



VIEW FROM THE VALLEY

JUNE 2026



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WVC CELEBRATES CLASS OF '26 AT 64TH ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT

Wabash Valley College celebrated the Class of 2026 during its 64th annual commencement ceremony, recognizing graduates for their academic achievement, perseverance and the next steps they are preparing to take.

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The ceremony brought together graduates, families, faculty, staff and community members to celebrate an important milestone in the lives of WVC students.

"We are here tonight to celebrate with these graduates the attainment of an important milestone in their educational careers," WVC President Dr. Matt Fowler said during the ceremony.

The evening included an invocation by graduate



LEFT: Noah Alka performs the National Anthem.
RIGHT: Dr. Christopher Ballard delivers the Charge to the Class.

Sam Brooks and the singing of the national anthem by graduate Noah Alka. Isabella Leurk and Alex McGinnis served as freshman student honor marshals.

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges trustees Brenda Culver, acting vice chair, and Roger Browning conferred the degrees and certificates.

Dr. Christopher Ballard, a family medicine physician and Mount Carmel High School graduate, delivered the charge to the class. Ballard encouraged graduates to see commencement not as an ending, but as a beginning.

"I hope that you celebrate this graduation well, because you have worked diligently, you've stayed the course and you've persevered to complete the requirements of your degree," Ballard said. "But we are also here to celebrate your next steps."

Ballard reminded graduates that life rarely moves in a straight line and that each new chapter brings another opportunity to learn, grow and move forward.

"We must remember that life is a series of steps," Ballard said. "We must keep moving forward even when we aren't ready, or occasionally when life forces us to do so."

He also encouraged graduates to make a difference in the lives of the people around them.

"You don't have to make your mark on the whole world, just those around you," Ballard said. "You've got this, I promise. And when you don't, God's got you."

The ceremony also included several recognitions for student achievement. Dr. Cathy Robb, IECC vice chancellor of academic affairs, recognized members of Phi Theta Kappa, the Nation-

al Technical Honor Society and the Alpha Delta Nu Nursing Honor Society. Graduates who participated in TRIO Student Support Services were recognized, along with graduates who served in the armed forces.

Academic honors also were recognized. Students who earned a grade-point average between 3.50 and 3.74 wore bronze cords, students with a GPA between 3.75 and 3.99 wore silver cords, and students who earned a 4.0 GPA wore a gold tassel and gold cord.

WVC also recognized faculty and staff during the ceremony. Rich Poskin, a life science assistant professor, was named Transfer Instructor of the Year. Megan Bunage, a nursing assistant professor and WVC graduate, was named Career and Technical Instructor of the Year. Terrence McGee, head men's basketball coach, was named Adjunct Instructor of the Year.

Kim More, a member of WVC's operations and maintenance department, received the TRIBE Award, which stands for True Role Model Inspiring by Example. The award recognizes employees who demonstrate outstanding achievement, contribution and performance beyond their regular duties.

The WVC Foundation also presented several scholarships during the ceremony, including the Charles S. Tate Scholarship, the Walter F. Holland Jr. Scholarship, the Robert and Norma Bethards Scholarship, the Day Family Scholarship and the James Watson Engineering and Science Scholarship.

After the degrees and certificates were conferred, graduates moved their tassels from the right side of their caps to the left. One by one, they crossed the stage as their names were announced.

After the final graduate crossed the stage, the celebration moved outside for a reception hosted by the WVC Foundation. Caps and gowns gave way to family photos, congratulations and a few extra moments to let the night sink in.

That was the heart of commencement at Wabash Valley College: a room full of individual stories, all arriving at the same milestone together.

WABASH VALLEY COLLEGE
CLASS OF 2026

182 GRADUATION CANDIDATES


17 YOUNGEST CANDIDATE **51 OLDEST CANDIDATE**


22.0 AVERAGE AGE


24.7% FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS

MOST POPULAR DEGREE TYPE
ASSOCIATE OF APPLIED SCIENCE

TOP DEPARTMENTS


AGRICULTURE


NURSING


BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

WATSON REMINDS CLASSMATES THEIR PAST DOES NOT GET THE FINAL SAY



Derek Watson opened his commencement speech with a joke.

Standing before his fellow Wabash Valley College graduates, their families, faculty and staff, Watson looked out at the crowd and acknowledged the moment with humor.

"I know what you guys are thinking right now," he said. "This guy looks really cool, but I'm up here underneath all this, I'm sweating like a sinner at church on Sunday right now."

The laughter helped break the tension. But moments later, Watson's speech turned deeply personal.

Three years earlier, he told the audience, he was sitting in a federal holding facility, unsure whether he would see his family and friends again. He also was recovering from a gunshot wound he sustained a month before he was incar-

cerated.

"At that moment in my life, I truly felt like I had nothing and nobody," Watson said.

On commencement night, however, Watson stood in a very different place. He was no longer talking about what had gone wrong in his life. He was talking about what had gone right.

Watson, of Robinson, Illinois, and Panama City Beach, Florida, graduated from Wabash Valley College with an Associate in Applied Science degree in radio, TV and digital media. During his time at WVC, he was a member of Student Senate. His future plans include pursuing a career in the entertainment industry.

But his student response at commencement was about more than earning a degree. It was about transformation, accountability and the power of a second chance.

Watson told the crowd that his path to graduation was not a straight one. He said he spent years "traveling coast to coast" and living life on his own terms before a turning point came three years ago.

“For the first time in a long time, I stopped focusing on everything that had gone wrong in my life, and I had started thinking about what could go right,” Watson said. “For the first time in a long time, I started trying to put positivity into the world instead of chaos.”

After his release in June 2024, Watson said he began repairing relationships with family and friends. He also made the decision to return to college. He had tried once before, in 2018, but said life took him in another direction.

This time, he said, was different.

“This time I stuck with it,” Watson said. “I didn’t get distracted, I didn’t drift away, and I didn’t quit when things got difficult.”

Then came the line that captured the heart of his message.

“I can finally say something that for a long time I truly believed was never in the cards for me,” he said. “I have a college degree.”

Watson credited Wabash Valley College and the people on campus with helping him reach that moment. He said faculty members did more than teach course material; they invested in students. He specifically mentioned instructors and staff members who helped make learning meaningful and made him feel supported.

“The way they engaged with students, the way they treat everyone with patience and respect, is something I had honestly never experienced before in school,” Watson said. He also pointed to the broader support system at WVC, including office staff, financial aid employees and library staff.

“No matter what your situation is, no matter how busy your life is, no matter where you’re starting from, the college finds a way to meet you where you are,” Watson said. “And for someone like me, that meant everything.”

Watson’s message to his fellow graduates was direct: Everyone has a story, and not every story follows the same timeline.

“Some of us took the straight path to get here,” he said. “Some of us took a more scenic route.”

But graduation, he said, proved something important.

“Your past does not get the final say in your life,” Watson said. “It doesn’t matter where you started. It doesn’t matter how many times you have fallen. What matters is whether you decided to get back up.”

His speech drew a strong reaction from the crowd. After Watson finished, WVC President Dr. Matt Fowler called it “maybe one of the better responses we’ve ever had.”

For Watson, the moment was both a celebration and a beginning. He encouraged his classmates to enjoy commencement, but reminded them that the next chapter begins quickly.

“Celebrate the work we have done to get here,” Watson said. “Live in this moment as long as you can. Because tomorrow the work begins.”



GOLDMAN'S JOURNEY COMES FULL CIRCLE



Cassandra Goldman arrived at Wabash Valley College with a goal, but not yet a roadmap.

She wanted to become a lawyer. As a first-generation college student, though, she did not know what that path looked like. She did not know any attorneys who could explain the process, and she was still trying to understand how to connect her ambition to a career.

WVC became the place where that future started to feel possible.

"I had goals and ambition, but I was still trying to figure out how to connect those goals to a career," Goldman said. "WVC became the place where those possibilities started to feel real."

Years later, Goldman is preparing to lead the college that helped shape her own future. Goldman will serve as Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs and President-Designate for Wabash Valley College, bringing her journey full circle

from student to alumna, attorney, Wabash County State's Attorney, college administrator and now President-Designate.

It is a role she never imagined as a student.

"If someone had told me then that I would one day become the president of WVC, I probably would have laughed and told them they had the wrong person," Goldman said. "At that point in my life, I was focused on becoming a lawyer."

Goldman said she knew Dr. Harry Benson was WVC's President at the time, but she did not know what a college President did on a day-to-day basis. The idea that she would one day serve in that kind of role herself would have seemed impossible.

That is part of what makes the opportunity meaningful.

"It is a reminder that education can take you places you never anticipated, and that sometimes the opportunities that change your life are the ones you never saw coming," Goldman said.

Goldman's memories of WVC begin with the faculty members and experiences that helped

her discover what she was capable of becoming.

She remembers Gary Shaw's psychology courses, which challenged her to think differently about people, behavior and the world around her. She enjoyed the classes so much that she chose psychology as her major.

She also remembers Dr. Patricia Owens, who served as adviser for Student Senate and Model U.N. Goldman said Owens had a remarkable ability to create opportuni-



TOP: Goldman (back row, right) with other members of Model United Nations

CENTER: Members of Student Senate when Goldman was a student

BOTTOM: Goldman and other members of Model UN prepare for the Midwest Model United Nations Conference.

ties for students and encourage them to step outside their comfort zones.

One of those opportunities came when local attorney Jody McPherson was invited to speak to Student Senate. Goldman was interested in law, and hearing from someone practicing in the field made that goal feel more tangible.

Another came during a Student Senate-sponsored political forum. As a student, Goldman helped behind the scenes in the





ABOVE: Long before she became a student, alumna, employee, and president, Cassandra Goldman was already connected to WVC through campus youth activities. She and her younger sister were members of the WVC baton & pom-pom team called the Wabash Valley Twirlers sponsored by Professor Brenda Phegley.

green room. Years later, she participated in that same event as a candidate for public office.

“At the time, I never would have imagined that connection,” she said.

Goldman also represented Canada with her classmates at the Model U.N. Conference in St. Louis. The experience helped her develop skills in advocacy, negotiation, public speaking, leadership and policy discussions.

Those experiences became building blocks.

“Looking back, many of the skills I use as an ad-

ministrator can be traced back to opportunities that began at WVC,” Goldman said.

WVC helped Goldman bridge the gap between ambition and action. Through faculty mentors and student leadership opportunities, she learned to communicate, think critically, advocate for ideas and lead with confidence.

Those lessons helped prepare her to transfer, attend law school and build a career in public service.

“Most importantly, WVC gave me confidence,” Goldman said. “It helped me realize that my goals were achievable and that I belonged in spaces and professions that once seemed out of reach.”

Goldman pursued law because she saw it as a profession centered on advocacy, problem-solving and public service. Those interests eventually led her to become Wabash County State’s Attorney.

Her legal career continues to shape the way she leads.

As an attorney, Goldman learned to analyze complex issues, make difficult decisions, communicate clearly and listen carefully to people with different perspectives. She said those lessons translate directly to higher education, where each day involves problem-solving, relationship-building, interpreting policies and making decisions that affect students and employees.

For many years, Goldman expected to spend her career in law. Higher education was not part of her original plan. But WVC again played a role in changing her trajectory.

Shortly after Goldman was elected State's Attorney in 2008, Theresa Marcotte, then WVC's Dean of Instruction, approached her about teaching as an adjunct instructor. The right opportunity did not materialize at WVC, but Marcotte connected Goldman with McKendree University's AiM Program, where she began teaching law courses.

Goldman discovered how much she enjoyed working with students. In 2019, she expanded her teaching into McKendree's MBA program. Over time, she realized the parts of her legal career she found most fulfilling involved mentoring others, sharing knowledge and helping people create opportunities for themselves.

When she decided in 2020 not to seek a fourth term as State's Attorney, she knew she wanted her next chapter to be in higher education.

"Looking back, it is fitting that the journey ultimately led me back to Wabash Valley College," Goldman said. "An institution that helped launch my own educational journey also helped introduce me to a career in higher education."

Goldman joined Illinois Eastern Community Colleges as Director of the International Program, a role that combined public service, education and student support. She later became Dean of Students, deepening her connection to student success and strengthening her understanding of the challenges students face today.

Returning to WVC as an employee did not feel like coming back to a place she had left behind. In many ways, she said, WVC had always been part of her life.

She remained connected to the college and the community throughout her legal career. She has served on the WVC Foundation since 2002, and many faculty and staff members have been friends, neighbors, mentors and colleagues for years.

"There were moments when I would walk across campus and remember being a student, but there was also a strong sense of purpose," Goldman said. "I understood what WVC had



ABOVE: WVC has impacted multiple generations of the Goldman family. Cassandra's father earned his degree from WVC as an adult learner and later taught in the college's truck driver training program.

meant to me, and I was grateful for the opportunity to help create those same opportunities for others.”

As Goldman prepares for her new role, she said her first reaction was gratitude, followed quickly by responsibility. She thought about the faculty members who shaped her, the opportunities she found through Student Senate and Model U.N., and the people who helped her discover possibilities she could not yet see for herself.

She also thought about her family’s connection to WVC. Goldman’s father earned his degree there when she was in third grade and later taught for IECC’s CDL program. Her mother earned her degree at WVC after her children were grown.

“WVC has touched my family across generations,” Goldman said. “It helped launch my educational journey, and it provided opportunities for my parents as well.”

For Goldman, serving in a leadership role at her alma mater carries special significance.

“This role carries a special significance because WVC is not just where I work,” Goldman said. “It is part of who I am. It helped shape my future, and now I have the privilege of helping shape the future of the institution.”

Goldman said what makes WVC special is its people and their commitment to students. As President-Designate, she wants students to feel that they belong, whether they are first-generation students, student-athletes, international students, working adults or recent high school graduates.

Most of all, she wants them to feel hopeful.

“I want them to see WVC as a place where opportunities are created, futures are shaped, and possibilities become real,” Goldman said.

If Goldman could speak to her younger self on the first day she arrived at WVC, she would tell her that it is OK not to have everything figured out. She would tell her that having a dream and having a plan are not the same thing, and that WVC would help bridge that gap.

Most importantly, she would tell her to believe in herself.

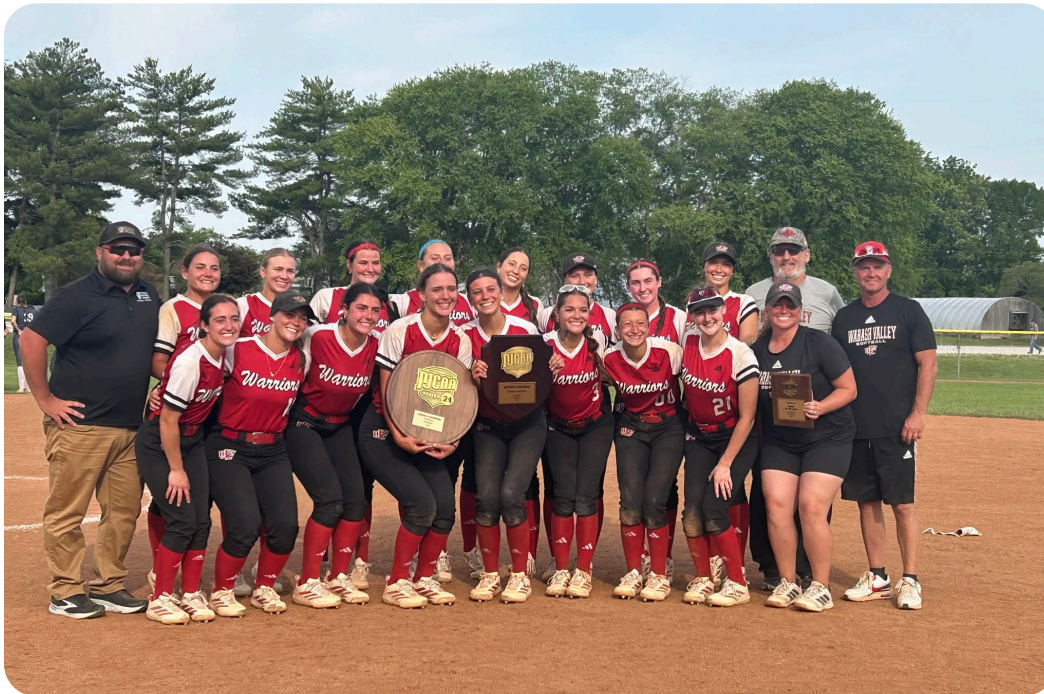
“The path ahead will not always be predictable, but it will lead to opportunities beyond anything she can currently envision,” Goldman said.

And if she told that young WVC student that one day she would return as President, Goldman knows how she would have responded.

“She probably wouldn’t believe me,” Goldman said. “But I would tell her anyway.”

TWO TEAMS, TWO WALK-OFFS, TWO WORLD SERIES TRIPS FOR WVC

Wabash Valley College's baseball and softball teams gave the college two national-stage moments this spring, with both programs reaching the NJCAA World Series after dramatic postseason runs.



The Lady Warriors softball team finished 42-20 and returned to the NJCAA World Series for the first time since 2015. The Warriors baseball team closed the year 44-22 after earning the No. 8 seed in the national tournament and winning its World Series opener.

For softball, the late-season surge began March 31. From that point, WVC was one of the hottest teams in the country,

closing the regular season 23-3 and carrying an eight-game winning streak into the Region XXIV and Midwest District Tournament.

The Lady Warriors won their first two tournament games before falling to Spoon River, forcing them into an elimination path. On the final day, WVC had to win three games to claim the championship.

The Lady Warriors beat John A. Logan 12-8, then defeated Spoon River 3-1 to force a second championship game. Easton Wampler went 3-for-3 with two runs scored in the first win over Spoon River, while Mireya Rose drove in two runs. Olivia Hemmerle earned the win, and Gra-ci Hines picked up the save.

The final game needed extra innings, and Hines gave WVC a chance. She threw all eight innings, allowing one unearned run on four hits. Wampler provided the offense, driving in both WVC runs. She tied the game with a sacrifice fly, then ended it in the bottom of the eighth with a walk-off home run that gave the Lady Warriors a 2-1 win and sent them back to the World Series.

At the national tournament in Oxford, Alabama, WVC drew the No. 19 seed. The Lady Warriors opened with a 3-1 loss to Gaston College despite a fourth-inning RBI single from Rose that gave WVC a brief lead. WVC then fell to the College of Southern Idaho 8-3. Wampler had two hits and a triple in the season finale, while Addison Hill and Selby Patberg drove in

runs.

The baseball team built its own postseason run with a perfect Region XXIV Tournament, going 3-0 before finishing 4-1 in the Midwest District Tournament.

The Warriors also faced a winner-take-all moment. After falling to Iowa Western 18-10 on the final day of the district tournament, WVC responded with a 6-5 win in the deciding game on a pinch-hit, walk-off home run by Owen Cornett.



At the NJCAA World Series in Grand Junction, Colorado, the Warriors opened with an 11-6 win over Midland College. WVC overcame an early 4-2 deficit, scoring three runs in the third, one in the fourth and four in the fifth. Leandro Hernandez drove in three runs, while Enrico Veach and Brady Schallmoser each had two RBIs. Veach, Schallmoser and Hernandez all homered.

The Warriors then fell to Blinn College 10-2, with Cameron Dube hitting a solo home run and Bryce Adams collecting three hits. In an elimination game against Louisiana State University Eunice, WVC kept answering early, tying the game three times through four innings before LSU Eunice pulled away for a 14-7 win. Veach homered and drove in three runs, while Hernandez, Andrew Dixon and Dube also drove in runs.

The World Series results were not what either team hoped for, but both programs had already done something difficult before they arrived. They won when their seasons were on the line.

That is what will stand out from WVC's spring postseason run: two teams, two district championships and two walk-off home runs that sent the Warriors and Lady Warriors to the NJCAA World Series.



ABOVE: Owen Cornett and Easton Wampler hold District Championship trophies after hitting walk-off homeruns

WVC, IECC PREPARE FOR WALK-IN WEDNESDAYS

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges will host Walk-In Wednesdays in July to help prospective and current students take the next steps toward enrollment for the fall semester.

Walk-In Wednesdays will take place from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. July 8, 15, 22 and 29 at all four IECC campuses: Fron-



ABOVE: A student meets with an advisor to go over classes.

tier Community College in Fairfield, Lincoln Trail College in Robinson, Olney Central College in Olney, and Wabash Valley College in Mount Carmel.

The events are designed to make the enrollment process easier by giving students access to key services without the need for an appointment. Staff will be available to help with advising, financial aid, placement testing and other steps needed to get ready for fall classes.

“Walk-In Wednesdays are designed to make the enrollment process a little easier for students,” said Chris Forde, Director of Marketing and Communications for Illinois Eastern Community Colleges. “Whether someone is planning to start college for the first time, return after time away or finish getting ready for the fall semester, this gives them a chance to stop in, ask questions and get help with their next steps.”

Students can use Walk-In Wednesdays to meet with college staff, review program options, discuss financial aid, complete placement testing or make progress toward enrolling for the fall semester.

To make the most of their visit, students are encouraged to bring their high school or college transcripts, a driver’s license or state ID, their Social Security number or card, and a completed FAFSA. If applicable, students may also bring an IEP or 504 plan to help with academic accommodations.

More information is available by contacting any IECC college or visiting iecc.edu.

IECC TO SUPPORT STUDENTS IMPACTED BY OCU PROGRAM SUSPENSION

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges is organizing a coordinated student support response following Oakland City University's recent announcement that it will suspend undergraduate operations for the 2026-27 academic year.

"Our focus is on students and making sure they can continue making progress toward their academic goals," said IECC Chancellor Ryan Gower. "Behind institutional announcements are real students and families facing uncertainty about credits, financial aid, scholarships, athletics and what comes next. As a public community college system serving this region, we believe we have a responsibility to help where we can."

As part of that response, IECC announced plans to honor qualifying OCU academic and athletic tuition and fee scholarships for transferring students.

Under the framework, IECC will honor the dollar amount of qualifying OCU institutional academic and athletic scholarships as first-pay institutional aid, up to the full cost of tuition and fees at IECC.

"Our goal is to create as much continuity and stability for students and their families as possible," Gower said. "Students should not feel like their educational momentum has to stop because of circumstances outside their control."

IECC officials also acknowledged that a significant number of OCU students participated in intercollegiate athletics and said opportunities may exist for some student-athletes to continue competing at IECC campuses where roster space and program needs align.

"We recognize athletics are an important part of the college experience and educational pathway for many OCU students," Gower said. "Where our coaches believe a good fit exists and NJCAA requirements can be met, we want those students to know IECC campuses may be able to provide pathways for them to continue both academically and athletically."

Chris Forde, IECC director of marketing and public information, said the institution's goal is to provide clear and accessible information as quickly as possible.

"We understand students and families are processing a great deal of uncertainty right now," Forde said. "Our focus is on making sure they have clear information, direct points of contact and immediate opportunities to begin planning their next steps."

IECC officials said additional information about advising events, scholarship support, transfer guidance and student resources will be available at iecc.edu/ocu.

Gower emphasized that the institution's response is rooted in IECC's public mission and commitment to the region.

"Community colleges exist to create access, opportunity and stability for students," Gower said. "This is one of those moments where that mission matters deeply."





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01 The WVC Student Nurses Association hosted Air Evac. Students learned about career paths in flight nursing.

02 WVC students got to prepare for graduation at Grad Fest and had some fun posing for pictures.

03 Students showcased their talent at the WVC Performing Arts Showcase.

04 WVC held a special graduation ceremony for baseball and softball players.

05 Graduates line up as they prepare for the processional at graduation.

06 WVC's Class of '26 poses for a group graduation photo.