Gateway to College program earns national honors

HOLYOKE – The Gateway to College program at Holyoke Community College (HCC), a past two-time recipient of a national excellence award, has been recognized for the third year in a row for its outstanding graduation rate, one of the best of all programs of its kind in the nation.

The award for Graduation Achievement was presented to HCC Gateway's director Vivian Ostrowski in July at the Gateway to College Directors Convening in New Haven, Conn., by the Gateway to College national network's parent organization, Achieving the Dream.

Gateway to College is an alternative high school program that offers dropouts and struggling teens a chance to earn their high school diplomas through dual enrollment by taking college classes. Gateway students also collect transferable college credits they can apply toward a college certificate or degree.

HCC has hosted a Gateway program since 2008. There are now 35 Gateway to College programs in 18 states.

Graduation Achievement is one of the principal benchmarks used to evaluate the success of Gateway programs. HCC's graduation rate was 76 percent for the award year when it enrolled 145 students from area high schools, most from Holyoke and Springfield.

"The incoming GPA of our students is 1.3," Ostrowski said. "Given that these students are starting out with such a low high school GPA, incredibly complicated lives and disengaged from their educations, a 76 percent graduation rate is a really amazing number, and we are incredibly proud."

This is the third year in a row HCC's Gateway program has received the national award for Graduation Achievement. In 2016, HCC's program received Gateway national's first-ever Program Excellence Award. The program was honored again with the Excellence Award in 2017.

Turley Publications Photo Courtesy of Chris Yurko

Gateway to College director Vivian Ostrowski and special programs coordinator Julissa Colon hold the Gateway to College national award for Graduation Achievement.

"HCC's Gateway program is one of the highest achieving programs in our network," said Stephanie Davolos, New England director of Achieving the Dream's Gateway to College programs. "What's unique about it is the depth of its partnership with Holyoke Public Schools and how it's played a significant role in moving the needle forward for some of the community's most vulnerable students. It does that by personalizing the work it does with each and every student. It really does give students at risk a second chance and put them on a course for success."

Since 2008, 384 students have earned their high school diplomas through HCC's Gateway to College program. Thirty-three have continued on to earn their associate degrees from HCC.

"We have this culture here of relentless kindness," Ostrowski said. "We've learned that academic success matters, but it's no more important than a sense of belonging and warmth and care for the whole person, so our students are successful academically because they can trust us and know we have their best interests at heart. We are using our power, our social capital, to motivate their potential."