

HCC graduate to attend Ivy League school

HOLYOKE – When it came time to apply to college, Les Welker knew he was not ready for a four-year school nor certain he would even get in. He didn't know what to study and wasn't keen to take out large loans to pay for classes he might not like.

"I didn't get good grades in high school," he says. "I was intelligent, but because of everything I was going through, I never applied myself very well. My high school GPA was embarrassing."

Instead, a guidance counselor suggested he try Holyoke Community College (HCC).

"Then I came here, and I found my footing," he says. "I found a really great program called Pathways. I really rediscovered how much I love to learn."

Welker learned a lot at HCC. He started with "undeclared" as a major. A first semester zoology class with Prof. Joseph Bruseo put him on a path toward biology.

A second semester class with "Bruseo," as Welker calls his mentor, vertebrate field biology, sealed it. Bruseo led the class on trips to the Quabbin Reservoir and out to his live-trapping grid in the woods around the HCC campus, where Welker learned how to bait, capture and identify different species of mice, research that became part of an independent project

he presented this spring at the Undergraduate Research Conference at UMass, "An Observation in Foraging Behavior in *Peromyscus*."

Along the way to a GPA of 3.9, a HCC Foundation scholarship and the 2019 academic award for Excellence in Biology, Welker became president of the HCC Wildlife Society and vice president of HCC's Green Key Honor Society. He was inducted into the Phi Theta Kappa national honor society and graduated from HCC June 1 with high honors and his associate degree in liberal arts and science.

In September, he will attend Yale University in New Haven, an Ivy League school and one of the nation's most prestigious colleges. He attributes that achievement in large part to HCC's Pathways program, which helps low-income and nontraditional students transfer to selective colleges and universities. This spring, students affiliated with HCC's Pathways program have been accepted to Amherst College, Boston University, Commonwealth Honors College at UMass, Cornell University, Mount Holyoke College, Smith College, Swarthmore College, Williams College and many others.

One important lesson Welker learned at HCC: what he had done in high school didn't matter anymore.

"Coming to HCC and applying

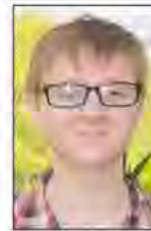
to these four-year schools, they're looking at what I've done here," Welker says. "They're not looking at how I did during a very damaged, lost part of my life. They were looking at me after I put myself together, after I became invested in a community and applied myself. Now they're seeing what I can actually do, which has been a life-saver."

Welker, now 19, grew up in Connecticut and attended Suffield High School, an experience he calls "rough," due partly to the fact that he is transgender and had yet to transition, and partly to his step-father's death during his sophomore year. "I was stressed out, depressed and anxious like a lot of teenagers," he says. Welker missed school. Uncompleted homework piled up. He got sick a lot, but made it through.

After high school, he and his mother moved to Springfield.

"The move and starting at HCC was like turning a page to a new chapter in my life," he says.

In his application to Yale, Welker had to submit a series of essays that he says he wrote, rewrote, shared with others and then rewrote again. One of them asked him to write about his commitment to a community. He wrote



Les Welker

about HCC and his experiences in the Marieb Center, a study area, lounge and computer room for students in HCC's Pathways and New Directions for Adult Learners programs.

"I wrote about how much I value the diversity here at HCC and hearing everybody's different stories," he says. "Everyone's got a different path to getting here. I

think of community college as a kind of crossroads. I really value hearing what roads people have taken to get here."

At Yale, Welker intends to study biology with a focus on urban ecology and ultimately pursue a career in research. "I definitely want to be in a position where I'm always learning new things and doing new things," he says.

After he received his acceptance letter to Yale, Welker wrote a thank-you note to his guidance counselor at Suffield High.

"I got accepted to Yale because you referred me to HCC," he wrote. Welker went on to say that he would be happy to talk to any of her current students about all HCC has to offer.

"The experience has been deeply meaningful to me," Welker says. "I absolutely tell everyone I know to go to HCC."