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.

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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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ing only on intellectual develop-
ment.
“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,”
hed 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 audi-
ence 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 car-
diovascular issues is stress.
It all goes hand in hand with
emotions and how we feel,”
hed. “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 pos-
itively in so many ways.”

While the HCC group host-
ing the event focuses on men,
the workshop was open to the
entire HGC community.
“I struggle with my mental
health, so stress manage-
ment and emotional intelli-
gen 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 stress-
ful 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 under-
stands part of what’s driving
her anxiety, which is a critical
first step, said Faustin.
“Self-awareness is a huge
pillar to emotional intelli-
gen. You have to be aware
of and manage your emotion-
al state,” he said.

Caban 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 well-
ness, personal relationships,
struggles in their life, family
conflicts or their own con-
dence,” he said. “Being able
to get a better understanding
of your own, and other peo-
ple’s emotions, is important
to having a healthy dialogue
and making sound decisions.
This will help you move for-
ward in your life, rather than
feeling stuck.”

Faustin said being emotion-
al isn’t a problem but lacking
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 emo-
tions that allow us to become
greater or live less than our
expectations and potential.”

Caban 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 Com-
munity College. “Self-awareness is a huge pillar to emotional
intelligence,” she says. (ISTAHER/HEROPOLOS/ SPECIAL TO THE REPUBLICAN)

Kurt Faustin, a motivational
speaker and life coach, led
an emotional intelligence
workshop on Tuesday at
Holyoke Community College.
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