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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.



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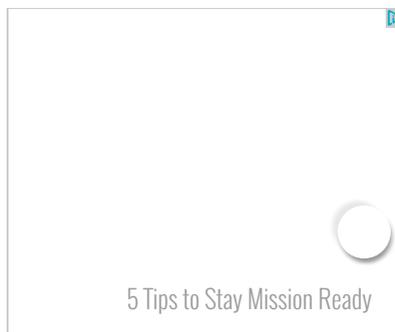
Sam Dauer

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In an educational climate in which high-achieving students often find themselves vulnerable to stress, depression, anxiety, and more, Macaulay Honors College students have received 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 Honors 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 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 are underserved populations.



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 P. She enthusiastically redirected me to Dr. Mike Lamb, Associative Director of Immersive and Personalized Education at Macaulay. In addition to spearheading the wellness program, Dr. Lamb is also the scholars program sponsored by the Kenan Trust. I sat down with him for about an hour at Macaulay Honors College last Thursday, April 7, and our conversation was as enlightening and promising.

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 understand 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 what you've achieved in the world and what outside validating sources tell you 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 so problematic."

Much of Dr. Lamb's work at Macaulay thus far has focused on revamping the original Kenan Scholars Program to make it more focused on giving students the resources to pursue their interests and passions. "When I arrived here," he said, "the program sort of treated students like absorbent material, like, 'Your leadership training will be sitting in a room, listening to some speaker on leadership'—usually this someone would be white, usually this someone would be male, usually this someone would be much older."

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 he 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, and 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 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 doctors 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 how to 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 launching 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 the 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 that between those two."



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 College—along with Associate Director of Student Development Andrew Adair, student scholars, members of the Macaulay Psychology Club, and other faculty, staff, and students who 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 ongoing fundraising, 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 speak up, raise awareness, and get involved—whether that consists of joining the planning committee or simply sitting in on an event.

On a personal level, I believe that providing accessible mental health resources to Macaulay students is long overdue, and I look forward to seeing how the program takes shape. My hope is that, in terms of mental illness on college campuses, and CUNY students are at a unique disadvantage due to our highly limited resources. As honors students within the CUNY system, we have an opportunity to foster our own wellbeing—and hopefully, through empowerment and advocacy, fight for the wellbeing of the ailing CUNY community at large.

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Mary Corliss Pearl

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

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