

HOLYOKE

2 times perfect

HCC student graduates with 4.0 GPA in both majors

And to think he once needed a math tutor.

Oscar Vidal Rubio graduated from Holyoke Community College on June 2 with two associate degrees, one in computer programming and the other, naturally, in math. He has a grade point average of 4.0 in each major. If you're counting, that's two times perfect.

On May 23, the 20-year-old Palmer resident received the college's Award for Excellence in Mathematics. That means the faculty chose him as the best math student for the entire academic year.

On top of that, he is a math tutor. He actually has held three math tutoring jobs on campus, with the HCC Math Center, the STRIVE program, and the STEM Scholars Program, to which he himself belongs as the recipient of a National Science Foundation STEM Scholarship.

"I know what it feels like to go into something not knowing anything about it and coming out more than OK," says Rubio. "I came to HCC not really knowing anything, but I'm going out with a lot and I've learned to take advantage of all HCC has to offer."

That includes visiting the Math Center for help with calculus and differential equations. "With the help of tutors," he says, "I was able to succeed in those classes, and now it's my turn to help others."

He's been helping others not just as a tutor but as a mentor for the STEM Scholars Program, providing academic and peer support to his STEM classmates and outreach to



Oscar Vidal Rubio of Palmer, a graduate of Chicopee Comprehensive High School, one of a handful of outstanding graduating students for Holyoke Community College's Profiles of Excellence.

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area high schools, encouraging younger students to pursue fields in STEM - science, technology, engineering and math.

He didn't intend to study math in college. For four years, he was part of the information technology and networking vocational program at Chicopee Comprehensive High School. He knew about hardware but wanted to study computer science - programming - and applied to the Uni-

versity of Massachusetts at Amherst. He got into UMass but not into the program.

"They wanted me to take some extra classes and come as a different major," he says, "so I figured HCC would be the best option for me - I could see what computer science was like and if I was going to like it. Plus, it was much cheaper."

In the beginning, he struggled with programming but

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kept at it, adding math classes – and then a math major – as he came to understand how they related, especially at more advanced levels.

For instance, this spring, in his Java II programming class, he worked on a project testing the efficiency of data structures, dealing with common concepts such as graphs and lists and more esoteric things

called cues, heaps, and binary trees.

“It’s not as exciting as it sounds,” he says. “It’s purely mathematical, but it can be applied to real-world situations.”

And for a final project in discrete mathematics he examined different algorithms and ran them on computers to “show them off.”

As Rubio progressed, and the A’s kept coming, he never took his grades for granted. Originally from Peru, he settled in Western Massachuset

ts with his family when he was 6 years old.

“It’s the same old American dream story, I guess,” he says. “I know the troubles that people have, whether it’s finances, not enough support, whatever it may be that doesn’t allow them to continue with their education. Being here and being able to keep going and trying to help people – it’s what drives me. And I’ll always be thankful for what HCC has done by giving me this opportunity to keep

going.”

And he will keep going. In the fall, Rubio is off to UMass to study computer science.

Beyond that, he says, he originally toyed with the idea of one day working for Google as a software engineer and app developer. Lately, though, he’s been leaning toward developing educational software tools to help people learn subjects such as physics, computer science, and especially math. He’s already been talking about such a project

with his girlfriend, Maija Lee Orlovsky Nagels, one of his principal inspirations, study partners and role models.

Nagels graduated from HCC in 2017 with associate degrees in three majors, business, liberal arts and math, and she had a GPA of 4.0 in two of them as well. She’s now at UMass, studying astrophysics. They met in math class at HCC.

“I always go to her for advice,” Rubio says.

Who could blame him?