Gateway to College program graduates largest class ever

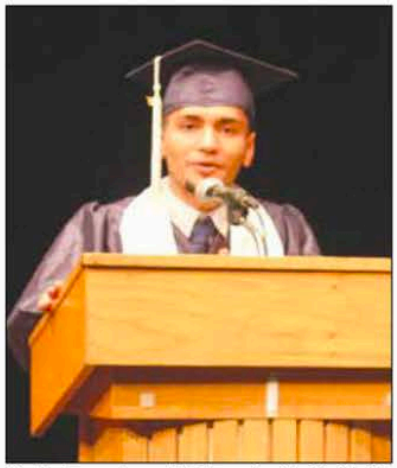
HOLYOKE — Holyoke Community College's award-winning Gateway to College program graduated the largest class in its nine-year history June 6, presenting certificates to 33 high school students who have been taking college courses at HCC.

Those students will now collect their diplomas from eight area high schools: Springfield, Holyoke, Westfield, Palmer, Longmeadow, Agawam, Minnechaug, and Belchertown. Between them the students also amassed a total of 372 transferable college credits, or enough to fulfill the requirements for more than six associate degrees.

"What you achieved is nothing short of miraculous," said Mark Guglielmo, the Gateway fine arts instructor and the keynote speaker for the graduation ceremony in HCC's Leslie Phillips Theater.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS

HCC Gateway to College students shift their tassels from the right side of their caps to the left signifying that they have completed their graduation requirements.



Student speaker J'Anthony Isaiah Smith Sr. of Holyoke talks to his Gateway to College classmates June 6 in HCC's Leslie Phillips Theater.

Gateway to College is a national program that takes high school dropouts or students at risk for dropping out and gives them the opportunity to earn their high school diplomas as dual enrolled college students.

"You gave us a second chance when you didn't have to," said student speaker Deborah Manus, from Holyoke. "This is the beginning of bigger and bigger things."

Guglielmo, a visual artist who was new to HCC this year, told the graduates, their families and guests how impressed he was with Gateway staff and how well the program works.

"The one ingredient that has me coming back is love," he said. "The adults responsible love these young people. It's so simple but so hard for so many."

The HCC Gateway to College program has consistently been one of the best performing Gateway programs in the country, earning top marks for G.P.A., graduation rate and retention rate. For the second year in a row, the program has received the Excellence Award from the national Gateway to College organization.

"Gateway helps to foster success for students," HCC President Christina Royal told the graduates. "Look to your next milestone. Education is about lifelong learning. Consider continuing at HCC."

Many Gateway students do.

Since its founding in 2008, HCC's Gateway to College program has helped 251 students earn their high school diplomas while also getting an early start on college. More than half have continued onto college and so far 30 have earned their associate degrees from HCC and six have earned bachelor's degrees.

Six Gateway to College graduates earned their associate degrees from HCC on May 27.

"What I see in front of me are not the leaders of tomorrow, but the leaders of today," said student speaker J'Anthony Isaiah Smith Sr. of Holyoke. "The country's pretty divided, but there's hope in every single one of you sitting here today."

HCC Gateway to College graduate Eimy Holguin of Springfield was also the valedictorian for the Springfield Public Schools Alternative High School graduation, which was held on June 8.

Among the other Gateway graduates were, from Springfield: Melanie Acevedo, Irelies Colon, Eimy Holguin, Ariana Perez, Ruddy R. Reynoso, Nathalia Rivera, Amanda Serrano, and Alyna Tirado; from Holyoke: Destinee Bailes, Zoe Bickford, Aisha T. Cruz, Julissa Figueroa, Lionel Resto, Hectsy Robles, and Mannix Torres; from Westfield: Serena Boisvere, Elyza Colson, Desiree Morceau, Jordyn Newsome, Jackson Olin, and Marisa Rodriguez; from Palmer: Cora Boudreau, Destiny Champagne, and Aaron Palmer, from Longmeadow: Zackary Center, and Nathan Donnelly; from Agawam: Lindsey Pattenaude; from Belchertown: Kassandra Luna.