

HCC's new president looking forward to first year on campus

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HOLYOKE — Less than a month after taking the job of president, George Timmons spoke with Reminder Publishing about his goals and ambitions for Holyoke Community College as he gears up for the new school year.

On July 17, Timmons succeeded Christina Royal, who stepped down this summer after 6½ years in the role of president. Before taking the job, Timmons was provost and senior vice president of academic and student affairs at Columbia Greene Community College in Hudson, New York.

Timmons, 61, holds a doctoral degree in higher education administration from Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Timmons told Reminder Publishing as a young man he went into finance as an undergraduate with aspirations of working on Wall Street before he ever entered the field of education.

"I was raised by my grandmother and one of the things that at an early age was instilled with me was the importance of education. The importance that once you have it, it cannot be taken away from you and that those rights and privileges that come with having an education are yours," Timmons shared.

After some time in the private sector, Timmons realized he was not motivated or feeling fulfilled from the career, so he went to a career counseling session. There it emerged that his affinity for his time as an undergrad and his involvement in extra curricular activities led to his counselor suggesting he try and work on a college campus.

"I had kind of an epiphany and that was kind of the start of my quest to say, 'hey, maybe you can have a career and find it fulfilling and maybe help other students,'" Timmons added. "It's been almost over a 25-year journey in this space, and I can't be happier. To be able to pay it forward and give students access to education and access to at least a middle-class lifestyle or better, I feel good at the end of the day doing all that I can to help achieve those goals."

When Timmons first heard of the opening, he became excited, as he said he was not chasing a title but somewhere where his skill set could add value, and that he aligned with through his values. He felt like working for HCC was a great opportunity, and somewhat of a homecoming for him, as he grew up in Greater Hartford, and his late mother lived in Springfield for 35 years.

"I felt a calling to serve. I felt like it was a place that I could relate to the



George Timmons, who took office in July as president of Holyoke Community College, speaks at a meeting with HCC faculty and staff in April. (SUBMITTED / HCC)

student body. Their story is my story. When you think about the HCC student profile, 48% are first generation [to attend college], a sizable number of students of color, coming from a lower socio-economic background, that was me 35 years ago," Timmons said. "This whole notion of paying it back to the students who were once like me, I felt a real connection to this institution. Both from a professional and personal perspective, this was a good opportunity at

the right time."

Timmons added, "When you see people like you in high positions, you are more likely to believe that is something you can achieve. So, I feel if I can be a role model, and as I interact and talk to students, let them know that what you see today — and although I'm still a work in progress — it's not where I started. It's not where you start but where you finish, and that if I can do it, you can do it. I think it's important for them to see what can happen when you put in hard work, have really good mentors and persevere through the challenges what the possibilities are."

Timmons said he was fortunate enough to have a normal transition period with Royal leading up to his first day and added he could not express enough "how appreciative and how foundational" the time was for him to learn about the institution and the region.

He added his time spent with Royal led to a good education on the foundations of HCC and also some of the new foundations Royal built, in terms of accessibility for students getting an education.

"I got a good understanding of what I was inheriting and building on the great work and the foundation that her and her team and the HCC community has done to date, which is this invaluable hearing

that work and story and commitment to this organization and learning how important HCC is not only to Holyoke, but to this region in Western Mass., and that came across loud and clear," he said.

Looking forward to the 2023-24 school year, Timmons said his initial goals are really taking the time to get used to and learn the area as he immerses himself in the community.

"I think for me the best thing I can do is listen and hear the various stakeholders in our community as well and as I listen, look at ways we can advance the mission, the vision and the values of this organization," Timmons said.

Timmons said when reflecting on why he's in education, he is reminded that he wants to be a part of inspiring and connecting people.

"As an institution, we aspire to be known for quality academic excellence and wanting to remove barriers to student success so that everybody who comes to our doors has an opportunity to achieve their academic and career goals, and then to really live in our values in order to do that work in a way that is kind and inclusive. And obviously at the foundation of all that is trust. If we can carry out our mission and strive toward our vision, I think that we would be moving in an excellent direction."