

HOLYOKE

HCC workshop helps students address mental health

By STAASI HEROPOULOS

Special to The Republican

When Kurt Faustin asked his audience at Holyoke Community College how they were feeling, a chorus of students replied. “Not so great,” they said.

Faustin, a motivational speaker and life coach, was leading an emotional intelligence workshop on Tuesday. One by one, students said they were hurt, stressed, bored, insecure and scared.

Second-year student Leniel Ramos of Westfield said the pressures of school, family and work are forcing him to freeze up.

“We’re here to elevate our students who are the most marginalized, including low-income, first-generation, LGBTQ+ students of color.”

Saúl Cabán, ALANA Men in Motion program

“It catches up to you really fast when you’re trying to do everything at once. It can really stress me out, and it causes an extreme mental block,

and I’m not able to think,” said the psychology major.

The workshop was sponsored by the college’s ALANA Men in Motion program, which focuses on the struggles and challenges facing men of color, said program director Saúl Cabán.

“We’re here to elevate our students who are the most marginalized, including low-income, first-generation, LGBTQ+ students of color,” he said. “All students struggle, but men of color have the hardest time staying in college.”

There are racial gaps in higher education. “The proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with postsecondary

credentials nationwide has been rising, up from 38 percent to 45 percent since 2008 according to the Lumina Foundation, which tracks this,” reads a story from The Hechinger Report, an education-focused news outlet. “But the gap between the proportion of white Americans with degrees and Black Americans with degrees hasn’t narrowed during this period; it’s gotten wider, increasing from 18 percentage points to 20 percentage points.”

Faustin said he is a first-generation Haitian American and was raised in a single-parent household. He believes society is missing the mark by focus-

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Students

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ing only on intellectual development.

“We have so many systems and educational institutions that focus on intellect versus how we feel, and feeling is what’s killing us right now,” he told *The Republican*. “People don’t do what they know. They do what they feel. Emotion drives our activities and the way we behave.”

Faustin advised his audience to examine what’s driving them — whether they are acting out of anger, sadness, fear, desperation or any number of emotions.

“Our body tends to break down, and one of the top reasons people are dying of cardiovascular issues is stress. It all goes hand in hand with emotions and how we feel,” he said. “If you feel like you’re not in the right mental space, talk to a professional, friends or family. Look at your environment, which can trigger you negatively or positively in so many ways.”

While the HCC group hosting the event focuses on men, the workshop was open to the entire HCC community.

“I struggle with my mental health, so stress management and emotional intelligence are huge parts of my life that I really want to develop,” said Tina Lopez, a first-year nursing student.

Lopez, 21, immigrated to

America from Ecuador with her family in 2003 when she was a baby. She says while she is light-skinned, her father has a dark complexion, and she worries about his safety.

“Just going out was stressful because we didn’t know if there was going to be a riot whenever we went out in public,” she said. “I would stand in front of him and be very alert and aware because I was afraid he would get hurt.”

Lopez is clear she understands part of what’s driving her anxiety, which is a critical first step, said Faustin.

“Self-awareness is a huge pillar to emotional intelligence. You have to be aware of and manage your emotional state,” he said.

Cabán was pleased to look around the room and see a racial mix of men and women. While the focus was on men of color, he observes a large number of students grappling with a host of stressors.

“Our students are facing challenges like mental wellness, personal relationships, struggles in their life, family conflicts or their own confidence,” he said. “Being able to get a better understanding of your own, and other people’s emotions, is important to having a healthy dialogue and making sound decisions. This will help you move forward in your life, rather than feeling stuck.”

Faustin said being emotional isn’t a problem but lacking



Kurt Faustin, a motivational speaker and life coach, led an emotional intelligence workshop on Tuesday at Holyoke Community College. (STAASI HEROPOULOS/ SPECIAL TO THE REPUBLICAN)

the ability to self-regulate can be self-destructive.

“I don’t think emotions are bad or good. They’re just signals of where you are,” he said. “It’s the behaviors that are linked to the emotions that allow us to become greater or live less than our expectations and potential.”

Cabán said the workshop was the first in what he hopes will be a series of self-help sessions open to the general public.



Tina Lopez is a first-year nursing student at Holyoke Community College. “Self-awareness is a huge pillar to emotional intelligence,” she says. (STAASI HEROPOULOS/ SPECIAL TO THE REPUBLICAN)

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