

## ► In The News

# HCC, Westfield State sign dual-degree nursing agreement

HOLYOKE – Holyoke Community College and Westfield State University today signed an agreement creating a new pathway for students to earn both an associate’s degree and bachelor’s degree in nursing by being simultaneously enrolled in both schools.

The concurrent enrollment program is the first of its kind in the Commonwealth and designed to help address nursing shortages by increasing the number of students accepted into a bachelor of nursing degree program and allowing them to earn their degrees faster.

“I think that what we are able to accomplish here will be the standard in the future,” Sharale Mathis, HCC vice president of Academic and Student Affairs, said during a signing ceremony today at HCC. “Through this partnership, we will be able to feed that nursing

pipeline and make sure we are putting forward the strongest educated workforce in nursing. This kind of collaboration is needed between associate degree programs and university programs to help fill those critical vacancies in the workforce for baccalaureate prepared nurses.”

The way it works is simple, she said: When students enroll at HCC for nursing, all they need to do is check a box on their application to indicate they are interested in the concurrent program with Westfield State.

“At that point, they’re in,” Mathis said. “No additional application is needed for Westfield State.”

During their first year at HCC, students will complete their general education courses and health science prerequisites; during their second and third years they will take classes both at HCC and Westfield State to complete their asso-

ciate’s degree in nursing. Then, as registered nurses, they will complete their fourth year at Westfield on the way to a bachelor’s degree in nursing.

“I think this is the way of the future,” said Westfield State University President Linda Thompson. “We really have to look at ways that we educate young people without causing them to feel like they have a burden when they graduate.”

According to a Massachusetts Health Policy Commission report, registered nurse vacancy rates in acute-care hospitals doubled from 6.4 percent in 2019 to 13.6 percent in 2022, and employment in nursing and residential care facilities has not recovered since the pandemic and remains below 2018 levels.

Thompson, herself a nurse, noted that she sits on the board for Baystate Health, so understands firsthand the industry needs.

“We are not just desperate for nurses,” Thompson said. “We’re desperate for every type of profession to work in the healthcare sector, so I do hope this is the first of many opportunities for us.”

HCC President Christina Royal agreed.

“This truly is an impressive program,” Royal said. “We’re so excited to be able to work together to create more ease of access for students. We know that sometimes just the transfer process alone can create extra hurdles for students. I have found in my experience working with Westfield State and President Thompson that Westfield is just as committed to access and equity as HCC, and looking for ways that we can help streamline the process for students and get them onto a full pathway so they can have a tremendous career is what this partnership is going to do.”