Christina Royal’s legacy of ‘we’

Why helping students cope became top goal for outgoing HCC president

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One Holyoke Community College president just cleaned out her office. Her successor has been unpacking. Christina Royal and George Timmons share more than a job title. As adolescents, both dreamed of overcoming obstacles they faced. Each has feared being left out or left behind. For both, education was the answer.

As president from 2017 to earlier this month, Royal created programs that addressed students’ need for food, housing, transportation and child care—all practical problems that can derail academic progress.

At stake, both Royal and Timmons say, is not only student well-being, but the school’s viability.

Timmons, who began work July 17, says he knows the opportunity that HCC offers students.

“Thirty or 40 years ago, I was ‘that’ student, and education was my way out of the lower socioeconomic SET ROYAL, PAGE A4

Christina Royal acknowledges the crowd on her last day as president of Holyoke Community College on July 14.

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Christina Royal was a trailblazer. She was willing to have the tough conversations that brought people and the community together.

Ira Mattasi, senior special programs coordinator at the Pathways Program, and director of news and external relations at HCC.

“Christina had left us in a good place. Her legacy will stand the test of time.”

Irene Mattasi, former special programs coordinator at the Pathways Program, and director of news and external relations at HCC.
“Higher education cannot stay the same when the challenges have evolved in the past couple of decades,” Royal said. “Everything we have done has been to recognize that and to make their experience at our college, and the transfer opportunity to four-year schools, that much easier and more reachable. I’m proud of that.”

Timmons, the new president, says that keeping community college affordable is key.

“In our history, we once saw education as a benefit to the entire community. That mentality has shifted to where it’s now seen as a benefit to the individual,” he said.

He views that as a misplaced emphasis.

“Think of the G.I. Bill that allowed veterans to come back and lift themselves through education. It created a middle class instantly, and we all benefited. But we don’t look at it that way anymore,” he said.