

New HCC student-mentoring program opens campus office

HOLYOKE, MA | **HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE** | April 17, 2019 – People often twist themselves silly trying to invent clever acronyms that are both readable and descriptive. Most attempts fail, leaving the confused masses tripping their tongues over seemingly random associations of letters, like those you might find stuck inside an empty can of alphabet soup.

SHOUTS, though, is a winner, an acronym that works as a powerful verb and an apt summary of the organization it represents – Students Helping Out Students.

This new mentoring group comprises students from two distinct but related Holyoke Community College support programs with their own acronyms: **STRIVE** (Students Together Reaching Individual Visions of Excellence) and **OSDDS** (Office for Students with Disabilities and Deaf Services).

“We’re like guides helping students find the right facilities and services,” says SHOUTS mentor Valeria Flores of Holyoke. “I like helping people.”

Although SHOUTS has been operating since the fall 2018 semester, the group recently celebrated the grand opening of its office on the first floor of the HCC Donahue Building, which it shares with the Assistive Technology Center.

The door is hard to miss, marked on both sides by colorful cartoons – original art courtesy of SHOUTS mentor Nevalle Ward of Springfield – and large letters that visually shout, “Welcome All Students!”

SHOUTS does not have regular hours, but is staffed at least several hours every day by shifts of SHOUTS mentors, who are all volunteers. Students can fill out a short form to be matched with a mentor and set up an appointment, or they can drop by anytime the office is open, and you’ll know it’s open because a string of blue holiday lights will be draped around the door.

“When the blue lights are on, people can just come on in,” says Denise Roy, a STRIVE learning specialist and a SHOUTS adviser. “The mentors will give them any type of support they need.”

SHOUTS started as a mentor club exclusively for STRIVE, an academic support program that serves first-generation, low-income and disabled students.

“But we felt we were missing people,” says Roy, “so that’s when we reached out to

OSDDS. Now it’s both our programs working together to make sure students get the support they need from a student’s perspective.”

Inside the SHOUTS office, books dangle from the ceiling. The walls are awash with bright colors and a time-management clock. A banner proclaims “Good Vibes.”

There are two computer terminals and lots of comfortable chairs. The mentors are trained not just to answer questions but to provide practical and meaningful support, such as helping students log into Moodle (HCC’s internal network), find their grades, upload a video or document for a class, make an appointment with an adviser, or find their way to HCC’s Writing, Math or Tutoring centers.

“They’re not tutors. They’re really navigators,” said Roy. “They all go through training so they understand what their role is, what the special programs are on campus, and how they need to work with students so they make sure they’re directing them to the right place.”

SHOUTS mentors also offer moral support and guidance, as suggested by the preponderance of motivational phrases affixed to the walls, such as:

“Yes, you can.”

“Work hard. Dream big.”

“Change your words, change your mind.”

The decor, Roy said, reflects the students’ vision and ideas. “If one student says to another, you can do it, they’re more likely to believe it,” she said.

Many of the 16 current SHOUTS mentors started as mentees seeking support and guidance. At the open house, Roy singled out SHOUTS mentor Kiara Taylor of South Hadley. “When she first came to the group, she was very shy,” Roy said. “She really wouldn’t say a peep. Now she’s leading campus tours. She’s an NSO (New Student Orientation) leader. She’s talking to tons of students all the time.” Taylor agreed. “This group is actually what helped me establish myself,” she said. Now she’s hoping to do the same for others. “For many, it’s a lifetime connection to the college,” said Roy. “A lot of mentees become mentors, so they pass it on.



SHOUTS-group: SHOUTS mentors welcome visitors during a grand opening of their new HCC campus office March 27