Macaulay Honors College Introduces Mental Health Program

From an in-house therapist to meditation to group sessions, Dr. Mike Lamb discusses plans for the over and underserved.

In an educational climate in which high-achieving students often find themselves vulnerable to stress, depression, anxiety, and more, Macaulay Honors College students have reaped good fortune.

The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust has made a hugely generous donation of $817,950 "to build an innovative model of comprehensive mental health delivery" for Macaulay College students, according to a press release posted on CUNY's official website about two months ago. While also intended to bolster Macaulay's Opportunities Fund, the grant's primary purpose is to recognize "that the emotional well being of [Macaulay Honors College] students is necessary for their peak performance, both as students and as leaders." Notably, the press release acknowledges that although mental health issues can negatively impact student success, treatment for such issues is often inaccessible to students in the honors community, who of underserved populations.

5 Tips to Stay Mission Ready
As an honors student living with mental illness who has also witnessed the detrimental effects of academic rigor and other stressors on my fellow students, I was intrigued when I read the press release, which had not been brought to my attention prior. Curious about how the Macaulay Wellness Program was developing (or not), I contacted Interim Dean Mary Pearl enthusiastically redirected me to Dr. Mike Lamb, Associate Director of Immersive and Personalized Education at Macaulay. In addition to spearheading the wellness program, Dr. Lamb was a proposed to the Kenan Trust. The proposal he wrote up was for "a holistic model within this college where we build the capacity to dissolve some of this competition, anxiety, stress—same time generating love, support, kindness, and mutual aid."

The proposal was successful, as the trust granted the above sum to the college for the purpose of establishing this very holistic model. And already, big plans are in the works: in addition to weekly meditation sessions and silent retreats for students across campuses every few months (beginning this summer), the college intends to hire a full-time therapist, along with two doctoral students under said therapist's supervision, by the fall. Other plans include forming groups to meet on certain subjects (such as eating disorders, addiction, and relationships), along with holding events about care, love, and the connection of those two concepts to political and social activism…and some will just be about reducing stigma." He went on, "I see deep connections between the personal struggle for inner liberation and the outside struggle for liberation. It must be my environmental psychology background—I would sort of blur the distinction between those two."}

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A graduate of the environmental psychology program at the CUNY Graduate Center, Dr. Lamb has worked with Kenan Scholars at Macaulay for several years. It didn't take long for him to see what enormous stress that these students were under. "When I came here, I didn’t understand the extent to which my work would be dealing with significant emotional health stuff. I didn’t understand how much of my work was going to be helping people unlearn all of the terrible things that they’ve been taught to feel about themselves."

He went on: "I think we raise really stressed-out people who are told their peers are in fact their competitors, who are told that you are interesting or good or worthy depending on achieved in the world and what outside validating sources tell you are. That your entire value is based on these things that you did or these prizes that you won, and I just find that and so problematic." Much of his philosophy is centered around empowering students and giving them space to grow—a philosophy that he has carried over to the Macaulay Wellness Program, which proposed to the Kenan Trust. The proposal he wrote up was for "a holistic model within this college where we build the capacity to dissolve some of this competition, anxiety, stress—same time generating love, support, kindness, and mutual aid."

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Assisting Dr. Lamb in the program's development are mental health professionals from different CUNY campuses—particularly Dr. Barbara Moore, Director of Counseling Services at Queens College—as well as Associate Director of Student Development Andrew Adair, student scholars, members of the Macaulay Psychology Club, and other faculty, staff, and students offer to join in on the planning is still very much open. The program, he says, is "a living thing that belongs to the students—it doesn’t belong to me. Let’s co-create something together."

While the donation from the Kenan Charitable Trust is obviously a very generous one that will get the Macaulay Wellness Program off the ground and running, it is Dr. Lamb's hope that with more support, the program will thrive as an initiative by and for honors students coping with mental and emotional stress. In order for this to be accomplished, students should raise awareness and eliminate the stigma surrounding mental illness.

Dr. Lamb is very cognizant of this stigma, as well as how it often affects students from first-generation families in particular and creates barriers to treatment. To combat this, he is student-guided "events about care, love, and the connection of those two concepts to political and social activism…and some will just be about reducing stigma." He went on, "I see connections between the personal struggle for inner liberation and the outside struggle for liberation. It must be my environmental psychology background—I would sort of blur the distinction between those two."

Mary Corliss Pearl

Thanks for shining a light on this important program, Sam Dauer!

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Mental Health Awareness Month 2016

On April 25, I attended a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training session hosted by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH). Although the...
Sam Dauer

On the afternoon of Nov. 17, 2015, Dean Ann Kirschner (former dean as of just this week) of CUNY’s Macaulay Honors College sent out a mass email... read more