

## HCC will operate food truck as mobile lab for culinary program

HOLYOKE — When is a food truck not a food truck? When it's a mobile culinary arts laboratory.

Holyoke Community College has been awarded a \$147,000 Skills Capital Grant to purchase a truck for its culinary arts program that will be used as a mobile kitchen for community outreach and education.

"It's not our intention to sell food out of the truck as a means to generate revenue," said HCC professor Warren Leigh, co-chair of the culinary arts program. "We're not going to set up on the corner and sell tacos and hot dogs. We are absolutely going to cook in it, but the main purpose is to engage the community. At the same time, our students will gain experience in food truck operations."

The funds, from Gov. Charlie Baker's Workforce Skills Cabinet, are part of a new \$3.3 million package of grants to 20 educational organizations in Massachusetts for updating equipment and expanding student enrollment in career education programs.

According to the award letter, HCC will use the \$147,000 to purchase and outfit a "mobile food lab" that will support both credit and noncredit culinary arts programs and also incorporate other areas of study including nutrition, health, business and entrepreneurship.

HCC's grant application notes that residents of Holyoke face a high level of food insecurity and downtown Holyoke has been identified as a "food desert."

"HCC will deploy the truck to bring food to neighborhoods of downtown Holyoke," HCC wrote in its application. In addition, HCC plans to connect this project to its downtown Freight Farms initiative with a focus on basic nutrition, local produce and healthy eating.

Leigh envisions using the mobile food lab to engage community partners such as the Holyoke Boys & Girls Club and area food pantries. Students will meet with representatives from area organizations to create menus based on ingredients of their choice or what might be seasonally available.

"We'll be there with our kitchen on wheels and help them understand that they can take this product XYZ and make it into something interesting, cooked in a fashion they would like," said Leigh.

Once the truck arrives — sometime later this year — food truck operations will be worked into the current culinary arts curriculum in both credit and non-credit courses, such as event planning and line-cook training.

Students will have to learn to cook in a much smaller space than they are used to in the kitchens at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute; they'll also have to learn food truck logistics, such as how to dispose of dirty "gray" water, replenish the kitchen with fresh water, and maintain a stable power source.

"You have to have a production plan, just like you do in a restaurant, but now it's even more important because you're going into a vehicle and driving away from your home base," said Leigh. "It's like catering off site. You have to bring everything you need."

According to statistics, the growth of food trucks outpaced restaurant growth 5.5% to 4.3% in 2021, spurred in part by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the research journal IBIS World, the industry was already experiencing rapid growth in the five years before.

"What's really cool about food trucks is that it allows you to enter the industry much more inexpensively," said Leigh. "If you're opening a brick-



*Holyoke Community College culinary arts alumna Nicole Ortiz wrote a letter in support of the college's mobile food lab grant. She started her own culinary career with her Crave food truck, and now also runs Crave restaurant on High Street in Holyoke. (SUBMITTED / HCC)*

and-mortar restaurant from scratch, the vent hood alone can cost \$20,000 to \$50,000, so it's a much lower bar getting started. It's a great way to put in a minimal investment and test out your concept without a lot of risk."

He cites the example of HCC culinary arts alumna Nicole Ortiz.

Ortiz wrote a letter in support of the grant and started her own culinary career with her Crave food truck business.

Ortiz now also is operating Crave restaurant on High Street in Holyoke.

"Nicole started with that small trailer that she bought with a grant from EforAll," Holyoke

SPARK's Entrepreneurship for All initiative, said Leigh. "She got going and now she's in a brick-and-mortar site."

Leigh said the HCC mobile food lab will have an awning like a food truck and a window pass for food, and will also be equipped with cameras in the cooking area and a flat-screen TV on the outside so people can watch what's going on inside.

"Other organizations, their idea of engaging with the community is pop-up tents and Bunsen burners," said Leigh.

"We're going to show up, and it's going to look like a professional operation. It will be a professional operation."