

A PUBLICATION OF ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

# Impact

Fall 2025 | Volume 32 | Issue 2

**Read about a  
nationally-ranked ECC  
soccer player's goals  
on the field and  
in the classroom**

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Elgin  
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# Igniting Potential

## A message from the ECC President and Board Chair

Dear ECC Community,

**A**t Elgin Community College, opportunity comes in many forms: academic success, global exploration, career preparation, artistic expression, and more. Each fall and spring semester, Impact magazine brings the stories of our students, alumni, and faculty to life, reflecting the determination, creativity, and possibilities that define the ECC experience. This issue is no exception.

You will meet students like Brandon Gonzalez, who turned an early academic setback into a story of resilience and redirection. His journey from struggling student-athlete to focused fire science major reminds us that perseverance and the proper support can change life's trajectory.

We also highlight global perspectives through study abroad, where students step outside their comfort zones, learn about new cultures, and return with fresh insights to enrich our campus and community. These experiences broaden horizons and prepare students to thrive in today's interconnected world.

Career development remains a cornerstone

of ECC's mission. Through personalized assessments and guidance, students explore pathways that match their strengths and aspirations. Their stories illustrate how ECC equips students with the knowledge and tools to build meaningful futures.

Finally, we celebrate the passion of our instructors, like the director of our steel drum band, who inspire creativity, community, and joy through the arts. Their dedication exemplifies how ECC's classrooms, rehearsal halls, and labs nurture talent and potential.

Looking ahead, the construction of ECC's new Manufacturing and Technology Center demonstrates our ongoing commitment to expanding student opportunities. Opening in the fall of 2026, this 150,000-square-foot facility will support advanced manufacturing, robotics, mechatronics, and more, ensuring that the same spirit of transformation you see in these pages extends into the workforce needs of tomorrow. You can visit [elgin.edu/mtc](http://elgin.edu/mtc) to watch the latest construction update video.

Together, these stories show the spirit of ECC: resilience, opportunity, and innovation. We are proud of our students and grateful to the faculty, staff, and community members who support their journeys. Thank you for being a part of our story.

Warm regards,

**Peggy Heinrich, EdD**  
President



**Jennifer Rakow, BA**  
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#### ON THE COVER:

Elgin Community College student-athlete  
Brandon Gonzalez tending goal.

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# FINDING A FIT



When Julia Wiesbrock first enrolled at Elgin Community College at 21, she had no clear career path.

"My goal was just to finish school as fast as possible," said the St. Charles resident. "But then I started thinking, 'I don't want to end up in a career that doesn't make me happy.'"

She initially considered nursing, but after speaking to professionals, she realized that career path wasn't for her.

"Everyone I talked to seemed burnt out," she said.

"I realized I hadn't explored enough options to know what I truly wanted."

Everything changed when her English professor, John Mravik, gave a presentation highlighting ECC's student support services. That's when Wiesbrock learned about the Career Assessment Package (CAP) offered through Career Development Services.

The CAP helps students explore careers that align with their personality and interests through two assessments: the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and the Strong Interest Inventory. "I've always been interested in personality tests, so when I heard ECC offered the assessment and helped interpret the results, I signed up," she said.

Wiesbrock met with Career Development Specialist Lynn Fagerlie, who explained the results and explored career paths that fit her strengths and goals.

"Lynn was amazing. She didn't just give me a printout, she helped me understand how my personality type plays a role in the kind of work I'd enjoy."

That conversation pointed Wiesbrock toward a new goal: occupational therapy.

ECC Career Development Specialist Peggy Gundrum said goal-setting is critical.

"We help students reflect on who they are and what they want, then guide them in setting intentional, achievable goals," Gundrum said.

Today, Wiesbrock is working toward completing her Associate of Arts degree with an emphasis in psychology and plans to transfer to North Central College for a dual bachelor's/master's program in occupational therapy.


"Before, I didn't think I could handle six years of school," she said. "Now I know I can."

Her advice for students still searching?

"Talk to someone. Take the assessment. Even if you don't change your mind, you'll learn something valuable about yourself." Career Development Services staff serve approximately 1,000 students annually, bridging education and meaningful employment through career exploration, goal-setting, and skill building like resume writing. This creates a stronger pipeline of skilled, confident graduates who can meet local workforce needs. ■

Julia Wiesbrock



A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a red and white floral short-sleeved shirt and khaki pants, is smiling and playing a steel pan. He is holding mallets in both hands, striking the surface of the instrument. The background is dark, and the lighting highlights the man and the reflective surface of the steel pan.

**Scott McConnell, instructor  
of the Steel Drum Band at  
Elgin Community College,  
plays his steel pan.**

# MAN OF STEEL

ECC Steel Drum Band builds lifelong community



When Scott McConnell walks into the rehearsal room at Elgin Community College, it's more than a return to campus — it's a full-circle moment.

Now the instructor of ECC's Steel Drum Band, McConnell first encountered the program in the late 1990s as a middle schooler taking percussion lessons from Paul Ross, one of the ensemble's co-founders. What started as a family curiosity — "What are those instruments, and can we try them?" — soon became a shared passion. McConnell and his parents began playing together through ECC's community education program.

"I owe my entire career in music to ECC," McConnell said. "This place introduced me to steel pan, and it's what set me on my path."

After earning multiple music degrees, including a master's in World Percussion and Steel Pan Performance, McConnell stayed connected to ECC through guest performances and family involvement. When the opportunity arose to lead the ensemble, he didn't hesitate. "Even though I live in Chicago now, I always knew I wanted to give back to this community. ECC gave me my start."

Established in 1987, the Steel Drum Band is not your average musical group. Many of its members have been playing together for years, some even for decades, and their connection goes far beyond the classroom. They attend summer concerts together, coordinate group outings, text regularly, and even help each other with everyday tasks, like picking up mail while someone's out of town.

"It's really become a family," McConnell said. "It's not just music, it's friendship, support, and belonging."

Michele Machowicz knows that firsthand. A retired teacher and former ECC English instructor, Machowicz got involved in the steel drum band in a roundabout way. She first encouraged her husband, Tom, to join and tagged along to rehearsals, which led to an invitation to try it herself.

"I couldn't even read music," she said, "but I was up for the challenge."

She started in the beginner class on entry-level instruments and gradually progressed to more complex ones. Today, she plays

side-by-side with her husband and is fully immersed in the band's vibrant community.

"We all get along so well," she said. "We go out to eat, attend parties, help each other install things in the home, and even take trips together."

Her message to those considering joining? "Just try it, because it's so much fun. And we play a wide variety of music."

That openness is what makes the ensemble stand out. Unlike traditional music groups that often require technical experience, ECC's Steel Drum Band is open to all, with no prior musical background necessary.

"Most people come in at the same starting point," McConnell explained.

"Some have played before, some haven't, but we work together. It's a community-driven learning experience."

The band plays an eclectic mix of music — everything from classical and '60s rock to Caribbean calypso and modern

pop. Their performances reflect the players' diverse interests and the instruments' roots.

"Steel pan has always been about taking familiar songs and giving them new life," McConnell said. "We try to honor that tradition in everything we play."

The next chance to see ECC's Steel Drum Band in action is at their winter concert, scheduled for Wednesday, December 4. The performance will showcase the group's wide-ranging repertoire and the vibrant energy they bring to the stage.

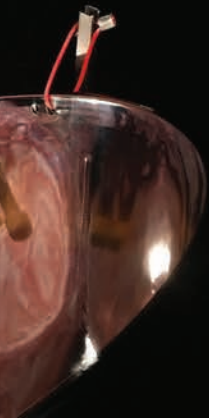
McConnell encourages those interested in joining or simply learning more to reach out. "Come to a concert. Talk to us. Try the instruments. We're always excited to welcome new members, no matter your experience level."

As McConnell continues to grow the program and look for new ways to bring steel pan into the broader Elgin community, his commitment to the ensemble remains rooted in gratitude.

"This isn't just a class," he said. "It's a community that changes lives, just like it changed mine." ■

## LEARN MORE

Visit [elgin.edu](http://elgin.edu) to learn more about ECC's six ensembles, including concert band, choir, and jazz.





# GOAL KEEPER



## Academic support team and lessons from sports help keep student athlete in the game



Elgin Community College student-athlete Brandon Gonzalez, of Elgin, has dreamed of playing professionally, maybe even internationally, since

his days in pee-wee soccer. But in his first semester, as his GPA plummeted to 0.7 on a 4.0 scale, he watched those big goals slip further from reach.

When recruited to ECC as a goalie for the men's soccer team, Gonzalez struggled to balance athletics, work, and school.

"After finding out I might no longer be eligible to play soccer, I realized I needed to turn things around," Gonzalez said.

The first step was switching his major from business to fire science, where he found a new enthusiasm for school.

"I enjoy my classes more and recognize that school comes first, then soccer."

Gonzalez treated his classes like practice, approaching them with consistency and discipline. Through Athletes Committed to Excellence (ACE), a mandatory program for all first-semester athletes, students participate in weekly tutoring sessions, connect with campus resources such as wellness professionals or success coaches, and check in weekly with Melanie Schaefer, ECC's sports information and academic support specialist.

By his second semester, Gonzalez raised his GPA to 3.4.

"He is the player who took the biggest leap forward in terms of his overall GPA," Coach Dimitri Tsoukalas said. "After changing his major and realizing what he was passionate about, he skyrocketed and finished with one of the highest GPAs on the team."

Gonzalez credits Schaefer and Tsoukalas with helping him make a successful GPA turnaround.

"Melanie definitely made a big difference," Gonzalez said. "She really understood my goals, academically and athletically, and together we picked out a class schedule that worked with playing soccer, while coach Dimitri kept me accountable and reminded me that academics come first."

"Our doors are always open," Schaefer said, which enables students like Gonzalez to feel more comfortable seeking advice.

Because of their open-door policy, ECC student-athletes get to know Schaefer, Kent





Payne, athletic director, and Bill Angelo, athletic coordinator, on a personal level. Laughter and conversation often fill the athletic department offices.

"It is different for us because we deal

with 150 student-athletes, and they are more than an ID number," said Payne, who has been at ECC for 25 years. "We know what is happening in their lives, what they may struggle with. We get to know them,

**ECC student and soccer player Brandon Gonzalez blocks a shot on goal, above. Melanie Schaefer provides academic support, left.**

and not everyone has that opportunity."

That support extends beyond the field. "It ensures students are accountable and know they have many opportunities for support," Schaefer said. "We show them that we are here for them."

Angelo, who achieved his 800th career win as a baseball coach last year, said his philosophy centers on failing forward.

"Sports are a great opportunity to learn life lessons," added Angelo. "You will struggle and fail, but you must remember you can dust yourself off and start again."

Gonzalez continues to excel on and off the field. He plans to graduate and either transfer to a four-year school or pursue his dream of playing soccer internationally. ■







# PASSPORT TO LEARNING

Study abroad transforms student's outlook

B

efore Elgin Community College, Anamika Dua's journey began in India, where she pursued education until she turned 21. When her life trajectory shifted to building a family, her studies stopped.

Dua moved to the United States in 2014 and eventually found a job working in the ECC library. Every day, she watched students pass through, borrowing books, researching assignments, and chasing their goals. The atmosphere reignited something in her.

"Say yes to the program."

— Anamika Dua

With her two sons now grown, Dua decided it was finally time to focus on herself.

"In my culture, women often put family first," she said. "But now that they're older, I finally have the opportunity to continue my education."

Returning to school after three decades wasn't easy, but she always valued learning. "Education is an asset no one can take away," Dua said. "Education is wealth that can never go bankrupt."

In 2023, she enrolled part-time and took a career assessment test in the college's Career Development Services office, discovering an interest in psychology.

"I'm especially drawn to working with young adults or children," she said. "Supporting them with the right values and mental tools early on is like strengthening the foundation of a house; it's essential."

Currently, Dua is taking a philosophy class that she describes as "inspiring," though she said she is torn between psychology and philosophy as a field of study.

Her curiosity stretched further when she learned about ECC's study abroad



**Anamika Dua strikes a pose in front of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris.**

opportunities. Having studied French nearly 35 years ago, the chance to travel and study in Dijon, France, captured her attention.

"It's very important to travel because it broadens your perspective," she said.

The four-week program blended academics with cultural immersion. Dua took Ancient and Medieval Western Humanities and elementary French, while exploring museums, city tours, Paris, and the south of France. She traveled with fellow ECC students and others from across the Midwest, led by a faculty liaison. In total, about 40 students participated.

For Lauren Nehlsen, PhD, an associate dean who directs global engagement, stories like Dua's capture the heart of ECC's study abroad mission.

**STUDY ABROAD** continued on **PAGE 11**





# FUNDING FUTURES



S

ince 2012, Purses with Purpose has provided more than financial aid to women students at ECC. It has created a vibrant community of support, mentorship, and inspiration.

Stewarded by the ECC Foundation and led by retired ECC business professor Sharon Fisher-Larson, Purses with Purpose is the college's largest giving circle.

Donors who contribute \$1,000 or more annually are invited to participate in the program's in-person interviews with scholarship applicants, where women students share their stories, goals, and dreams directly with those funding their futures. "It's about showing up, listening to these students, believing in their potential, and being there for them throughout their journeys," said Bonita Goist, manager of alumni and affinity relations.

To date, Purses with Purpose has awarded nearly \$200,000 in scholarships to 138 students, many of whom are first-generation college students, working mothers, or adult learners returning to school to improve life for themselves and their families. Scholarships are funded through donations and an endowed scholarship fund. A committee determines how much to award each year based on the cohort's size and needs. This year's \$20,000 allocation is slightly higher than last year's and provided scholarships for 10 students.

But what makes this program truly transformative is what happens after the

## 2025-2026 Scholarship Recipients

1-Katie Licon  
Colorado

2-Brianna Garcia

3-Miriam  
Hernandez

4-Maria Jaimes

5-Chianna  
McConahay

6-Arizbeth Jurado  
Rodriguez

7-Merna Sedrak

8-Lynn Stringini

9-Maya Wade

10-Vera Wang



award. The mentorship component pairs donors with scholars, building relationships that extend far beyond the classroom.

### A Safe Place to Land

As a then-single mother raising a nonverbal, autistic six-year-old son, 2024 Purses scholarship recipient, Raymesha "Ray" Henry juggled far more than academics during her time at ECC. Living in Carpentersville, managing car troubles, and recovering from a car accident, she navigated the demands of parenting, college, and her own goals.

Henry became a leader in ECC's Black Student Achievers, participated in the TRiO program, earned ECC Foundation scholarships, and was part of the inaugural cohort that helped launch the college's Center for Civic Engagement — a program that teaches students to become thoughtful and engaged civic leaders. Even with her involvement and personal drive, she longed for something more, which she found through Purses with Purpose.

"This financial opportunity turned into a bigger opportunity because I was able to network and make connections with a diverse group of women," she said.

She was paired with a mentor, ECC Senior Director of Marketing Strategy Ashley Zeman, who offered empathy, encouragement, and a safe space to be herself.

"She didn't try to fix everything," Henry said. "She just showed up, and that made all the difference."

After graduating in May with an Associate in Science degree, Henry is continuing forensic psychology studies with a minor in criminology at Northern Illinois University. She's moving forward with a renewed confidence, and the support system she once hoped for is now firmly in place.

**"It's just wonderful to see the opportunity that's there for them — and to be a part of it."**

**— Donna Bolz**

### Mentors Who Inspire and are Inspired

For ECC employee and Henry's mentor Ashley Zeman, joining Purses with Purpose was a way to give back, but it ended up giving her something too.

"I initially signed up because I was looking for a meaningful way to support female students at ECC," Zeman said. "I didn't expect how much I would gain from the experience."

Zeman described being continually inspired by Henry's passion, drive, and resilience. "Being a mentor has given me a deeper understanding of the challenges our students face," she said. "It creates a lasting bond."

Retired educator and second-year mentor Donna Bolz appreciates the scholars' diversity and courage. "I loved the range of ages and personal stories," she said. "It's just wonderful to see the opportunity that's there for them — and to be a part of it." For Bolz, mentoring means being a cheerleader, believing in others, and nurturing growth.

### A Lifelong Circle

Each year, past and current scholars are invited to reconnect at events like a fall meet-and-greet and holiday celebration. When scholars graduate, they're presented with a symbolic "dream bracelet" representing their lifelong place in the Purses with Purpose circle.

"This is one of the most personal and inspiring scholarship programs we have," Goist said. "You see your gift's impact firsthand, not just in dollars, but in confidence, ambition, and belonging." ■

### LEARN MORE

Visit [elgin.edu/foundation](https://elgin.edu/foundation) to learn more about Purses with Purpose and how to get involved.

### STUDY ABROAD continued from PAGE 9

"Studying abroad isn't just about travel; it transforms how students see themselves, their communities, and their role in a global society," Nehlsen said.

Dua embraced every moment, from exploring to sharing meals with new friends. She even managed to take a train to Switzerland.

"Honestly, I was scared," she said, laughing. "I had printed directions in one hand, the app in the other, and a backup battery. But I kept telling myself, 'You can do this.'"

Dua's biggest concern was the cost. "The program was expensive," she said. "But there's help and there's hope." With scholarships, professional development funds, and reimbursements, she made it possible. Her advice now: "Do not let money be the reason you don't apply."

What happened in France changed more than

Dua's passport stamps. She found a new confidence and reminders of human kindness — like the farmer in Bern who returned her lost bag. After an hour of retracing her route, she spotted him waving it across a field. Everything was still inside. "I cried," she said. "It reminded me that kindness is universal."

So what would Dua tell an ECC student who is hesitant about studying abroad? "Say yes to the program," she said. "It's a bigger picture than you can see right now. You'll be 100% present, reflecting on what you thought before, what you learned there, and how you've changed afterward. It becomes a part of you forever." ■

**The summer 2026 study abroad application deadline is February 15.**

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