

GUEST COLUMN

Pandemic prompted a 'shining moment in history of HCC'

Community college president reflects on third anniversary of COVID-19 announcement

By **CHRISTINA ROYAL**

Monday, March 13, marked the third anniversary of my message to the Holyoke Community College community, announcing that, following spring break in 2020, all academic courses (and soon nearly all campus services) would go fully remote due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

At that time, no one could have anticipated how long that would last or how the pandemic would reshape our world. Not surprisingly, our community immediately set out to build new structures, content and services that would allow our students to learn in new and innovative ways. We rallied around our mission to “educate, inspire, and connect” and leaned into our values as an institution of academic excellence that helps students overcome barriers to success.

While everyone dealt with COVID on an individual level, as a community we remained focused on students — always our No. 1 priority. Faculty revamped their courses and adjusted their teaching practices. Staff modified processes and procedures and made weekly phone calls to each of our students to offer support, even from a distance.

The administration kept teams and the entire college informed through increased communications and frequent, virtual town hall meetings as we sought ways to remain connected as the physical campus grew increasingly quiet.

We provided laptops, Chromebooks, and Wi-Fi hotspots to every student — credit and noncredit — and also to every member of our faculty and staff who needed them. Stimulus funding enabled us to increase investments in equity initiatives aimed at closing achievement gaps, creating professional development opportunities for faculty and staff, addressing budget shortfalls, and continuing to meet strategic goals, as well as write off unpaid account balances for our students from the previous few semesters.



CONTRIBUTED

Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal: “We found ways to make it work.”

At the height of the pandemic, staff from our Thrive Student Resource Center and Food Pantry made house calls, delivering meals and technology to students who could not travel to the campus to pick them up.

We were an early responder and implementer of safety protocols. As a good neighbor and community partner, we donated health care supplies to area hospitals and health centers. In partnership with the Holyoke Board of Health and the health care company Curative, HCC became a busy regional COVID-19 testing site.

Despite the ongoing uncertainty and stress, there were joyful moments, too. Some of my fondest memories are times when our community came together in new and creative ways, such as students meeting on Zoom to play Pictionary on game night, the virtual performances put on by our theater and music departments, the virtual celebrations we held in place of in-person commencement.

We shared photos from our remote-work locations of ourselves drinking hot cocoa from our favorite mugs to celebrate the winter holidays. We created the hashtag “To-

gether HCC” to send messages of hope to our students and colleagues on social media, a tagline we have incorporated into the theme of our annual “Drive to Change Lives” 24-hour fundraising campaign, with the next set for Tuesday, April 25.

The history books will include other HCC milestones from this period. The college completed an intensive — and successful — 10-year reaccreditation from the New England Commission of Higher Education. And, in 2021, we marked the college’s 75th anniversary virtually before gathering on campus for a spectacular in-person celebration in May 2022.

We reached another milestone earlier this month as the presidents of all 15 Massachusetts community colleges announced that, following the spring 2023 semester, proof of COVID-19 vaccination would no longer be required for faculty, staff and students. Although we will continue to emphasize sanitation protocols and encourage vaccinations (and social distancing, masking and testing when necessary), this represents a prudent and timely next step.

Many people suffered tremendous losses during the pandemic, loss of loved ones, friends, livelihoods. Despite the pandemic and all it wrought, I believe this period was a shining moment in the history of HCC. We found ways to make it work because we never lost sight of the reason we exist.

As we look ahead, we will continue to grow and change as needed. We will advance our equity work and celebrate our diversity because we know how much it contributes to our students’ success and to our collective greatness. We will embrace innovation and take risks as we imagine endless possibilities for our future as we continue to provide opportunities for people from all backgrounds to achieve their educational goals and create better lives for themselves and their families.

Christina Royal is president of Holyoke Community College.