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First-Generation
Edition



Elgin
Community
College



LEADING THE WAY

A message from the ECC President and Board Chair

Dear ECC Community,

There is always something exciting happening at Elgin Community College, and this fall is no exception. Our official fall enrollment is 8,920 students, representing an 11% increase over last year. Throughout the fall, even more students came to ECC in our 12- and eight-week late start sessions, putting us over 9,000 enrollees. A bustling campus reminds us that ECC is a special place that offers countless opportunities for learning and growth.

We're also excited to move forward with the construction of a \$55 million manufacturing center that will be built near our main Spartan Drive entrance. This pioneering space will house the computer numeric control (CNC) machine program; heating, air conditioning, ventilation, and refrigeration (HVAC-R); energy management; industrial maintenance and mechatronics; welding; and a new pipe welding program that previously stalled due to space limitations. We also plan to offer space for community innovation, idea incubation, and 3D printing labs. Increasing our capacity to prepare the next generation of the manufacturing workforce is critical for continued growth and stability in our communities and our nation as a whole, as well as for meeting the evolving needs of our region's employers.

Ensuring our students and communities have

access to the educational resources needed is at the core of ECC's mission to improve people's lives through learning. We see no better evidence of succeeding in our mission than sharing the stories of our remarkable students, employees, and alumni. In this issue, we learn about five first-generation ECC students: Leslie, Michael, Kristina, Yesenia, and Habeeb. First-generation students identify as the first in their family to attend college or for which neither parent nor guardian graduated from a college or university in the United States. More than 35% of ECC's students are considered 'first-gen.'

Many first-gen students face additional language and financial obstacles, along with balancing work and family responsibilities with schoolwork. At ECC, these students don't have to face these challenges alone. Programs such as the Alliance for College and Career Student Success, Talent Search Transitions, Upward Bound, and TRiO all offer resources to help students navigate a path to and through college. ECC also offers robust financial aid options and scholarships specifically for first-gen students.

We hope you are just as inspired as we are by the stories of determination and drive shared in this issue. Our first-gen students are shining examples of all that is possible at ECC. If you or someone close to you is considering attending college for the first time, returning to learn new skills, or exploring a different career, we would love to meet you. ECC is here to welcome you and ensure your success. Thank you for your continued support.



David Sam, PhD, JD, LLM
President



Jennifer Rakow, BA
Chair, Board of Trustees

FEATURED FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

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ON THE COVER:
Leslie Gracia, a leader for ECC's student body.

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The Leader LESLIE GRACIA

AS A CHILD OF MEXICAN IMMIGRANTS who did not have an education past the sixth grade, Leslie Gracia was intimidated but confident in her decision to attend college. "Being the first to go to college is game-changing for my family and me. Even though it's scary going into something totally new, I know I'll end up with a good outcome," she said.

Gracia considers herself a shy person and never imagined she would dive even further into the unknown and seek out leadership roles in college. "In high school, I was scared to talk to people, but when college came, I tried to get out of my shell," said Gracia. Last year, she served as the service officer for the Rho Kappa chapter of Phi Theta Kappa International Honor Society. This academic year, she took a more significant step and ran for student body president, which she now serves proudly.

Gracia's growth at Elgin Community College began early on when she joined the TRiO Upward Bound program — a federally funded college preparation program that helps eligible high school students. The program helps first-generation students develop the knowledge, skills, and motivation necessary to succeed in high school, enroll in college, and graduate.

As a first-generation college student, Gracia leans on programs like TRiO to help her navigate. Gracia knew she always wanted to continue learning after high school and received moral support at home and technical support through the programs. "My parents help my sisters and me in every way they can and help us prioritize school before anything else."

Gracia realizes how important it is to seek help. "It's hard sometimes to ask for help, especially if you are shy like me. But reaching out to people for more information helps you gain access to new opportunities," she said. As this academic year progresses, Gracia continues growing as a leader for ECC's student body, finishing her Associate in Science degree, and applying to colleges to reach for the stars with a major in astrophysics. ■

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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The Community College District 509 Board of Trustees meets at 6:30 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month, unless otherwise posted on the board's web page. All meetings are held in: Building E, Room E125 Seigle Auditorium Elgin Community College 1700 Spartan Drive Elgin, IL 60123

You can access board agendas, minutes, instructions for addressing the board, and board contact information at elgin.edu/boardoftrustees.

For additional information, contact the Office of the President at 847-214-7374 or dkerruish@elgin.edu.

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The Helper

MICHAEL LACALA

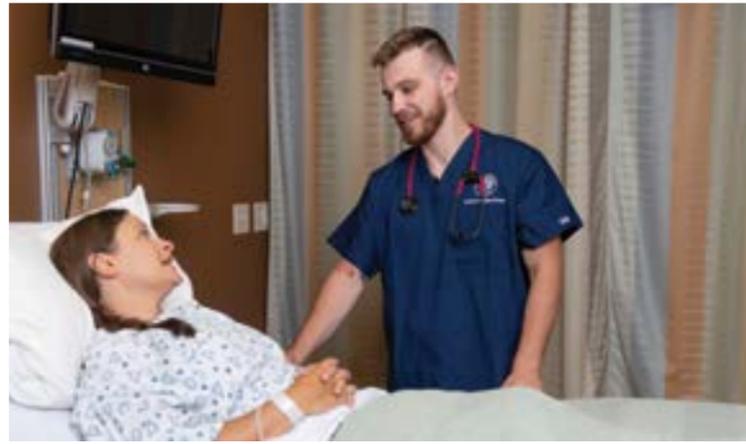
WHEN MICHAEL LACALA DECIDED TO ENROLL at Elgin Community College, it came with support from his parents, but not without some difficulties along the way. When Lacala's parents were 18 years old, they immigrated to the United States in search of a better life for themselves. While his mother finished high school, his father did not.

During grade school, Lacala was also enrolled in English as a second language classes and attended Polish school weekly. From an early age, Lacala was challenged to excel in school while learning English and maintaining his Polish culture and traditions. His parents' focus on education encouraged him to go to college. "They were always quite supportive and pushed me to go to school and get an education to find a good job," he said.

"I started taking some psychology courses in high school and found them quite interesting," said Lacala. "After researching, I thought I might want to work with forensic patients (people diagnosed with mental disorders and have a history of criminal offenses)." In addition to working nearly full time, Lacala discovered the logistics of college involved a lot of trial and error to stay organized, balance his studies, and stay on top of his financial needs.

After graduating from ECC, Lacala found full-time work in his field of interest as a security therapy aide at the Elgin Mental Health Center and decided to pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology at Elmhurst University. While gaining experience in the field and the classroom, he realized he wanted to take it one step further. "I felt like I wanted to do more and care for the whole person, so I decided to return to ECC for nursing," said Lacala, who graduated from the program in the spring of 2022.

Lacala plans to continue working at the Elgin Mental Health Center, now in the role of a nurse, another accomplishment his family celebrates. "They always mention how proud they are and tell other family and friends because it is a big deal for us," said Lacala. "I think it also makes them feel that everything they sacrificed and did for us was worth it." ■



ECC nursing graduate Michael Lacala listens to a patient. Lacala shown with his parents Aneta and Edwin, in their family home (far left).



The Generation Changer

KRISTINA BROWN

KRISTINA BROWN GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL with interest in going to college but instead entered the workforce full time. Then, she received a graduation present from her uncle — a check payable to Elgin Community College for her to explore a few classes, so she did. As a first-generation college student, Brown considered majoring in English and becoming a college teacher. However, she changed her career choice once she began working as a student worker in the ECC Early Childhood Lab School.

"After only a semester of working in the child care center, I switched my major," said Brown. "When I graduated, I went on to try a few daycare centers but realized they were not my fit. I called ECC and asked if I could come back — I'm now in my 29th year here." Brown currently works as the supervisor of child care services.

As the second oldest of five children, Brown's positive experience helped influence her younger siblings. Her youngest sister earned an associate degree at ECC, and her middle sister also found her place working in ECC's child care center. Brown's two children also followed her lead, obtaining associate degrees from ECC and continuing on to Northern Illinois University for their bachelor's degrees. "My kids knew from an early age they needed to have some sort of an education to pursue what they wanted in life," said Brown. "Through my time in education, I was able to help them navigate certain areas of college, and in their decision to attend ECC, they were able to save money and still have a good experience like I did." Brown's son plans to earn a master's degree and aims to teach college English.

Brown's education didn't stop at ECC. She recently completed her bachelor's degree from Walden University. "I just worked my way through it, taking two to three classes at a time while continuing in the job I love at ECC," said Brown. "I owe it to my kids for influencing me to get my bachelor's degree. It was the right time in my life, and they gave me the push I needed while they continued to pursue degrees of their own." ■



Kristina Brown, supervisor of child care services, reads a story to children in ECC's lab school classroom.



The Artist

YESENIA ARROYO

TO YESENIA ARROYO, A BLANK PAGE REPRESENTS a world full of possibilities. Since high school, Arroyo's passion for art, specifically charcoal and pencil drawings, inspired her desired career path. "Ever since I started high school, I wanted to be an art teacher. Art is a huge part of my life," she said.

Going to college to pursue her dream appeared as another blank page, but one Arroyo has a passion for filling just the same. "Elgin Community College was my first choice because I am from Elgin and have an older sister who went here," said Arroyo. "I also wanted to choose a college that would benefit me and was also great with cost and tuition." As one of five children, she knew she needed to be smart about her financial choices when pursuing higher education.

Arroyo's experience at ECC as a first-generation college student taught her to seek help. "I was always afraid to ask for help, but entering college made me realize you need to and that no one is judging you. With financial aid, scholarships, and help from my parents, I didn't have to pay for anything, which is great, especially since I live in such a big household," said Arroyo. Arroyo's parents, who are from Mexico, provide support for their children but are limited in how much they can help. "My main priority was to make sure I maintained good grades and reduced the cost of college as much as I could for my parents."

Arroyo won first place in the ECC Student Art Exhibition in 2021 and best-in-show in 2022. "Seeing my accomplishments, my family is very happy, which shows them how an art career is possible," said Arroyo. She also works part-time teaching art to children at Side Street Studio Arts in downtown Elgin. The studio has helped her sell two of her paintings. "I love it there. They are fantastic. They helped me expand my means of where I can feature my art."

Now well on her way to inspiring future artists, Arroyo finished her studies at ECC in August of 2022 and transferred to Northern Illinois University to complete a bachelor's degree in education. ■



Yesenia Arroyo looks through her artwork in a drawer at Side Street Studio Arts in downtown Elgin.



The Risk Taker

HABEEB AWOLUMATE

A NATIVE OF NIGERIA, HABEEB AWOLUMATE left his family and homeland to chart a new course for his future. "For me, going to college was never really a decision. It was always in the plan, and I knew that coming to the United States to study computer science was my goal," he said.

With unwavering support from his father, Awolumate knew he would succeed. "My dad would always say, 'Just go to school, and it will be easier that way,' knowing that it would help me and my siblings not have the same struggles he and my mother had," said Awolumate. The need to earn an income and support a growing family didn't allow his parents the opportunity to continue their education; however, they made it a priority to help their children with what was not available to them.

Awolumate first landed on the east coast, intending to start college. But when his living arrangements fell through while faced with limited finances, Habeeb moved to Illinois to stay with an acquaintance of his father and discovered a newfound opportunity to begin his studies at Elgin Community College. "At first, it was very hard because being alone is hard. You have to make your own connections and adapt to a new country and culture," said Awolumate.

Now living on his own and taking classes, Awolumate works nearly full-time to support himself. Habeeb was grateful to receive a scholarship through the ECC Foundation, which he learned about as a member of the Black Student Achievers club. With this financial assistance, Awolumate has more time and energy to focus on his ultimate goal — earning a computer science degree.

"I have always been interested in computers, and this field is full of opportunities," he said. "I know if I am financially stable, I can also help my siblings and parents." After the fall 2022 semester, Awolumate will have one more class to earn his Associate in Science degree before transferring to Northern Illinois University to pursue his bachelor's degree. He will be well on his way to making his dreams a reality. ■

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