"For our students to be the best version of themselves, their most fundamental needs must be met."

CHRISTINA ROYAL, HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT

From left, Emily Conrad, Julio Colon and Xavier Williams check products at the Homestead Market at Holyoke Community College. Recognizing that many students struggle with food insecurity, the market accepts electronic benefit transfer cards and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. (HOANG 'LEO' NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)

HOLYOKE

Keeping the mind nourished

Campus store helps fight food insecurity

BY RON CHIMELIS
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When Holyoke Community College president Christina Royal has given speeches about food insecurity, she’s asked her audiences to put themselves in the position — just for a few moments — of students who are trying to learn or concentrate on an empty stomach.

"I ask them, 'Have you skipped a meal or two, or gone even a day without eating?' For our students to be the best version of themselves, their most fundamental needs must be met," Royal said.

The college's most recent response is an on-campus convenience store that makes it the first college in Massachusetts to accept electronic benefits transfer (EBT) cards for students receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Homestead Market opened with the fall term as a collaboration between dining service vendor Aramark, the college and the HCC Thrive Program, which operates the college's food pantry and helps students with food and housing assistance.

"What drives my passion for this issue is that we have so many students who are minoritized or marginalized and are not receiving an equitable chance in life or in college," she said.

Royal's passion is also driven by personal experience, and by her loyalty to an HCC population that, by any measure, is remarkably diverse.

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Not only does the college serve traditional students, but also minority students, those of varied sexual orientation, those with disabilities or chronic illness, adults with children and products of foster care. Some must raise food between themselves and their children.

Royal says the broader issue of food insecurity goes beyond the time-honored term of “hunger,” because it not only involves going without food, but also not knowing when — or if — the time to eat healthy food regularly will come.

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