"Many students ask themselves, is college even possible? What we offer is that anything is possible. If you desire to attend a prestigious four-year school, you can start here and finish anywhere — anywhere."

CHRISTINA ROYAL, HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Above left, students study human anatomy in this undated photo provided by Holyoke Community College. At center, nursing students and faculty work with practice dummies in 1996. At right, a culinary arts student prepares salads in 2010. (THE REPUBLICAN FILE PHOTO)

EDUCATION

Holyoke Community College celebrates 75th year as trailblazer

BY RON CHIENKIS

Holyoke Community College is celebrated its 75th year, as the first community college in Massachusetts.

"We existed before community colleges were even enacted. Our early roots speak to the innovation we represent today," said Christina Royal, the president of Holyoke Community College.

Royal is the fourth president of a college whose founding director, George L. Frost, served from 1946-78. Much credit for the college’s growth has gone to David M. Bartley, a former Massachusetts speaker of the House who followed Frost as president, and used his political strength and educational reach to set HCC on its modern course.

A 75th anniversary celebration is planned for May 5, "dependent on things (with the COVID-19 pandemic) moving in the right direction," Royal said.

When it began, HCC was hardly the institution it is today. In 1946, Holyoke Community College became a junior college in the Massachusetts community college system. It was formed by the merging of the Holyoke Junior College and the Westfield State Teachers College.

The school was located in the old State Normal School building on Main Street, in what is now the heart of downtown Holyoke.

"We did not have our own faculty, so we had professors from Smith College, Mount Holyoke, University of Massachusetts, American International, Springfield College, Westfield State and American College," said 1958 graduate Margaret "Peg" Wendlandt, who has been a major donor to the school.

"These professors were looking for a little extra money, so we were lucky. We got the best and the brightest," said 1958 graduate Francis M. Kane, a former trustees chairman who still serves on the HCC Foundation board of directors.

The school also lacked a physical structure. "We went to school in the late afternoon or early evening at Holyoke High School," Kane said.

By 1968, Holyoke had a new high school, Holyoke Community College used the former building. By 1978, it burned to the ground, causing students to take classes at various locations while the city successfully scrambled to keep the college in Holyoke — and, by 1984, open a new campus.

For many whose connection predates those transformative years, Holyoke Community College remains special.

"My older brother had gone to Holyoke Junior College. My grandmother and uncle lived at 96 Reed St., and I could walk there," Wendlandt recalled.

"I had graduated from high school and had a job as a long-distance telephone operator for New England Telephone and Telegraph Co. They had maybe 200 of those, a dozen supervisors and one chief operator, and I didn't see much of a future there, so I decided to go to college."

By July, it was too late to apply for other schools. With Frost's encouragement, Wendlandt chose the college down the street.

"I loved it. I blossomed there. If you will, and went on to UMass and then to work at MassMutual," she said.

Wendlandt's husband did not attend the college, which adopted its current name in 1964, but he has become a partner in supporting it.

"The path to success for any institution is when the people who have had success, like my wife, give back," he said.

Royal's 2017 arrival came as community colleges continued rising, not just as affordable avenues for a two-year associate degree,
"We still educate a lot of first-generation college students who don’t have family they can talk to about college."

CHRISTINA ROYAL, HCC PRESIDENT

Holyoke Community College president Christina Royal congratulates graduates of the Freight Farms Hydroponic Growing apprenticeship program at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute in 2019.

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"Among many achievements, he started the college's foundation from scratch, and it's still helping students today," Kane said. "He was the first of three generations of his family to use Holyoke Community College to launch points to four-year colleges. Royal said that transfer path is one of many options the college offers today."

"Community colleges educate the entry-level job force. They have been gaining recognition and respect for their success with preparedness and as a key engine in workforce development," she said.

Royal's tenure has been marked by innovation. She says the college's mission is to provide opportunity for all categories of racial, ethnic, economic and sexual identities. Adult learners, those with unique job or family demands, are similarly welcomed, she said.

Of the current HCC population, Royal said 12% have documented disabilities. The door is kept open for their success as well, she said.

When the COVID-19 pandemic prompted campus closings in March 2020, HCC was well-positioned because Royal had advocated for flexible learning platforms for 20 years. She said in-person education remains important but that online options will remain accessible, up to date and of high quality, long after the pandemic has ended.

"Providing student services is crucial," she said.

"We still educate a lot of first-generation college students who don’t have family they can talk to about college," said Royal, who added the school is working to meet the differing needs within its student population.

Adult students might be more interested in knowing how to navigate the worlds of investment or purchasing, she said, while younger learners might emphasize issues of social justice. She also said the traditional step-by-step growth path from high school to college, and then to the workforce, is giving way to more "intersectionality," and overlapping of steps — and that HCC must meet those changing needs.

"The advantages of access and affordability have been drilled into people’s minds, and we offer that but much more," Royal said.

"Many students ask themselves, ‘Is college even possible?’ What we offer is that anything is possible. If your desire is to attend a prestigious four-year school, you can start here and finish anywhere — anywhere."

William F. Messner, third president of Holyoke Community College, greets students from Morgan Elementary School during a visit to the college’s Bartley Center for Athletics & Recreation in 2016.

At left, top. Holyoke Community College president David M. Bartley, left, talks with University of Massachusetts president William M. Bulger, Francis E. Kane and attorney Maurice R. Ferber at a Valley Press Club event at HCC in 2001. Kane, a former trustee and current member of the community college’s foundation, calls Bartley "the Red Auerbach of HCC."

At left, below, the graduating Class of 1954 at Holyoke Junior College, the predecessor of Holyoke Community College, line up for a group photo.

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