

EDUCATION

LOCAL COLLEGES IN THE NEWS

Carry This With You

Holyoke Community College celebrates 78th Commencement

HOLYOKE – In his Commencement remarks to the Holyoke Community College class of 2025, President George Timmons told a story about an experience he'd had during spring break that "truly captures what makes our HCC community so special."

Walking down the nearly empty hallways, he noticed a student sitting alone in a study lounge. Curious, he asked why the student was on campus during spring break.

"This place has always felt like a sanctuary to me," the student said. "No matter what's happening in my life, I know I can come here and feel welcome."

"This moment reminded me of something foundational and unique about an HCC education," President Timmons said. "It's not just about the classroom, but about creating spaces

where people feel they belong. As you leave HCC, I hope you will carry this sense of belonging with you and create it for others wherever your path leads."

HCC held its 78th Commencement on Saturday, May 31, at the MassMutual Center in Springfield. The cold rain falling outside did little to dampen the spirits inside, as graduates celebrated the occasion alongside their families, friends, HCC faculty and staff, with all the traditional pomp and circumstance.

This year, the college conferred a total of 805 associate degrees and certificates to 742 graduates, who range in age from 18 to 66 and hail from 66 different Massachusetts cities and towns, as well as Connecticut, New Jersey, South Carolina, Florida, Colorado, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nigeria,

Pakistan, Peru, Russia, Jamaica, Iraq, Trinidad, Tobago, and Ukraine.

In her faculty address, English Professor Elizabeth Trobaugh described HCC as an ecosystem, such as a coral reef or a forest, whose diverse elements depend on each other to provide a healthy environment where all can thrive, which, in the case of the college, means students.

"Learning is the birthright of every living thing," said Trobaugh, recipient of the 2025 Elaine Marieb Chair for Teaching Excellence Award, HCC's highest faculty honor. "And access to education is the mark of a just society, the hallmark of Democracy. Pursuing an education is a noble endeavor that we at HCC are honored to support and advance."

"Thank you, graduates, for sharing this leg of your academic journeys with us," she said.

Student orator Isa'Rose Ramos, in her address, described herself as more than just a new graduate but "a garden that survived the storm" and the ceremony itself as "a resurrection, a remembering, a return to soil that saw me through seasons of doubt."

"When I first enrolled at HCC, I was still searching for my place – not only in higher education, but in myself," she said. "As someone navigating neurodivergence and grief while carrying invisible

weights, I often questioned if I truly belonged here. But this campus — this community — showed me that I did."

Ramos, 39, a Westfield resident and mother of three, received her associate degree in human services, and is transferring to Westfield State University to study psychology.

"To every student sitting here who thought they wouldn't make it, look at you now," she said. "You are not just graduates. You are gardens. You are the bloom of becoming. We didn't rise because everything was easy. We rose because we kept showing up. Because we dared to dig deeper. Because we remembered that, even in the dark, we were still growing."

Trudy Monson '97, president of the HCC Alumni Council, welcomed graduates as the new alumni and encouraged them to stay connected to the college.

"Your journey with this institution doesn't end today," said Monson, of Holyoke, one of four individuals presented with a Distinguished Service Award at Commencement. "Come back to campus to share your success stories. Consider becoming a mentor to current students. Join us at alumni events. Volunteer your time and expertise. Your experiences and wisdom can inspire the next generation of HCC students." ■

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McKayla Ulibarri, of Springfield, waves to the crowd after receiving her HCC diploma.
(Photo by Leon Nguyen)