



On her last day, departing Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal greeted George Timmons, at left, who took over the presidency July 17. Above, Royal hands a diploma to a student during graduation at the MassMutual Center in Springfield in June. (HCC SUBMITTED PHOTOS)

Christina Royal's legacy of 'we'



Christina Royal acknowledges the crowd on her last day as president of Holyoke Community College on July 14.

Why helping students cope became top goal for outgoing HCC president

By RON CHIMELIS
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One Holyoke Community College president just cleaned out her office. Her successor has been unpacking.

Christina Royal and George Timmons share more than a job title. As adolescents, both dreamed of overcoming obstacles they faced. Each has feared being left out or left behind. For both, education was the answer.

As president from 2017 to earlier this month, Royal created programs that addressed students' need for food, housing, transportation and child care — all practical problems that can derail academic progress.

At stake, both Royal and Timmons say, is not only student well-being, but the school's viability.

Timmons, who began work July 17, says he knows the opportunity that HCC offers students.

"Thirty or 40 years ago, I was 'that' student, and education was my way out of the lower socioeconomic

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Holyoke Community College president Christina Royal and American International College president Hubert Benitez shake after signing an articulation agreement that allows for HCC students to transfer more smoothly to AIC, where they would enter as juniors after their two years at the community college. The signing took place at HCC. (DICK TRESSER / THE REPUBLICAN)

Royal

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class and to a better life," Timmons said. "The profile at Holyoke Community spoke to me — I felt it was a calling."

That's how Royal said she felt, too. Those who worked with her say she delivered. "Christina has left us in a good place. Her legacy will stand the test of time," says Robert W. Gilbert Jr., the chair of the Board of Trustees.

And now, with Timmons on board, faculty, staff and students wait to see what the college's fifth president will do. Timmons says he wants to get a lay of the land. No major changes are imminent.

"Dr. Royal has left an excellent foundation, and it would be premature for me to come in on Day One with changes," he said. "I want to observe how things are playing out, but the values or visions of equity and opportunity, which she promoted, are very much in line with what I believe in, too."

In interviews over the past month, The Republican and MassLive took stock of how Royal's emphasis on opportunity and equal access changed HCC in the last six years.

A time of change

Holyoke Community College has been around since 1946, when it was established as the state's first junior college.

When Royal took over, she believed the college had a duty to recognize and respond to its students' diverse backgrounds and circumstances. Gilbert, the trustees chair, says that of all the programs Royal began, three stand out to him. One is the acceptance of Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards on campus, as a response to student food insecurity.

In 2021, HCC became the state's first college to accept EBT cards as part of students' Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.

Gilbert also cited the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center, which in 2022 made HCC the state's second community college to offer temporary child care and supervision while their parents attended classes.

"She also developed a (five-year) strategic plan, which we had never had. We're in our second iteration of that, and while any new CEO has his own ideas, I'm sure Dr. Timmons will continue in this direction because we now have a good game plan," Gilbert said.

After Royal arrived, HCC established a Student Emergency Fund, which predated the pandemic but became a vital financial lifeline in 2020.

"We were ahead of the curve, and well-positioned (when COVID-19 hit)," said Amanda Sbriscia, the college's vice president of institutional advancement and executive director of the HCC Foundation.

The size of funding fluctuates, based on need but is generally around \$500,000, Sbriscia said.

This year, the college established an annual award in Royal's name that will offer financial assistance to a faculty member who best rep-

resents the former president's dedication to equity, diversity and inclusion. About \$10,000 exists in the fund.

In Royal's time as president, the HCC-MGM Culinary Arts Institute opened on Race Street in Holyoke. And the college's campus center re-opened after a two-year, \$43.5 million renovation.

Student experiences

Barney Garcia, 20, is entering his second and final year as a business administration major. He said he was drawn to the college's attention to students' real needs. "This college offers various resources and support and when I was looking at colleges in this area, and talking to people, there was something about HCC that attracted me and stood out," said Garcia, a California native who lives in Northampton.

"I attended 'Accepted Student Day,' where you get to meet people, and I had this strange sense of familiarity, like I knew these people. The tight-knit nature of the campus drew me. President Royal calls this a 'mini-university,' and I think that stands true," he said.

Garcia cited the Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center and therapy services at the Center for Human Development ("mental health is a big issue these days," he says) as examples of the outreach.

For Joni "Jay" George, the adjustment to college was personal. She said she's grateful HCC understood the trepidation and challenges facing students as they arrive.

"I entered just as the campus was reopening from the pandemic," said George, 22, a Chicopee resident who is pursuing an English degree. "I had taken a gap year (by delaying college), and I wondered, 'Can I even get back in the swing of education?'"

George said she was made to feel welcome. She has seen programs at HCC help students deal with depression, anxiety, stress and grief, especially for first-generation college students.

"These services have been very good, very often," said George, who has served as a student trustee.

A culture about cultures

Royal says an entering student's needs can't be overlooked, particularly for Latino students navigating study in English. "We help students look at courses but also at aspects such as the student services side," Royal said.

The cultural transition is a point of focus for El Centro. The bilingual program provides academic support, but also encourages a sense of belonging.

"We just finished our first year, which was a wild and fun ride and very well-received," El Centro's director, Julissa Colón, said.

Colón is an HCC graduate who has worked at the college for 13 years. She said the program served nearly 200 students in its first year. The goal is to help students on campus, but also to connect the college with the community. Colón was heartened by the positive response. "Anything ethnically spe-

"Christina Royal was a trailblazer. She was willing to have the tough conversations that brought people and the community together."

Irma Medina, senior special programs coordinator of the Pathways Program, and chair of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Council at HCC

cific in this day and age can be controversial, and this was new, but people saw El Centro for what it was — a necessary service to advance the college culture," Colón said.

"It was received the way I'd hoped, but had not been sure," she said. In the coming school year, El Centro aims to grow and to expand its peer mentorship programs. It hopes to strengthen ties not only with the city of Holyoke, but with Springfield and Chicopees.

Irma Medina says these programs require not only vision,

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ROBERT W. GILBERT JR., CHAIR OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES AT HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Irma Medina, senior program coordinator of the Pathways Program, and Amanda Sbriscia, vice president of institutional advancement, both say they've seen student services grow at Holyoke Community College. (HOMAS LEON NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)

but salesmanship from the top ranks at HCC.

"Christina Royal was a trailblazer. She was willing to have the tough conversations that brought people and the community together," said Medina, senior special programs coordinator of the Pathways Program, and chair of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Council.

"Christina made equity a bedrock. We pride ourselves in offering transformational experiences — it's part of our identity — and this has led to establishing the (DEI) council," she said. "It's a true grassroots effort."

Medina said HCC's leadership role was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when staff members personally delivered food

to isolated students in need.

Alumni answer call

All the programs and initiatives that arose during Royal's tenure cost money. Sbriscia, the vice president of institutional advancement, said HCC donors have responded.

Most prominent was 1958 graduate Peg Wendlandt, who, along with her husband Gary, made a game-changing \$10 million pledge. That was the largest donation ever made to a Massachusetts community college.

"Education has made a great deal of difference in our lives and how we have succeeded over the years," Peg Wendlandt said a few years ago. "Gary and I both received scholarships to assist

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“Higher education cannot stay the same when the challenges have evolved in the past couple of decades.”

CHRISTINA ROYAL



The Campus Center at Holyoke Community College reopened after a two-year, \$43.5 million renovation. (THE REPUBLICAN FILE PHOTO)

Royal

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us in achieving our goals of education and feel fortunate that we can help others do the same.”

“For Peg, an emergency in 1958 was much different than what students are facing now, but it resonated with her and her husband. The Student Emergency Fund helped us through COVID, but will live on forever,” Sbriscia said.

Royal left HCC to explore professional and personal interests. But she continues to believe higher education today must recognize that the needs of students go beyond curriculum and might involve housing, food insecurity, child care, transportation and bilingual access.

“Higher education cannot stay the same when the challenges have evolved in the

past couple of decades,” Royal said. “Everything we have done has been to recognize that and to make their experience at our college, and the transfer opportunity to four-year schools, that much easier and more reachable. I’m proud of that.”

Timmons, the new president, says that keeping community college affordable is key.

“In our history, we once saw education as a benefit to the entire community. That mentality has shifted to where it’s now seen as a benefit to the individual,” he said.

He views that as a misplaced emphasis.

“Think of the G.I. Bill that allowed veterans to come back and lift themselves through education. It created a middle class instantly, and we all benefited. But we don’t look at it that way anymore,” he said.



Holyoke Community College student Barney Garcia said he immediately felt comfortable on campus.

