Wellness on Campus: GCC Takes Care of the Whole Student, with Your Support

Did you know that in addition to the Greenfield Savings Bank Math Studio, the Sandri Science Studio, and the Humanities Studio, GCC has a Wellness Studio? Perched above the library, on the fourth floor of the Core, students can use the studio as a quiet, restful space that encourages mindfulness and provides solitude away from the intense pace of college life. Visitors will find yoga mats, blocks, blankets, meditation cushions, relaxation CDs, a zen garden and more.

“Many of our students live complex lives. They need a place where they can just be and check in with themselves. It’s a place to stop, breathe and practice mindfulness,” explains Kathleen Keough, Learning Support Counselor.

The studio is part of GCC’s Morton A. Slavin Wellness Center, also home to the Office of Disability Services and the Office of Counseling Services, which was created through the generosity of the family of GCC founder and long-time supporter Mort Slavin.

Disability Services supports students living with disabilities such as cerebral palsy, learning disabilities, ADHD, mental illness, low vision/blindness, deafness and traumatic brain injury. Colleen Caffery, Coordinator of Disability Services, works with each student one-on-one to remove obstacles that could keep them from fully participating in their education.

“We have a special responsibility to make sure student need for access is met.”
Colleen Caffery
Coordinator of Disability Services

“Especially for new students to the college, in their first semester they often feel like they are taking a whole extra class called learning how to be a college student. So we help them adjust their course loads or access support and accommodations, so they can be successful,” says Colleen.

That might mean assistive technologies (demonstrated by one of the Center’s helpful work study students), testing accommodations (more time or an environment with fewer distractions), coordination with faculty to ensure classroom learning is accessible, or short-term counseling to address anxiety. Students who need help with study strategies are connected with Peer Tutoring or with Cindy Kunz, Learning Specialist. “Cindy is phenomenal at helping students break down tasks and get organized,” says Colleen. “After just three or four meetings they are off and running.”

“Because of GCC’s open access policy, we see more students with challenges here than at colleges with greater or different entrance requirements,” Colleen explains. “Some of these students were treated in high school like they were not ‘college material.’ For some, if there were not a community college here, they would not be going to college. Some thought, ‘Maybe I’m not good enough. I don’t have what it takes.’ But with the right accommodations, they find out they really do. We have a special responsibility to make sure their need for access is met.”

Morton A. Slavin Wellness Center staff, l to r:
Carol Leary, Administrative Assistant;
Colleen Caffery, Coordinator of Disability Services;
Cindy Kunz, Learning Specialist;
Kathleen Keough, Learning Support Counselor
Increasing student success one student at a time

Yves Salomon-Fernández, Ph.D.
President, Greenfield Community College

Last month, the American Council on Education (ACE) released a study revealing that 72% of college and university presidents allocated more resources to address student mental health issues in the last fiscal year than in the prior three years. The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors previously identified anxiety and depression as the leading causes for student visits. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 11% of all undergraduate students have a disability of some type.

At GCC, we did not need these surveys to inform us of the increasing challenges our students face every day. Non-academic issues remain the biggest barriers to student success.

An all-around healthy student is able to effectively tackle the rigors of academic life. The World Health Organization defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.” It goes further to add that "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

Increasing capacity in GCC’s Morton A. Slavin Student Wellness Center (see cover article, Wellness on Campus) was among the first investments that we made last year, at the beginning of my tenure. With increasing income disparity, increasing cost of living, and a range of personal and family factors, it is not surprising that many students struggle. Mental and physical health challenges, along with learning disabilities, affect students across the age and ability spectrum. Some of our best students are able to utilize accommodations and GCC support services to help them address these concerns on their way to achieving their best potential for themselves as students, and often for their families also.

At GCC, we serve a range of students—from those who are able to afford private health care to those for whom we care directly. Others, we refer to specialists in our community. At times, the wait to see a specialist within their financial means can interfere with students’ ability to successfully complete a course or semester. Our Wellness Center coordinators are committed to caring for the whole student.

Adopting a holistic wellness approach has been key to responding to the range of students’ needs and to increasing student success one student at a time.

We thank you for the many ways that you support student success at GCC.

With appreciation,

Yves Salomon-Fernández, Ph.D.
President, Greenfield Community College

An all-around healthy student is able to effectively tackle the rigors of academic life.

You’re Invited

Join us on Monday, November 18 at Building Blocks for a Resilient Community, a celebration at the GCC Foundation annual gathering with panel discussion hosted by the Valley’s own Monte Belmonte! This special event will feature Katie Allan Zobel, President and CEO of the Community Foundation of Western MA, and Lily Mendez, President and CEO of Mass Mentoring Partnership. Come celebrate with other friends of GCC and learn more about how your community college is building and sustaining innovative communities.

Registration at: gcc.mass.edu/foundation/nov18
“I’ve been interested in the well-being of young people for many years. I’ve been a school teacher, volunteered with Big Brothers/Big Sisters and served as a guardian ad litem, representing abused and neglected children in the court system. I got particularly interested in what happens to those who spend their lives in the foster care system and then age out without parents or other adults to help them. A lot of them end up homeless and in trouble.

After working in the Albany area, Boston, and Asheville, NC, I moved to Northampton and serendipitously was introduced to Regina Curtis [Executive Director of the GCC Foundation]. At that time, I’d been reading about what young people need to succeed in college. It turns out the answer is supportive, engaged adults and also money. Students need money to eat, rent a place to live and get to school. It all impacts their academic success.

From my work in the courts, I know that ages 18 to 24 are exciting but tough years in a person’s life. You want your independence, but you also need reliable adults. When you don’t have a home or family support system, making life work is even tougher. So, I told Regina that I want to underwrite GCC students who need that kind of support, especially students who are homeless.

For several years now, I’ve been donating a monthly stipend to a student selected by GCC. The College has an investment in each of them, which adds a layer of support from responsible adults, and helps them use the money wisely to foster their own success.

I want to encourage others to make this kind of donation too. The amount is not that much for me, but it’s a tremendous amount for a young student who doesn’t have a home or family invested in them. It’s practical support that does a lot of good, and there are students at the College who need it.

I have total trust in GCC to identify students who will really benefit, and I’m so impressed with the students. What they go through to stay in college and try to make something of themselves—it’s very inspiring. And, it is up to the students how they use the money. A gift is only a gift if it comes without obligation, and if the receiver is treated with dignity. GCC is committed to helping their students succeed on their own terms, and I’m happy I can contribute in this way.”

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You Did It!

Thank you for supporting last spring’s annual fund drive. Together, we exceeded our fundraising goal of $1 million by almost 10 percent, for a total of $1,094,237. That’s over $1 million contributed by alums, parents, current and retired faculty and staff, foundations and businesses from Franklin and Hampshire counties, the North Quabbin, and southern Vermont and New Hampshire—all to make sure that a GCC education is accessible to everyone.

“With college becoming increasingly elusive for so many because of cost, we are beyond grateful to our community for prioritizing equity in access to higher education.”

Yves Salomon-Fernández, Ph.D.
President, Greenfield Community College

Special thanks goes to our dedicated corps of campaign volunteers and to our campaign co-chairs, Lindsay Stromgren ’95, Assistant Fire Chief of Amherst and Amy McMaham, owner of Mesa Verde in Greenfield, for leading the way.

Your gifts help students access tuition, textbooks, GCC programs, services like tutoring and counseling, and practical support like our food pantry and student emergency fund.
New Student Trustee

Dorinessy Orphee Meledje

On July 31st, GCC officially welcomed its new Student Trustee, Dorinessy Orphee Meledje. Meledje was sworn into her new role by Governor Charlie Baker in a ceremony at the State House in Boston, with State Representatives Mindy Domb and Natalie Blais and GCC President Yves Salomon-Fernández in attendance.

Originally from the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire in West Africa, Orphee came to GCC in Fall 2017 and now studies Criminal Justice, with plans to transfer for her B.A. in International Relations.

“I plan to attend one of the best law schools, such as Harvard, Yale or Notre Dame, and to better represent both the Ivory Coast and the United States, the country that is giving me the opportunity to reach my goals,” she says.

Orphee enjoys being an active member of the GCC community, and as Student Trustee she will connect with GCC’s diversity of student voices and relay student views and concerns to the Trustees. She plans to keep students at the heart of her service to GCC.

“I believe in student equality. I believe in my will and drive for leadership, and mostly in women’s leadership. I believe in creating and maintaining opportunities for students to allow them to build on their passions and skills for greater futures.”

Finding the Drive to Learn

Sherriff Mark Anderson ’07

With your support, GCC is helping today’s generation develop the professional skills they need to lead their communities into the future.

Mark Anderson ’07 knew early on how he wanted to serve his community. “My senior year of high school, in 2004, I took a law enforcement class that was taught by staff from the Windham County, Vermont, Sheriff’s office,” he says. “Right away I fell in love with law enforcement. I knew that’s what I wanted to do.”

From high school he went directly into the police academy, and then to a job in the Sheriff’s office, and also enlisted in the National Guard. Fast forward 15 years, and Mark was just named Sherriff of Windham County, VT, his home community. Between then and now, it wasn’t always clear how college was going to fit into his picture.

“Coming out of high school, I knew I wasn’t prepared to be a college student. I didn’t think I had the drive or maturity, and I was glad to go straight to work. As I learned more about my field, though, I found a real passion for the business side of running a government organization. I saw that the Business program at GCC could help me progress in my career.”

With the tuition and waiver program provided by the National Guard, Mark came to GCC in 2005 and matriculated into the Business Administration Transfer program in 2006.

Mark graduated from GCC in 2007 and went on to obtain a bachelor’s degree in business administration in management from UMass Amherst.

“I’m very grateful that I did the first two years at GCC. It gave me good study habits, and class sizes were small enough that if you hit a roadblock or were struggling with a difficult concept there was always someone who could help you get through it.”

Mark especially remembers the support of Norman Beebe from the College’s Peer Tutoring Program and other faculty and staff who helped during his time at GCC, such as Kathy Vranos, Thom Simmons and Jeff Galbraith from the Business Department. He recalls Galbraith as a “wonderful human being” whose Principles of Management course taught him real-world applications of accounting from a managerial standpoint. One particularly engaging Science Department course on alternative energies with Teresa Jones helped him to understand science in a practical way.

“Courses like those helped me develop the passion to engage in the course material. When you have teachers that care deeply about the work and the assignments, it really drives the energy to learn.”

Mark says GCC helped give him the foundation he needed for both day-to-day management of the Sheriff’s office and for big picture thinking about his community.

“My studies helped me grasp the finance side of our whole economy, which is important for understanding how communities operate and for predicting future needs. This is important in policing, so that we can develop services that are sustainable and that treat our community fairly.

Mark says he is honored to be chosen as the new Sherriff of Windham County. His goals include making access to law enforcement and emergency services simpler, using technology to improve the civil process, and helping to organize regional efforts to fight the opioid epidemic. He still serves in the Barnes Air National Guard and is on the Board of INSPIRE for Autism, a non-profit school for students with autism.
In the Counseling Services Office, Kathleen addresses the stress and conflicts that may distract students from achieving their full potential, offering supportive short-term counseling and, when needed, helping students coordinate with outpatient behavioral health resources in the community so they can get the help they need.

“We see positive change all the time,” she says, “We offer support to students in distress and help them access supports at the college or in the community so they can address whatever is getting in the way of their academic success. For many, that’s all it takes for them to move forward.

Prior to the creation of the Wellness Center, Disability and Counseling Services staff had worried that their department names didn’t fully fit their mission. They were concerned about the stigmas attached to disability and mental health and worried that students were being deterred from seeking help. They were also trying to serve students in a sterile and cramped set of offices that didn’t feel welcoming. They knew that their broader mission was to work to reduce stigma and to address student well-being more holistically, so they advocated for a name change and an office “makeover.”

With the generosity of the Slavin Family, the space was renovated and the new Wellness Center was dedicated in 2018. The updated space has a welcoming reception area, where Administrative Assistant Carol Leary makes everyone feel at ease. There are separate offices for Counseling, Disability Services, and Learning Specialist support. The Wellness Studio is accessible at the front of the suite, where students can step in and out as needed. The walls are painted in soothing blues, greens and yellows and hung with intriguing pieces of student art. It’s now an inviting space, conducive to a sense of calm.

“It’s been working,” says Kathleen. “We’re seeing more students as word is spreading that this is a good place to come for assistance, support or just some time alone.” Counseling Services served over 200 students this past academic year, and Disability Services served 392 students – up about 10%.

Outreach to students has become an increasingly important part of the mission to reduce stigma and normalize conversation about mental health issues. Each month the Center conducts outreach around campus or presents workshops on mental health, recovery, eating disorders, self-care and other issues—often in collaboration with local community health organizations. As Kathleen shares, “The world has become much more complex. Nationally, we know that student suicide rates are going up. Research has shown that anxiety and depression are the number one mental health challenges reported by college students. Alcohol and drug abuse, eating disorders and post-traumatic stress disorder are also reported. As stigma around issues related to mental health decrease, students become able to share their challenges more openly, and therefore can better access the help and supports they need to thrive.

“I think I have the best job on campus,” smiles Colleen. “What could be more rewarding than helping students get what they need to succeed?”

Thanks to GCC Foundation donors—the Slavin Family and all our contributors—support services are available to GCC students when they need them most.

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Did you attend GCC? Membership is free! Connect with other alums, and stay up to date on alumni and college events. Join now at www.gcc.mass.edu/alumni

Come home to GCC!
ALUMNI REUNION, November 1 & 2, 2019
Catch up with fellow classmates and enjoy free appetizers at Taylor’s Tavern in Greenfield. Cash bar available.
Stay for the family-friendly alumni breakfast the next day!
For more details and to RSVP: www.gcc.mass.edu/alumni/reunion/

How You Can Help
Please use the enclosed envelope or the “give” section of our website to make a gift to support GCC students and the programs described in this newsletter.

Or, if you’re interested in learning more about hosting an event to benefit the GCC Foundation, please contact Regina Curtis, Executive Director, at CurtisR@gcc.mass.edu

If you’d prefer to share your time and talent as volunteer, we would love to put you in touch with volunteer opportunities at GCC. Please email foundation@gcc.mass.edu

Ways to give
• Donate online at gcc.mass.edu/give
• Send a check to the GCC Foundation
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  Greenfield, MA 01301
• Contact us at 413-775-1600