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George Timmons speaks after his installation as the fifth president of Holyoke Community College during an inauguration ceremony Friday in Holyoke. Timmons is the first African American man to hold the position.

New HCC president reflects on journey

At official inauguration, Timmons sees his own struggles and arc in students' paths

By **ALEXANDER MACDOUGALL**
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HOLYOKE — George Timmons knows just how much a difference a college president can make in a student's life.

As a senior at Norfolk State University, a historically black university in Virginia, Timmons faced the possibility of not being able to graduate because he had run out of financial aid. But after hearing of his dilemma, the president of the college, Harrison B. Wilson, agreed to fund the entirety of Timmons' final year of college via a discretionary fund.

"I was able to finish what I had started, and it was just the beginning," Timmons recalled. "Mindset, hard work, and people believing in you almost more than you believe in yourself ... I believe these are the keys to finding our unique purpose."

Timmons told this story in front of a packed audience of more than 300 people during his formal inauguration as the new



Timmons receives a hug from a colleague after his installation as the fifth president of Holyoke Community College.

president of Holyoke Community College. He's been serving in the role since last April, when he was offered and accepted the position.

Many of those attending the inauguration wore green bow ties, the school color and Timmons' signature neckwear of choice. Just the fifth president in the community college's 60-year history, Timmons is the first African American man to hold the position.

The assumption of the position of president represents a coming home of sorts for Timmons, who was raised nearby in the Connecticut city of Hartford and now lives in Amherst. In his inaugural address, he described growing up in an environment where no one went to college, in a neighborhood where drug deals were the norm and family members battled substance abuse.

Though Timmons was a self-admitted average student, he said he had been inspired by his grandmother to appreciate the value of education and a strong work ethic. After completing his bachelor's degree at Norfolk State, he earned a master's degree in higher

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education from Old Dominion University, followed by a Ph.D. in higher education administration from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Before becoming the president of HCC, he served as provost and vice president for Columbia-Greene Community College in New York.

"I'll be honest, sometimes I pinch myself," Timmons said. "The tremendous responsibility of this role, of leading this institution, is not lost on me. I believe the answer to how I got here is the same collection of qualities that have led to the success of thousands of Holyoke Community College students."

Timmons takes over from Christina Royal, who led the school from 2016 to 2023, and had been part of a group of four finalists for the position before being selected. Barney Garcia, a senior at the college and who serves as a student representative for the school's board of trustees, participated in the interview process for the finalists and provided feedback to the school's search committee.

"He checked off all the boxes on what, to me, makes someone a great leader," Garcia said. "It is true that basic leadership is about commanding authority and being able to lead. But if you ask me, where true leaders go above and beyond is when they're able to tap into everyone's inner leader, helping them harness their inner potential to be their best selves."

Beyond leadership qualities, Garcia said he related to Timmons on a personal level, having also been raised by his



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New Holyoke Community College President George Timmons, center, shares a laugh at his inauguration Friday with Vanessa Smith, interim chair of the board of trustees, and Patrick Tutwiler, Massachusetts secretary of education.

grandparents who prioritized education, and from Timmons he learned over the past year how to be a more effective leader in his own right.

"It wasn't until I met Dr. Timmons, someone who was so unapologetically himself, that I felt empowered to break that barrier and be unapologetically myself," Garcia said. "Along the way, we formed a strong bond based upon our shared passions and upbringings. As I say to all the special people in my life, I'm thankful for being able to know this man."

Timmons' inauguration was attended by several state, city and higher education officials who offered their own words of congratulations.

"You have taken on the best job in the world. It's also the most difficult job. In fact, it's a

lot like my job," joked Holyoke Mayor Josh Garcia. "I think we both have the power and even the responsibility to change lives. Your job is to chart the course for the HCC community, just as much as my job is to chart the course for the city."

Patrick Tutwiler, the Massachusetts secretary of education, also spoke during the inauguration, and like many attending the event, also sported a bow tie in honor of Timmons.

"It is said that the bow tie represents confidence, individuality, and creativity," Tutwiler said. "In donning the bow tie frequently, as he does, President Timmons is sending a message. In my view, it is a small but not insignificant window into the type of leader he is and some of the wonderful qualities he will bring to this

role."

Tutwiler also noted that the current administration of Gov. Maura Healey is working to improve the state's community colleges, such as by backing the MassConnect program to provide free community college for people over 25 with no degree, and also working to improve food security and mental health services on campus.

"Students cannot focus if their own hierarchy of needs is not met, if they are hungry, if they don't have stable housing, or if they cannot find child care or affordable transportation," Tutwiler said. "I know that President Timmons is also focused on helping students overcome their barriers to success."

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