HCC president is all in — for one more year

Mayor calls departing Royal ‘a rock star’

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As Christina Royal prepares for her final academic year as president of Holyoke Community College, she says she’s asked what’s in store for her next.

“People ask me where I’m going,” she said yesterday after her plans to retire on July 14 were announced. “I’m going to focus on leading HCC. Anyone who knows me knows I won’t be phoning it in.”

Royal arrived at Holyoke Community in 2017, a moment in the college’s history that was impactful in itself. She was just the fourth president

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Holyoke Community College President Christina Royal, whose tenure coincided with the 75th anniversary of the college and the COVID-19 pandemic, will retire next July after a tenure that saw transformational change at the college. (DON TREEGER / THE REPUBLICAN)
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in the history of a school which, in 1946, became the first community college in Massa- 
chusetts. She was also the first woman, first openly gay and first biracial person to serve as the college’s president. Royal’s, however, though, has been transformative in ways far beyond labels or personal demographics, and it’s helped changes a two-year college to become a “first-choice” school, more than it had ever previously been.

“Our mission has been to offer high-quality education at an affordable rate, and provide pathways to transfer for four-year colleges,” Royal said. “We want all our students to thrive academically, but to do that, we have to create conditions to help them do that. I’m proud that we have been advancing emphasis on basic needs support and on equity, as well as working on equity of all kinds, but particularly racial equity.

Those goals remain ongoing, and Royal said they always should be.

“You can never look at this mission as complete, not even in 10 years,” she said. “You can’t say, ‘We’re all wrapped up so it’s time to stop doing it.’”

The reason she’s choosing to leave next July, she said, comes after a lifetime of never stopping to give herself, as she put it, “some space.” She is not taking another job, and her post-HCC plans are purposely unspecified.

“When you grow up in poverty as I did, the goal is to get out of poverty, and then you keep going,” Royal said. “My attention will be at HCC until I retire, and then, I want to take a little space, which I’ve always believed in.”

Her decision evolved this summer, Royal explained, and became more clear to her when she was on a trip to visit with her daughters’ partners. That’s when Royal, 50, realized her desire to expand and grow to ways beyond her work at the college.

That doesn’t mean she won’t miss it, Royal said.

“I’m so impressed by what the faculty, staff, students, donors and alumni community have really rallied around at HCC, which is something I want to pass this institution to a new leader who will further our trajectory,” she said. “I’m making this announcement now because there needs to be time to find a new president and wrap up the work we’ve already started.”

A search for a new president will begin immediately. Typical of such colleges, the job will not be part of that process, beyond offering an opinion if asked.

Royal’s tenure has been marked by expansion of academic curriculum, but also student needs. Explaining how this is the foundation of ground of a child in poverty, and as a member of underrepresented and often disenfranchised groups gave her personal insight, she led

"Dr. Royal’s collaborative spirit and selfless nature will be missed by those who worked with her. We can all learn from her enthusiasm, dedication and leadership," Linda Thompson, president of Westfield State University, said. Royal’s leadership has been more than prepared for students to pilot to virtually any overnight program of extracurricular activities, including the Student Emergency Fund, which provides students grants to study and the management of higher education has invaluable to the board and to me personally," said Robert Gilbert, chair of the college’s trustees. "She has always shown me how to be done to take HCC to the next level and she involved everyone in her vision for moving the college forward.

Royal said she is proud of HCC's collaborative efforts with local employers, including a strategic plan, advancing equity, and investing in programs to support students’ basic needs, including the Student Emergency Fund, which provides students grants to study and the management of higher education has invaluable to the board and to me personally."