

OUTLOOK COMMENTARY

Reimagining the community college workplace: A people-first approach

DURING A RECENT cabinet meeting, I posed a question to my leadership team: “If we were launching a community college today, what would it look like?” This simple question has become our north star as we navigate profound changes in the nature of work and higher education.

The answer, we’ve discovered, lies in “peopling” — a term our new vice president for people, culture and equity frequently uses. It’s more than just a catchphrase; it’s our commitment to creating an exceptional workplace where employees feel supported, challenged, and empowered to grow. It’s an idea that aligns perfectly with our institutional values of kindness, inclusion, trust, innovation and collaboration.

With free community college now a reality, we saw a 13% increase in student enrollment from fall 2023 to fall 2024, and we expect this growth to continue as more people choose this moment to begin or resume their educational journeys.

When we live these values, employees thrive, and our students succeed.

This commitment recently led us to launch a division of People, Culture, and Equity, a bold step that acknowledges the changing face of both our workforce and our student body. Today, 70% of our students study part time while juggling work and family commitments. More than one-third identify as Hispanic/Latinx, and 40% are 25 or older. These demographics reflect our vibrant Western Massachusetts community and demand that we evolve as an institution.

The timing of this evolution couldn’t be more critical.



GEORGE TIMMONS



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This enrollment surge affects every aspect of our daily operations — from classroom

instruction to student services. How we serve, support, and “show up” for our increasingly diverse student population requires not only an institutional commitment to our people but also strategic investments in the resources that will enable their success, such as our free child watch program, and, new last fall, our Marieb Adult Learning Success Center and Parent Learning Center.

Our transformation begins with reimagining traditional structures. We have revamped our human resources department into the Office of People and Talent, streamlining administrative processes with an enhanced focus

on strategic priorities like recruitment, retention, and professional development. We want to make it difficult for employees to leave — not in a bad way, but because they can’t imagine finding a better workplace culture somewhere else.

Sometimes the most impactful changes are beautifully simple. Our monthly “Cheers for Peers” program creates opportunities for employees to celebrate each other’s achievements, fostering a culture of recognition and appreciation. We’ve implemented restorative practices that create intentional spaces for dialogue and conflict resolution, acknowledging that healthy workplaces require open communication and mutual understanding.

Perhaps our most revolutionary change involves our approach to campus safety. By moving our police department under the division of People, Culture, and Equity, we are reimagining campus security through a lens of community engagement, awareness and education. After all, shouldn’t every aspect of our institution ultimately serve our educational mission?

These changes reflect our understanding that diversity in leadership matters. Our students must see themselves represented in decision-making positions across the college. Every department must feel equipped to support students along their educational journey, whether they are recent high school graduates or working parents returning to school.

With 750 employees residing throughout Western Massachusetts and beyond, we recognize that our impact extends far beyond our campus.

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Holyoke Community College is not just an economic driver in our region; we have the potential to create a “positivity impact” that ripples through our communities. Our faculty and staff are inspiring students and changing lives inside and outside the classroom every day, and we want them to love what they do. We are committed to creating the conditions for joyful workplace for all. →

This is our moment — an opportunity to recreate ourselves as an institution that truly puts people first. The profound changes we are seeing in today’s workplace require more than surface-level adjustments. They demand a fundamental reimagining of how we support, develop and empower our people.

By focusing on our people and their talents, we are building more than just a better workplace — we’re creating a more responsive institution that meets the evolving needs of our community. This is how we’re doing it differently. This is how Holyoke Community College is leading change in higher education.

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