

A PUBLICATION OF ELGIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Impact

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Read about ECC
student Delanie
Parker's shift
to robotics

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PLUS

Meet our new
president and learn
about her vision for
ECC's future

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Elgin
Community
College



MISSION

The mission of Elgin Community College is to improve people's lives through learning.

SHARED VALUES

*Excellence
Freedom of Inquiry
Ethical Practices
Accountability
Collaboration
Holistic Approach*

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Empowering Futures

A message from the ECC President and Board Chair

Dear ECC Community,

Elgin Community College is not only shaping the future; we are embracing it.

In this edition of Impact magazine, we discuss the vision for Elgin Community College and our top priorities for the future. We spotlight one of our alumni, now attending Yale University as a graduate student. We also highlight the expansion of our robotics and automation program in our community's new 150,000-square-foot manufacturing and technology center opening for classes in fall 2026. Additionally, we are excited to share a local client success story from the Illinois Small Business Development Center at ECC.

At the college, we are deeply committed

to being a resource for all members of our community. Whether you are a student, a local business owner, or someone looking to learn new skills, we are here to empower you. Our mission to improve lives through learning goes beyond providing an education; we are dedicated to helping people of all backgrounds achieve their personal and professional goals. From accessible academic programs to financial aid, career coaching, and more, ECC strives to create pathways to future success for everyone.

We hope you enjoy reading these inspiring stories about the impact ECC continues to make both in and out of the classroom as much as we did. Thank you for your support as we reflect on the past, celebrate the present, and look toward a bright future.

We look forward to seeing you on campus!

Warm regards,



Peggy Heinrich, EdD
President



Jennifer Rakow, BA
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ON THE COVER:

ECC maintenance technician apprenticeship program student Delanie Parker holds an assembled pneumatic valve.

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HER OWN BOSS



Elgin business owner Erin Ramirez wasn't always her own boss. After years of life experiences and a push from her husband, she found the courage to step into the entrepreneurial space. Ready to take the leap but unsure how to succeed, Ramirez found the Illinois Small

Business Development Center (Illinois SBDC) at Elgin Community College, which became the lifeline she needed.

The Illinois SBDC at ECC is part of the Workforce Development and Continuing Education division, providing support for businesses through internships, apprenticeships, hiring assistance, and training. At the Illinois SBDC's 2024 Better Your Business Breakfast, Ramirez met the center's director, Ian King.

"The event offered a lot of value, and so I thought, 'If they're able to put this much into a free event, how much can I get from their one-on-one services?'"

Ramirez took advantage of the center's many no-cost services. Entrepreneurs and small business owners can receive advice on management, marketing, finance, and operations. They benefit from personalized advising and workshops focused on business development. The center is not just for start-ups but also helps clients looking to scale their businesses.

"We take a holistic approach and are very customizable, which sets us apart," King said.

The Illinois SBDC meets clients where they are — sometimes, this means laying the foundational work before diving into business plans. King has helped clients with everything from sales coaching to networking and market analysis.

That personal touch differentiated the Illinois SBDC for Ramirez. With the center's support, she launched Real Change Studio, where she provides coaching and training to leaders and organizations undergoing company-wide change.

"Change is often uncomfortable," she said.

Although Ramirez officially launched her business in February, she has already celebrated significant milestones.


"Thanks to the preparation, I was able to leave my corporate job and earn the same salary in my first month. It's a big accomplishment and gives me peace of mind that it was worth the wait."

"I'm thrilled," Ramirez said, adding that she also started this business with the goal of making these services accessible to local businesses in the area.

"Elgin needs this, and it shouldn't be a luxury service."

She encourages others to give the Illinois SBDC a chance because it helps clients understand their business journey and fill in the gaps.

"Entrepreneurs need that kind of support." ■



Erin Ramirez



The ECC Board of Trustees appointed Peggy Heinrich, EdD, as ECC's ninth president in December 2024.

MADAM PRESIDENT

A new era for Elgin Community College: Peggy Heinrich leads the way

W

hen Peggy Heinrich, EdD, became the ninth president of Elgin Community College, she was both honored and exhilarated.

Heinrich, who is deeply committed to higher education and community service, views her new leadership role as the continuation of a personal journey that has evolved throughout her career.

Looking back, Heinrich never imagined herself leading a community college. "If I were telling my story, I'd probably go backward and say that I thought I would be a high school English teacher, and I thought I'd be happy doing that," Heinrich said. "But as I grew in my career, I found my passion for working with adult learners and for higher education administration."

Heinrich discovered her true calling through her work with non-traditional students — the opportunity to transform lives through education.

Over her past 18 years at ECC, Heinrich has been an integral part of the institution's growth. She has held various administrative roles, each one deepening her understanding of the pivotal role community colleges play in fostering educational and professional success.

"What excites me most about this new chapter is the opportunity to have an even greater impact on our students and community," Heinrich said. "ECC has a strong foundation of affordability, flexibility, and academic excellence,

and I am committed to building upon that legacy."

ECC's mission to serve its diverse community is something that Heinrich is keenly ardent about.

"The road ahead may have its challenges, but I am confident that together, we can build on ECC's legacy of excellence and open up even more opportunities for the people we serve," she said. "This is not just a job for me — it's a community I care about deeply, and I can't wait to start."

One of Heinrich's top priorities as president is to sharpen the focus on student success, ensuring that ECC graduates are both prepared for graduation and equipped to thrive in their post-graduation endeavors. "It's not enough to just get our students to graduation — we want to ensure they are thriving after they leave us, whether that means transferring to a four-year university or launching directly into the workforce," Heinrich said. With a commitment to preparing students for the realities of both academia and the professional world, she is determined to continue expanding ECC's workforce-oriented programs.

ECC has long been a beacon of opportunity in the region, and under Heinrich's leadership, the institution is positioning itself to meet the demands of the modern workforce. "Our goal is to bridge the gap between education and industry needs," Heinrich explained. "We're constantly adapting our curriculum to ensure that our graduates are job-ready and in demand." Manufacturing and

technology are areas of particular focus for the college. Heinrich is dedicated to ensuring that ECC remains a leader in providing progressive education in these fields. "We're investing in state-of-the-art facilities and equipment," she said, noting that these investments not only enhance students' learning experiences but also prepare them for the advanced technologies they will encounter in their careers.

A fundamental component of Heinrich's leadership is community engagement. Under her guidance, ECC continues to

"We're constantly adapting our curriculum to ensure that our graduates are job-ready and in demand."

— **Peggy Heinrich**, President,
Elgin Community College

foster meaningful partnerships with local businesses and organizations. "We're not just an educational institution; we're a vital part of the community," Heinrich said.

"Our outreach programs and partnerships with local businesses create a symbiotic relationship that supports the economic health of our district."

As ECC's inaugural woman president, Heinrich takes immense pride in the opportunity to break new ground while continuing to build upon the college's rich history. "My leadership style is centered on building strong relationships, fostering

collaborative decision-making, and demonstrating a deep commitment to our community," she said. She stressed that engaging with students, faculty, staff, and local stakeholders will be central to her approach as she charts the next chapter for this remarkable institution.

With a clear vision for the future and a deep-rooted understanding of the needs of both students and the broader community, Heinrich is ready to lead ECC into its next era of excellence. "Success and affordability go hand in hand at ECC," Heinrich said, emphasizing the institution's commitment to providing high-quality education without overwhelming students with debt. "Everything we do is aimed at helping our students thrive. From academic support services to career guidance, we're dedicated to seeing our students achieve their goals."

Under Heinrich's leadership, ECC is not simply responding to the evolving educational landscape but helping to shape it. As she looks to the future, Heinrich is committed to ECC's continued cultivation as a college at the forefront of higher education, workforce readiness, and community service. With a focus on positive student outcomes, community partnerships, and continued innovation, Elgin Community College is poised for an exciting future — and Peggy Heinrich is ready to lead the way. ■

READ MORE ON MANUFACTURING AND TECHNOLOGY:

See Cover Story, Page 6-7.



President Heinrich checks in on a chess game at the 'Manufacturing Student Showcase' event, above, and participates in commencement, left.

Mike Marin, Parker's mechatronics instructor, shows her how to position the robotic arm using a control box called a 'teach pendant.'



Station to station

There are eight key stations in the pneumatic valve construction process for smart factories to ensure quality and reliability. The entire process, slowed down for training purposes, takes roughly two minutes to complete. Students gain hands-on experience with advanced manufacturing technologies, including automation and quality control. These valves are produced for machines which make familiar items found in common households.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Pick & Place Plastic or aluminum valve body is selected, then a suction gripper grabs the valve body and moves it to the next station.	Gauging Sensors verify the valve body for the correct size.	Indexing Aligns the pre-drilled holes and ensures correct orientation.	Queuing Lines up and prepares pieces for robotic assembly.	Robotic Assembly Robot places valve body onto the assembly station, which adds the spool, push button, and screws to the valve.	Torquing Tightens the screw in the valve to meet proper specifications.	Testing Picks up the assembled valve and uses hydraulics to actuate the push button and test with air to check for proper operation.	Inventory Storage Selects good parts and organizes them for packing, while discarding defective ones.

PROGRAMMED FOR SUCCESS

Student prepares for the fourth industrial revolution

Delanie Parker has driven three hours from Iowa to ECC once a week for nearly three years to participate in the college's maintenance technician

apprenticeship. Why the sacrifice?

"I know that I'm going to have the opportunity to provide better for my children than what I've been doing," she said.

Parker is an electrician and mechanic at Smithfield Foods, Inc., in Iowa. Before that, she worked in maintenance and later took a job at a gas station.

In 2022, ECC and Smithfield partnered to offer a maintenance technician apprenticeship program for Smithfield employees. The program provides training at the company's Bolingbrook, Monmouth, and St. Charles facilities. Participants like Parker are working toward an Associate of Applied Science (AAS) in integrated systems/maintenance technology (IST) from ECC while gaining hands-on engineering and mechanical experience.

The tuition-free program includes three years of classroom learning and one year of experience at Smithfield facilities. Apprentices receive an associate degree, state and federal journeyman certifications, and a full-time salary with benefits. ECC's AAS degree is fully transferable toward a bachelor's degree at all Illinois state colleges and universities.

With the expansion of manufacturing in the United States, the demand for skilled personnel to install and maintain machinery is growing. As a mother of four who has been out of school for 16 years, Parker initially feared she wouldn't succeed. Her supervisor encouraged her to apply, especially with Smithfield shifting to robotics and automation — an area where she lacked experience.

Now, Parker has developed an interest in mechatronics. "With more skills, my future looks bright."

Hands-On Learning

In 2024, ECC became the first and only community college in Illinois to acquire smart factories through a partnership with Amatrol, a global leader in career and technical education training solutions. These systems help students learn how to program industrial computers, which build parts on an assembly line.

Students like Parker gain experience working with robotic arms and automation systems, learning to troubleshoot, program, and optimize industrial systems. The hands-on experience goes beyond traditional textbook learning, giving them a competitive edge in the job market.

Preparation

ECC's commitment to preparing students for the future of manufacturing and automation will expand with its 150,000-square-foot Manufacturing and Technology Center (MTC), which will open in the fall of 2026. The state-of-the-art facility will provide students with advanced resources and opportunities in fields such as industrial maintenance and HVAC.

The introduction of smart factories at ECC is part of a broader push to prepare students for the digital transformation of manufacturing, particularly with the rise of the fourth industrial revolution. With increasing calls to onshore American manufacturing jobs, ECC is training students for in-demand careers.

Expanding Opportunities

In March of 2023, Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi presented the college with \$936,000 in federal funding for the mechatronics and automation program, one of several new programs to be housed in the MTC, which broke ground

last September.

Parker's instructor, Mike Marin, who teaches HVAC/IST, emphasized the importance of continuous learning in mechatronics and advanced manufacturing.

"Technologies and systems are always advancing, and our goal is to prepare students for this ever-evolving landscape," he said. "Introducing them to the smart factory environment gives them the tools and knowledge they need to be adaptable and successful in the industry."

Marin is excited about the new MTC because it will give students experience working with advanced systems unhindered by space limitations.

"The new MTC building will allow us to expand our smart factory system," Marin said. "This expansion will allow us to have more equipment in permanent locations and have separate areas for the louder automation equipment so students can better concentrate in the quieter mechanical areas."

The additional space and new

equipment will introduce more advanced technologies, such as additional robots, which the current space can't accommodate. Marin emphasizes that this will significantly improve the learning experience for students.

"The expansion gives us more room, newer equipment, and greater capabilities to enhance our students' hands-on learning in advanced manufacturing and automation," he said.

When given the opportunity to participate in a similar program closer to home, Parker declined. "Instructor Mike is the reason I wanted to stay at ECC," Parker said. "He breaks everything down, is super accommodating, and is the best." Parker's journey is proof that with the proper training, support, and determination, it's possible to reshape your future — no matter the distance. Although Parker began the program with hesitation, her confidence has grown. She isn't sure what's next but knows the new skills she's learning will take her further than she ever imagined.

As ECC continues to invest in cutting-edge technology and workforce development, students like Parker are building the skills they need to thrive in an evolving industry and create better lives for themselves and their families. ■



Scan to see a video tour of the new Manufacturing and Technology Center.



Anala Thakkar

REACHING FOR THE STARS

ECC student Anala Thakkar explores NASA program



Anala Thakkar, of South Elgin, Ill., is on track to achieve her mission to graduate with an Associate in Science degree in the summer of 2025. Before completing her degree,

she accomplished a significant milestone by participating in the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) Community College Aerospace Scholars Program, for which she was selected in June of 2024.

"I applied without even knowing how competitive it was," Thakkar said.

From an initial pool of over 6,000 nationwide applicants, Thakkar joined a group of just 600 students for Mission 1. This foundational phase of the program offered an in-depth exploration of NASA, which breaks down into five Mission Directorates: Aeronautics, Exploration Systems, Science, Space Operations, and Space Technology.

After completing Mission 1, Thakkar was one of 450 students selected for Mission 2, a competitive, week-long career simulation in which participants worked in teams to design and develop a lunar rover simulation.

"Anala excelled in this phase, assuming the role of science communication specialist. She contributed to the technical aspects of the project and played an integral part in communicating the team's work to NASA mentors and the public," said Farah Bennani, PhD, dean of math, science, and engineering. "Her ability to thrive in this high-pressure environment reflects on her adaptability, which is a key characteristic of our students at ECC."

To handle the strenuous nature of the program, Thakkar relied on what she learned in her classes at ECC and stayed organized. "ECC's physics classes helped me better understand the aeronautical and technical

aspects," Thakkar said. "It was very stressful, and I probably spent over 30 hours working on Mission 2. Time management was a critical skill to have during that time."

Despite the program's intensity, Thakkar enjoyed working with students across the country who were just like her. "The NASA program helped me quite a bit because I could interact with people with the same interests as me," Thakkar said. "It was nice to have a community of college students across the nation to talk about our passions while working on the project together."

Her interest in physics began at a young age when she realized how quickly she grasped

math and science and easily solved problems. Her turning point came in eighth grade at a career fair hosted by District U-46, where she met a physicist from Fermilab.

"She told me about her work, and I thought it was cool and interesting, and that pushed

me to want to do work like that, too," Thakkar said. "Ever since, I started trying to learn more about physics and math, making it my focus."

Part of that focus was also to enjoy herself. Thakkar became a member and president of ECC's Mu Alpha Theta math club after Chris Cunningham, assistant professor of mathematics, scouted her to lead the group.

"Anala is not just an excellent student; she is also a natural leader," Cunningham said. "She took a band of disorganized math students and turned them into a club. I hope we get her to come back and visit often after she graduates!"

Thakkar is hard at work applying to universities and looks forward to pursuing a PhD in physics.

"Physics is pretty versatile, but my preferred avenue would be research," Thakkar said. "That can be hard to break into, but there are a lot of options with a physics PhD, so I'm staying flexible." ■

"I applied without even knowing how competitive it was."

— Anala Thakkar



Gabriel Cabrera Ruiz

YALE MAN

ECC alum climbs New (Haven) heights



Gabriel Cabrera Ruiz, '21, is living where he once never dreamed he would: New Haven, Connecticut. He found himself on the picturesque campus of Yale University, where he began his first semester in the fall of 2024 as an environmental studies graduate student.

Cabrera Ruiz doesn't consider his journey to the Ivy League the typical path, but every decision and connection laid the foundation.

"ECC really helped me bridge the gap to higher education because it was affordable," he said.

"When I came to Yale, I had to constantly remind myself that I earned my place here and that I was offering a different perspective that others might not have encountered before. I came completely detached from wealth and privilege."

When he attended ECC, he thought he would take classes and transfer. However, after becoming involved in the student-life community and joining the Organization of Latin American Students (OLAS), he began to form life-changing connections.

"ECC helped me find the people that inspired and empowered me," Cabrera Ruiz said.

He became treasurer of OLAS and helped lead events.

"Gabriel was such a positive energy in OLAS and was very passionate about spreading awareness and advocating for the Latinx community," said Gaea Atta Moy, student life coordinator and OLAS advisor.

Through OLAS, he felt empowered to embrace his status as a deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA) student. A peer inspired him to share and spread information about undocumented students on campus.

"She was open about her status and unapologetic about it," Cabrera Ruiz said. "That really inspired me."

Cabrera Ruiz graduated from ECC in 2021 and transferred to Northern Illinois University (NIU), where he completed his bachelor's degree in environmental science.

"ECC made me resourceful, and I took that to NIU," Cabrera Ruiz said. "That's where I met my mentor, Dr. Holly Jones. She pushed me to believe in myself, to want more, and not just settle on any opportunity."

Cabrera Ruiz formed a strong relationship with Jones, who, like him, was also a first-generation college student. She motivated him to aim high.

This led to his acceptance at Yale University and selection as one of 25 Cairns Scholars, a program that supports emerging environmental leaders.

"I was afraid at the time, but I began networking and mingling, and I found people who helped me, like

at ECC and NIU," he said.

Cabrera Ruiz recently accepted a research assistant position in Yale's geospatial analysis lab, allowing him to work in an area related to his field.

"It's a very exciting opportunity," Cabrera Ruiz said. "Last semester, chances like these were harder to get because I was working 40 hours a week outside of Yale. I've been working and going to school since ECC to pay for rent and groceries. These opportunities are more valuable than being a barista because I can learn and network more."

As Cabrera Ruiz embraces new possibilities, he'll never forget the key things that got him here: staying positive, avoiding comparisons, and finding a strong mentor.

His advice? "Never lose your spark [because] when that happens, you give up." ■

"ECC helped me find the people that inspired and empowered me."

— Gabriel Cabrera Ruiz

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