

HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

# College bids farewell to an ‘all-star’

Christina Royal reflects on legacy as she leaves president position

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Staff Writer

HOLYOKE — For Christina Royal, the power to help students realize their full potential is just like magic.

In front of a group of former graduates, state dignitaries and city officials gathered at Holyoke Community College last week to bid Royal farewell as Holyoke Community College president, she described how as a child she had bought a magic set at the Salvation Army, bedazzling her friends with card tricks and other illusions.

“I felt there was a very important lesson in learning magic — it was an understanding and belief that the

mind was so powerful, it could make you believe or not believe anything, including yourself,” she said. “Helping students to embody a growth mindset and realize the potential within them is what HCC does best.”

More than 200 people showed up to HCC’s Campus Center on May 3 for the sendoff for Royal, who is stepping down as the school’s president. The event included a large Lite Brite display and servings of bacon-wrapped scallops, beef empanadas and vegan meatballs. Many who attended stood in line to have their picture taken with Royal.

Royal made history when she was first appointed as HCC president in 2017, becoming the first woman of

color to lead the college. Since then, she has stood out as a leader in the state for promoting diversity and equity in higher education, launching programs such as a partnership with the Holyoke Housing Authority and Westfield State University to support low-cost housing for students, the creation of a student emergency fund that students can apply if they need a sudden expense that keeps them from learning, and the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch, which looks after children of students so that they can attend classes.

Notable guests included Holyoke Mayor Josh Garcia, Holyoke Director



STAFF PHOTO/DAN LITTLE

**Departing Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal, middle, poses for photos with guests during a sendoff party in her honor Wednesday at the HCC Campus Center.**

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# HCC president says farewell

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of Planning & Economic Development Aaron Vega, state Reps. Mindy Domb and Patricia Duffy, Massachusetts Department of Higher Education Commissioner Noe Ortega and state Sen. John Velis.

"Everybody wants her on their board," said Robert Gilbert, the HCC board of trustees chair. "She changed the culture, she changed the way we care about students."

In recognition of her work in education, Royal was tapped to serve on one of Gov. Maura Healey's transition committees, to form concrete policies to address education and equity concerns for the new administration.

"She's left a legacy behind on a number of things the state finds important," said Ortega in an interview. "She's not only promoted racial equity, but the entire intersectionality of that with gender and sexual identity as well."

Part of Healey's resulting platform on higher education has been the proposal of Mass-Reconnect, a program in the state that would make community college free for adults over 25 who don't have a degree.

"I think that is going to continue to grow in awareness about the amazing work that happens at community colleges, and also that the majority of our students choose to stay here," Royal said of the MassReconnect program. "They contribute to the economy, they assume leadership positions, and so in many respects we are an engine for fueling the community."

The event concluded with several speeches made by attendees. Speaking on behalf of the mayor and the city of Holyoke, Vega told those gathered that Royal made true the "community" aspect of community college.

"She's passionate about the community that she works and lives in, and that's been a huge asset for us," he said. "She went beyond being just the president."



STAFF PHOTOS/DAN LITTLE

Departing Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal embraces Linda Desmarais at a sendoff party.



State Reps. Patricia Duffy, front, and Mindy Domb, add colored pegs to a large Lite Brite display during a sendoff party in her honor of Christina Royal.

Velis told the crowd he remembered the first time he met with Royal, recalling leaving that meeting convinced she was an "all-star."

"That first impression stuck with me as someone who's passionate, compassionate, empathetic and cares," he said. "I know with absolute certainty that this isn't the end of [her] story. This is like a comma, or a semicolon."

Royal will be succeeded as HCC president by George Timmons, who was named to the position last month. The former provost and senior vice president of academic and student affairs at Columbia Greene Community College in Hudson, New York, Timmons will start his new position during the last week of June.

In an interview with the Gazette, Royal said that she would help support Timmons

as he transitions to the presidency.

"My advice is to just recognize all these things that HCC is doing and capable of doing, to continue to build upon our strategic plan and our priorities," she said. "At some point, you have to pass the baton to someone else, and I look forward to passing the baton to Dr. Timmons."

As for her own future, Royal said she would take some time off before deciding the next steps in her career, focusing on aspects such as her personal life such as marrying her fiancée, Karen MacGeorge.

"I've really been practicing the art of saying no," she told the Gazette. "I want to take a break for the rest of this calendar year, and then I will look at new opportunities for 2024."

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