

Collaboration key to region's prosperity

MY GRAND-mother raised me to be an optimist. She taught me the value of education, which, she always said, will help you find your way, and, once earned, can never be taken away.

Through both words and deeds, she taught me the value of a strong work ethic. Even if you're not the smartest person in the room, she told me, no one else can control how hard you work toward your goals.

GUEST LECTURE



I took those lessons to heart. I understood from an early age that education and hard work were the keys to my future.

Of course, Grandma was right. Because of the values she instilled in me, I was the first person in my family to go to college. A college degree provided me with opportunities unavailable to my parents, who could not afford to take care of both me and my brother.

I might not have always been the best student, but education and hard work led me to where I am today, the fifth president of Holyoke Community College, a job I could not be more excited and optimistic about.

I feel blessed to have inherited a bedrock institution with such a long, proud history.

During my interview for this job, I told the HCC Board of Trustees that, if hired, I would be of and for the community. I've tried my best to live up to that pledge.

I grew up not far away, in Hartford, but I'm new to Western Massachusetts. I've made it a priority to immerse myself in the community, attending as many events as possible, engaging with key stakeholders to better understand the relationships, challenges and opportunities here — and figuring out how HCC can play an even more prominent role in advancing our community.

This is important work, and we must do it together.



GEORGE TIMMONS

“I want HCC to be known as a true community partner, one committed to the region's economic success.”

I believe collaborations and partnerships are critical to any region's economic success. In my short time here, I've already seen great promise. During my first semester, I had the opportunity to take part in two grand-opening celebrations, one for the Tech Hub, a collaboration with Tech Foundry, the Alliance for Digital Equity, and many other corporate and community groups intent on closing equity gaps with regard to access to technology; the other was for the Holyoke Community Cupboard, a new regional food pantry managed by the United Way of Pioneer Valley at the HCC MGM Culinary Arts Institute.

I am encouraged by the generous investments that have recently come our way from both the state and local groups. MassReconnect now allows any Massachusetts resident 25 and older to earn a community college degree at no cost. This pairs well with our own plan at HCC to open what we are calling the Adult Learner Success Center, a dedicated, wrap-around support program for our non-traditional students, who are generally older.

For more traditional-age students, those under 25, the state has increased the numbers eligible for free community college through the MASSGrant Plus program, and has instituted scholarship programs for nursing students,

as well as subsidized costs for international students.

In addition, the state recently awarded HCC (and its partners, including Baystate Health) a \$1.46 million workforce grant to create a free program to recruit unemployed and underemployed individuals, train them first as nursing aides and then as

nurses — and find them jobs.

Creating pathways to upward mobility is critical and demonstrates the value of community colleges to the regional economy. With so many new funding options available, there has never been a better time to be a community college student.

Also this fall, HCC received a \$600,000 grant from the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation to expand its free Itsy Bitsy Child Watch Center, one of our many programs designed to address basic needs that can be barriers to a student's academic success.

Private investments like that show great faith and confidence in the college. We don't take that for granted.

I want HCC to be known as a true community partner, one committed to the region's economic success.

I'm not a pessimist. I feel good about the region's prospects. I feel good about being here and making sure that HCC remains a pivotal contributor to the social and economic prosperity of Western Massachusetts. Because, if you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem. At the end of the day, you've got to sit with yourself and ask, did you do anything to help make things better?

That's pretty much how I grew up.

George Timmons, Ph.D., is the fifth president of Holyoke Community College.