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Myriam Quiñones, left, coordinator of Multicultural Academic Services at Holyoke Community College, talks last month at the University of Massachusetts Amherst with 2021 HCC graduate Tugce Kuruca, now a transfer student. Kuruca, a native of Turkey who spoke no English when she arrived in 2016, began at HCC by taking ESL courses, graduated with honors and gave last year's student commencement address.

HOLYOKE

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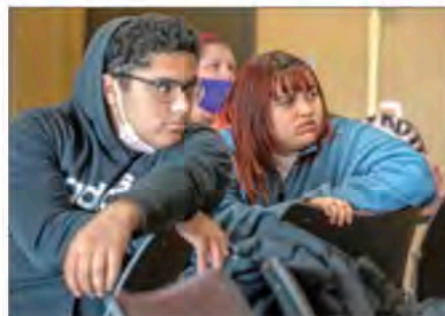
Myriam Quiñones of HCC's Multicultural Academic Services program became the adviser she needed when she started college

By DUSTY CHRISTENSEN  
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HOLYOKE — When Xiomara Rivera first got to Holyoke Community College, she had no idea what to do.

"I didn't know what financial aid was," she said. Nor did she know what classes she needed to take. "I felt a little bit lost," she admitted.

That was until she met Myriam Quiñones, however, the coordinator of HCC's Multicultural Academic Services program. Eating lunch in a



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HCC students Jiovanny Montañez, left, of South Hadley and Xiomara Rivera of Chicopee listen to a presentation for prospective transfer students at UMass last month.

small conference room at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where Quiñones had taken a group of students on a "transfer tour;" Rivera said that Quiñones helped her sort everything out and feel more confident — a sentiment echoed by fellow HCC student Jiovanny Montañez.

"Without her, I would have flopped at STCC," Montañez said, referring to Springfield Technical Community College. But as he was struggling at that college, he got on the phone with Quiñones about transferring to HCC and has been doing well in college since. "Within two hours, I was enrolled at HCC, enrolled in classes and had my financial aid all set up."

For the past 16 years, Quiñones has been ensuring that HCC's students have access to bilin-

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gual services that she wished she had when she first came to the college herself — but this group will be the last she helps herself.

Friday marked the end of an era; it was Quiñones' last day at HCC after 21 years working there. She and her wife — well-known local organizer Jossie Valentin, a former Holyoke city councilor and HCC counselor — are moving back to Puerto Rico.

When somebody first drove Quiñones “from downtown to the hill” where HCC stood, she had only recently arrived from Puerto Rico as a 18-year-old single mother who had dropped out of high school. As someone who had “no intention of going to college,” she said that she too was lost in an unfamiliar institution where she and other Hispanic students felt marginalized. She recalled being in the cafeteria with a group of friends and getting “shut down” by somebody at the college who said they were “too loud.”

“We had a specific corner we'd go to to be as far away as we could,” she said. But that's no longer the case. Sitting in her office Wednesday in the college's “El Centro” area, which houses her Multicultural Academic Services program and other student services, she said she often hears students in the nearby cafeteria speaking loudly and happily, unafraid: “It's very different and it feels good.”

A big reason for that welcoming environment is Quiñones, who has fought for more inclusive policies for students of color, LGBTQ students, those whose first language isn't English and many more ever since being hired as the school's English as a second language program coordinator in 2003.

“We worked together for quite a while trying to serve the urgent needs of our students, particularly those who spoke relatively little English,” said community activist Orlando Isaza, who worked for a time with Quiñones in the ESL program. Isaza, who ended up officiating the wedding of Quiñones and Valentin, said that Quiñones' work was critical for so many students over the years.

“I love Myriam,” she said. “I think she's a great woman and I was very honored to work with her and be at her side.”

Though Holyoke was not her first home, Quiñones em-



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**Myriam Quiñones, coordinator with Multicultural Academic Services at Holyoke Community College, speaks with the Gazette about her time at the college and in Holyoke. She and her partner are returning to their native Puerto Rico to live later this month.**

*“I wish I had somebody who could take me on a transfer tour to UMass like we're doing today ... I wish I had somebody who could open the space for me to do leadership work as a student.”*

**MYRIAM QUIÑONES**, who pioneered multicultural services at HCC

braced the city and became an institution unto herself.

“She's the one who made me really fall in love with the community” of Holyoke, said Valentin, who met Quiñones at HCC. Quiñones was on the search committee for a bilingual counselor position Valentin had applied to. The two became coworkers, and it wasn't long before they moved in together, Quiñones said. They've been together ever since.

“She made me want to get involved, pushed me to say I wanted to run for office,” Valentin said. “She just literally encouraged and supported me every step of the way.”

In 2006, Quiñones was named as the first coordinator of the college's Multicultural Academic Services program, or MAS. She said that for more than a decade she has

been fighting for a fully staffed space that provides culturally responsive services to the many students who, like her, arrived at the college needing to take ESL classes or wanting a comfortable place to turn as a student of color who may be the first in their family to attend college.

“It's finally happening right as I'm leaving,” Quiñones said. “The college has put their money where their mouth is.”

By providing comprehensive services in a department where everyone is required to be bilingual, she said the college is able to do for others what she needed when she was a student. Back then, she said, “it was really difficult to navigate the system that was largely white male-dominated.”

“I wish I had somebody who could take me on a trans-

fer tour to UMass like we're doing today,” Quiñones said Wednesday. She wishes there had been somebody to talk to about applying for grants, and said she would have loved to talk with somebody about joining a club. “I wish I had somebody who could open the space for me to do leadership work as a student,” she said.

So Quiñones became that person for others, following in the path of others who came before her: longtime local educators like Lucy Perez and Edwin Sanchez, for example, who were at HCC when she arrived. Isaza and longtime Enlace de Familias executive director Betty Medina Lichtenstein were her “guardian angels” and “Holyoke parents,” she said.

Quiñones' own parents live in Puerto Rico, as does Valentin's aging father. And when Hurricane Maria devastated the island in 2017, the couple got involved in relief efforts but yearned to do more.

“We realized that was not enough,” Quiñones said. “We were changed people and we felt like we want to be part of this beautiful island again,” was how Valentin put it.

So the couple started making plans. They sold their

home in Holyoke and have laid the groundwork to return to the place both had left so long ago; Quiñones arrived on the U.S. mainland 32 years ago and Valentin 23 years ago.

On Saturday, they depart for Nashville, to spend time with one of their two daughters and their young grandchildren. They would have left earlier, Quiñones said, but wanted to wait until their younger child graduated from college. Though they don't know what they'll do full time in Puerto Rico, they are excited to spend time with family and friends and decide where to put their roots down. Quiñones said it's her dream to start her own tourism business eventually.

Quiñones and Valentin also said they felt at peace leaving Holyoke after the most recent citywide election, which produced the most diverse City Council in the city's history and the first Latino mayor of Holyoke.

“I leave happy,” Quiñones said. “I am so proud of this city that saw me become the professional woman I am today.”

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