

OPINION & COMMENTARY

GUEST VIEWPOINT

Students shouldn't be burdened by hunger

WHenever I talk about food insecurity I ask people to take a moment and think about how it feels to be hungry. I mean, really hungry.

Not just like you're running late for lunch, but what it means to miss a meal. To miss an entire day of eating. Could you write a term paper? Could you ace a test? Could you engage in a meaningful conversation with your academic adviser about your future?

Now, in addition to being hungry, imagine that you are also not sure where your next meal will come from. Do you think you could focus enough to get to class?

Sometimes people respond that students just need to build some resiliency, dig deep and push through. But what if there's nothing to tap into because your body is so depleted from lack of nourishment?

Many students at Holyoke Community College don't have to imagine this scenario. They're living it. In 2020, we learned from a basic needs survey that 46% of our students experience low or very low levels of food security. Half of all the respondents said they can't afford to eat balanced meals.

This was pre-pandemic and we know that the pandemic has exacerbated a lot of these basic needs issues.

At HCC, we have made it a priority to address these nonacademic barriers, which can fundamentally cripple a student's ability to succeed in the classroom.

Following my inauguration as HCC president in 2017, the college, working through the nonprofit Holyoke Community College Foundation, established the President's Student Emergency Fund to provide grants to students needing critical and immediate financial support.

As someone who grew up poor, this



Kathy Vadnais, of Aramark, stands behind the counter at the newly opened Homestead Market at Holyoke Community College in early November. (HOANG LEON NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN FILE PHOTO)

issue is important and very personal to me. My story of poverty is not any more special than that of others who grew up poor, but the piece that I've carried forward is a desire to reduce the stigma associated with food insecurity and other forms of poverty and give students the lift they need to help them unlock their academic potential. This is one of the reasons I have been such a vocal advocate for the "Hunger Free Campus Initiative" now under consideration by the state Legislature.

Students who experience food insecurity have the same desires as everyone else to change their lives through the power of education and positively contribute to their communities and the world at large. Once we

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address their most basic needs, we see them thrive.

Our Thrive Student Resource Center, which runs the college's food pantry and helps students apply for food subsidies through the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, has been doing this work for years. The opening this fall of Homestead Market, our campus convenience store, takes our work to

the next level by providing students convenient access to fresh produce, pantry essentials, and quick meals they can purchase with SNAP benefits.

Once final approval is granted, Homestead Market will be the first campus store at any of the 29 public colleges and universities in Massachusetts to accept SNAP benefits.

This means that students who



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would otherwise have to find transportation from campus to buy groceries can now pick up milk, bread, eggs, and other staples right on the HCC campus, and they can afford to do so.

The initiative for opening a campus store that could accept SNAP benefits started in 2018 with HCC's Student Senate. Our own student leaders identified this as a priority for themselves and their peers. The effort became a collaboration between the college, our food service provider Aramark, which runs the store, and our Thrive Center. COVID-19 amplified this issue and the need for us to take action.

The name Homestead Market is a nod to our history as HCC celebrates its 75th anniversary during this academic year as the oldest two-year college in the commonwealth.

We've been on Homestead Avenue in Holyoke for the last 47 years, but we have been guided since 1946 by the words of our founding president George Frost, who often said that everyone deserves an opportunity to receive an affordable and quality education.

The Homestead Market is just our latest step in this commitment. As our partners at the Food Bank of Western Massachusetts often say, education should not come with the added burden of hunger. We could not agree more.

Christina Royal is president of Holyoke Community College.