

“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 'LEON' 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 Mas-

sachusetts 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, it greets minority students, those of varied sexual orientation, those with disabilities or chronic illness, adults with children and products of foster care. Some must ration 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. That, according to Royal, is not just a physical issue but a cognitive one that involves quality as well as supply.

"We want to be able to make sure we are offering our customers the healthiest and freshest foods," said Kevin Vincent, food service director at Aramark, which is managing the store. "We have fresh vegetables, fruits and dairy products. We also have alternatives like oat milk and soy milk, as well as a variety of products ranging from cereals to frozen dinners."

"People don't realize that being a student is like having a job. Staying on point with work takes all of your time and energy," said Luis J. Pinto-Jimenez, a Holyoke native who will graduate from HCC this year.

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Pinto-Jimenez plans to attend the University of Massachusetts Amherst for a career in architecture. For students like him, the challenge of proper eating is one of both time and money.

"I'm on campus almost all day. What time is there for groceries that help keep you in school?" Pinto-Jimenez said. "It's just easier."

"I go twice a week to the store and maybe more. I'm very involved with encouraging more students to know about it. Not everyone was aware at first, but as soon as they know, they keep on going."

"They need to know. I'm running around, getting the word out," said Gia Mendez, of Holyoke, who is carrying a double major in visual arts and human services, which she expects to complete in 2023.

The store is open from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays. It's located in Room 251 on the second floor of the Frost Building, near the Thrive Student Resource Center and food pantry. Hours will be adjusted as necessary based on demand.

A modest but growing number of students are already using the store. The college will be handing out vouchers to students to raise awareness and promote the location.

Mendez is doing a work-



Students check out the Homestead Market at Holyoke Community College earlier this month. (HOANG LEON NGUYEN / THE REPUBLICAN)



"When students hear they have things like pizza rolls, they'll be coming."

Gia Mendez, student

need. Her parents split when she was 8 years old, and her mother's highest annual income as a single mother of three was \$14,000. That was the year Royal went to college.

"In most years, it was under \$10,000. Her average annual income until I was 18 was \$7,000," she said.

For students trying to overcome challenges of food insecurity, finance, academics and time management, Homestead Market represents more than nourishment. It represents hope. Mendez says as word gets out, its popularity will grow.

"It's a whole market that has so much," she said. "When students hear they have things like pizza rolls, they'll be coming."

study program at the Thrive Center, with an eye on future work in social services. She handles food donations, appointments and other duties.

Fitting a visit to the store into her packed schedule isn't easy, but certainly worth it, she said.

"For me, it's the best. I'm here all day, and when I get out, I need to eat. I pick up something and eat at home because they have frozen foods," Mendez said.

While Homestead Market is the first of its kind in Massachusetts, Aramark has some experience offering the SNAP program at its locations at Yosemite National Park in California, according to Vincent. He is more than satisfied with the first two months in Holyoke.

and state nutrition benefits available to said student or dependents."

Royal says the market, which will be celebrated with a ribbon-cutting on Friday, addresses a need that was apparent from the moment she stepped onto campus as the new president in 2017.

"We targeted four areas to address: food insecurity, housing, transportation and child care. We went to work on food insecurity because we had some data on that," she said.

The data was sobering. A 2019 survey done by a Temple University organization found that 46% of HCC respondents — four points higher than the national average — reported experiencing food insecurity in the previous 30 days.

About half said they could not afford balanced meals or were worried about running out of food before they had money. More than a third of the food-insecure respondents were using SNAP benefits.

As disturbing as those numbers were, Royal is convinced the reality of what's happening is much worse.

"A lot of students facing the most stress don't have time to respond to a survey. Those are also pre-pandemic numbers, the most recent we have available, and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation even more," Royal said.

Students had been asking about the school accepting EBT for SNAP since at least 2014. When the pandemic closed the campus in March 2020, the HCC plan shifted to delivering food directly to students in need and expanding other programs, while putting the store on hold.

This fall, after more than a year of remote learning, the college reopened its campus. College officials weighed whether to wait until the end of the pandemic to launch the store, but with one-third of students learning online, it was deemed advantageous — and urgent — to open it to a manageable campus population.

"We've had a strong relationship with Aramark to make this agenda become a reality. It's important to not just make food available to students, but healthy food," said Rosemary Fiedler, who operates the thrive center and food pantry.

Fiedler says a future vision is to have the college's culinary arts program, which is located on Race Street in

downtown Holyoke, produce more food that will be distributed to Aramark as well as to the food pantry.

"That way, we'll always have not just nonperishables but protein-based food, fresh vegetables and so on. I'm very excited about this," Fiedler said.

For the present, the college has cut through red tape to allow SNAP recipients to use Homestead Market after only a short-form application. Turnaround time for acceptance is 24 hours.

Royal says percentages of students on campus, online and in blended programs is split almost evenly in thirds, but that all students who qualify can utilize the store's services.

The college has had to navigate its own bureaucracy. Three applications were needed to obtain state approval. "Getting approval for the city of Holyoke was pretty straightforward," said Narayan Sampath, the college's vice president for administration and finance. "The challenge was getting acceptance for SNAP recipients by the (U.S. Department of Agriculture). SNAP is a federal program. The application had to come from Aramark, which manages the store."

The first application went out in 2019, but approval first requires a store to be operational, with proof of sales and records of receipts.