job and gets it. We are being given a chance to show our worth or productivity. But a person in a wheelchair isn’t always given that. A lot of times they are read like a book, and the cover is the only thing you see. If someone will just open the cover and read it page by page, it will start there.

Q: Overall, in your years here at the University of Delaware, what do you think of diversity on campus?

Donny: I’ve been here since 1990, and seeds were planted well before then, and now we have trees with shade. There is usually someone here who is willing to help. I cannot name anything I’ve said fall on deaf ears. The university is better than the state as a whole. Since 1990, the ADA office has moved on campus, sidewalks have improved; I would say the University is 98% accessible. There are few housing facilities though, and, as the disabled student population grows, and I think it will, these housing facilities will need to grow with them.