

The VOYAGER



MARCH 2026



HOPE AFTER CLOSURE

Community resources available after Champion Labs Closure.



INVEST IN STUDENTS

Alumni and community invited to support IECC students.



EXPLORING FCC PATHWAYS

Future students learn about FCC at SPIN.



IECC, COMMUNITY RALLY TO SUPPORT CHAMPION LABS WORKERS

On February 23, First Brands Group, LLC announced the permanent closure of Champion Laboratories in Albion. News of the shutdown spread quickly throughout the region, with approximately 1,000 employees immediately losing their jobs. Despite efforts to keep the facilities operating, First Brands Group said the decision to close the Albion plant came only after all possible options had been exhausted. Once it became clear that no viable path forward remained, the difficult decision was made to permanently shut down the facility.

Since the announcement, Illinois Eastern Community Colleges has stepped forward to assist displaced workers and their families. The situation is reminiscent of another major local plant closure more than a decade ago. In 2013, Airtex Products announced layoffs as it began winding down operations at its Fairfield facilities, with the final layoffs occurring in 2016. Frontier Community College President Dr. Sharmila Kakac said the Champion Labs closure is a deeply traumatic event for the community, similar to what she experienced during the Airtex shutdown.



Justn Young (left) and Brittany Longbons (right) speak with a former Champion Laboratories employee about financial aid options during the Rapid Response event. FCC's Financial Aid department was among several resources available to assist workers and answer questions.

"My immediate reaction was asking what we can do to let them know that help is here," she said. "This is a gut punch for many people, but there are resources and opportunities available to help them decide what their next step will be."

Kakac said IECC can provide several pathways for displaced workers, including short-term training programs that help individuals quickly return to the workforce, as well as longer-term certificate and degree programs offered across the four IECC campuses: Frontier Community College, Wabash Valley College, Olney Central College, and Lincoln Trail College.

"For one thing, we are in the best position to provide people two options," Kakac said.

"One is to provide short-term training that will help them get back to work. A lot of people at Champion worked on assembly lines. There aren't as many line jobs here, so we need to help upskill them—give them additional skills that will help them find opportunities in manufacturing or related fields with a different skill set."

"The second option is that some people may decide they want to move away from manufacturing entirely and do something different," she continued. "In those cases, we have certificate and degree programs they can take advantage of. There is funding available for those programs because they are now considered dislocated workers. Those are two important ways we can help."

Kakac emphasized that IECC campuses are also local resources for individuals who simply need guidance on what to do next.

"We have four campuses in the region impacted by this closure," she said. "People should feel comfortable walking into their community college and saying, 'I need help.' Whether that's help we can provide directly or connecting them with the agency that can assist them, we want to be that resource. We are a community college, and moments like this are when we focus on the community piece."

Kakac said one of the first steps displaced workers should take is contacting Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) representatives for assistance. Through WIOA and other programs, grants are available to help cover the cost of training and educational opportunities.

She also emphasized that the support from IECC goes far beyond the rapid response events that were recently held.

"One of the things I wanted people to understand is that IECC is here for them not just during the rapid response event that was held at Frontier," Kakac said. "We are here for the duration—however long it takes for them to figure out what their next step will be."

“They may decide they don’t want to do anything right now. Maybe they need a few weeks or a few months to regroup. If they decide later that they want to come back to school or pursue training, we will still be here for them.”

Kakac said it is important for workers to understand they have options.

“Yes, they are dislocated workers right now,” she said. “But they have time to take a breath and consider new directions. They may take classes, earn a certification, or pursue a degree that helps them pivot into a different field. We want them to know we are here to support them through that transition.”

She added that IECC maintains close relationships with regional employers and is committed to aligning training programs with workforce needs.

“We work closely with employers throughout the region and understand the skill sets they are looking for,” Kakac said. “It’s very important that the training we offer aligns with those workforce needs.”

She noted that IECC regularly communicates with industry partners, including an upcoming manufacturing roundtable scheduled for June.

“A lot of manufacturing today involves Industry 4.0, which includes automation and robotics,” she said. “We offer both short-term and long-term training opportunities to meet those evolving needs.”

Kakac also pointed to growing demand in healthcare careers.

“This summer, we will be launching a program with Fairfield Memorial Hospital that functions as a pre-apprenticeship,” she said. “It allows recent high school graduates to explore healthcare careers and determine if they are interested in pursuing healthcare programs.”

Kakac said IECC continually evaluates workforce needs across multiple industries to ensure programs remain relevant and beneficial for the region.

“We are always looking at what industries in our region need and how we can help meet those needs,” she said. “It’s an ongoing effort.”

Kakac also praised the community response following the Champion Labs closure.

“We live in a very generous community,” she said. “The ability to make one phone call and have 10 people respond is incredible.”



Former Champion Laboratories employees visit resource tables inside the Workforce Development Center on Monday, March 9, gathering information and exploring next steps following the plant closure.

She said local businesses and organizations quickly stepped forward to help during the rapid response events.

"I contacted the Chamber to help coordinate these events," Kakac said. "Businesses donated snacks and water, and some even provided grocery gift certificates for those who attended."

"It's truly amazing to see how people care about one another and recognize how difficult this time is for these workers and their families," she added. "Even small gestures can go a long way when people are hurting."

SCHOLARSHIPS BUILD FUTURES



**DAY OF
GIVING**
MARCH 31, 2026

FCC freshman Chloe Papineau smiles as she listens to her instructor during the first day of classes in August 2025. Alumni near and far, along with community members, are encouraged to take part in the upcoming Day of Giving.

IECC'S FIRST DAY OF GIVING SET FOR MARCH 31

Illinois Eastern Community Colleges will host its first-ever coordinated Day of Giving on March 31, inviting alumni, businesses, and community members to support student success across its four campuses.

The 24-hour event will feature fundraising efforts led by the foundations of Frontier Community College, Lincoln Trail College, Olney Central College, and Wabash Valley College. Each campus will focus on raising support for scholarships, programs, and initiatives that benefit students.

IECC Vice Chancellor of Institutional Outreach Tona Ambrose said the idea for a coordinated Day of Giving grew out of the district's recent reorganization and a renewed focus on strengthening alumni engagement.

"IECC has wanted to establish an alumni community for years, and with the collaborative reorganization of our district two years ago, it seemed like the perfect time to create our first Day of Giving," Ambrose said. "This event gives each of our college foundations an intentional opportunity to grow partnerships with alumni, businesses, and community supporters who care deeply about student success."

While each campus will highlight its own priorities, Ambrose said holding the event on the same day creates a sense of shared purpose across the district.

"Each campus has unique needs and priorities, but we are united by a commitment to serving our students and communities," she said. "A coordinated effort allows alumni and supporters to rally around the campus that means the most to them while still contributing to the broader IECC mission."

Support from the college foundations plays an important role in helping students succeed. Donations often fund scholarships, campus programs, and improvements to facilities and learning environments.

"Foundation support has a direct and meaningful impact on students every day," Ambrose said. "These gifts help make college more affordable, remove barriers that might otherwise prevent students from completing their education, and allow students to focus on learning and achieving their goals."

Ambrose emphasized that even small gifts can make a difference for students.

"A modest scholarship might help a student purchase a textbook, pay for a certification exam, or cover part of their tuition," she said. "When many people come together and contribute, even small amounts, the collective impact can be powerful."

Beyond fundraising, the event is designed to strengthen connections between the colleges and the communities they serve. It will also help the district reconnect with alumni and expand its ability to stay in contact with graduates in the future.

“Launching a coordinated Day of Giving reflects IECC’s commitment to building strong relationships with our foundations, alumni, and the communities we serve,” Ambrose said. “We see it as the beginning of a new tradition that celebrates community generosity and will have a lasting positive impact on our students.”

Ambrose said the event is about more than a single day of giving.

“Day of Giving is about building a culture of connection and pride,” she said. “We want alumni, community partners, faculty, staff, and students to feel that they are all part of something bigger. When our colleges succeed, our communities succeed as well.”



FCC advisor Eric Resor speaks with a high school student about opportunities at Frontier during SPIN on Tuesday, March 3.

SPIN SHOWCASES OPPORTUNITIES AT FRONTIER

Student Parent Information Night (SPIN) was held Tuesday, March 3, at the Workforce Development Center at Frontier Community College. Area high school juniors and seniors, along with their parents, attended the event to learn more about FCC and the academic and career opportunities available to them. A meal was provided by Big Boy Catering of Fairfield.

Director of Student Engagement & Recruitment for Illinois Eastern Community Colleges, Carrie Halbert, said the event was designed to help students and families gain a better understanding of the options available as they begin planning for life after high school.

APRIL 2026 EVENTS

2	Baseball @ SWIC	3:00
2	Softball vs Lake Land- DH	2:00
3	Spring Holiday - Campuses Closed	
3	Baseball vs SWIC - DH	12:00
3	Softball vs Kaskaskia- DH	12:00
7	Baseball vs Lincoln Trail	3:00
7	Softball @ John A. Logan - DH	2:00
9	Baseball vs Olney Central	TBA
9	Softball vs Spoon River- DH	2:00
11	Baseball @ Olney Central - DH	12:00
11	Softball vs Wabash Valley College - DH	12:00
12	Softball vs Shawnee - DH	12:00
14	Baseball @ Lincoln Trail	3:00
14	Softball @ SWIC - DH	2:00
16	Baseball vs Rend Lake	3:00
16	Softball vs SIC - DH	2:00
18	FCC Lineman Rodeo	9:00
18	Baseball @ Rend Lake - DH	12:00
18	Softball @ Shawnee - DH	12:00
21	IECC Board of Trustees Meeting @ FCC	6:15
21	Baseball vs Lincoln Trail	3:00
21	Softball vs Rend Lake - DH	2:00
23	Baseball @ Kaskaskia	3:00
23	Softball @ Olney Central - DH	2:00
24	Last Day to Withdraw From Spring Courses	
25	Baseball vs Kaskaskia - DH	12:00
25	Softball vs Lincoln Trail - DH	12:00
28	Baseball vs Vincennes University	4:00
28	Softball @ Lake Land - DH	2:00
29	Baseball @ Vincennes University	4:00
30	Baseball vs Vincennes University	4:00

MAY 2026 EVENTS

1	Baseball @ Vincennes University	2:00
8	Last Day of Spring Classes	
11 - 15	Final Exams	
15	FCC Graduation	7:00
18	First Day of Intersession Classes	
19	IECC Board of Trustees Meeting @ LTC	6:15
25	Memorial Day - Campuses Closed	
27	Intersession Midterm	

*Note that all baseball and softball sporting events are weather-permitting. For more information and updates, check out fccbobcats.com.

“Student Parent Information Night was an event hosted by Frontier Community College to provide high school juniors and seniors and their families with information about the college and its programs,” Halbert said. “The goal was to help students explore academic and career pathways, learn about opportunities available at FCC, and connect with faculty and staff who could answer questions and guide them through the college decision process.”

Throughout the evening, students and parents had the opportunity to visit program tables and speak directly with faculty, staff, and current students.

“SPIN allowed students and parents to interact directly with FCC faculty and staff through program tables and informal conversations,” Halbert said. “Faculty and staff were available to discuss their academic programs, explain career opportunities, answer questions about classes and training, and provide insight into what students can expect when enrolling at FCC.”

Halbert said it was encouraging to see the level of involvement from FCC employees and students who volunteered their time to assist attendees.

“It was very encouraging to see FCC faculty, staff, and students actively participating in the event,” she said. “Their willingness to share information, answer questions, and talk about their programs helped create a welcoming environment for prospective students and families. Their enthusiasm and knowledge demonstrated the strong commitment FCC has to supporting student success.”

Halbert added that events like SPIN help students begin to envision themselves as future FCC students.

“Events like SPIN are important because they give students and parents the opportunity to learn about programs, career pathways, and campus resources in a relaxed and informative setting,” Halbert said. “It helps students begin to picture themselves at FCC and allows them to ask questions that can help them make informed decisions about their future education and career goals.”

Halbert noted that feedback from attendees was very positive. Students and parents appreciated the



opportunity to speak directly with faculty and staff and learn more about specific programs and opportunities available at FCC. Many said the event was informative and helpful as they begin thinking about their next steps after high school.

“SPIN was a successful event that highlighted the many opportunities available at Frontier Community College,” Halbert said. “It was great to see strong participation from faculty, staff, and students, and the event provided a valuable opportunity for prospective students and their families to learn more about what FCC has to offer.”

Carrie Halbert, Director of Student Engagement and Recruitment, speaks to high school students and their parents during Student Parent Information Night (SPIN).

For more information about Frontier Community College and its programs, visit

iecc.edu/fcc or call 618-842-3711.

FAFSA NIGHT

Get Help Completing Your 2026-2027 FAFSA Application.

Things to Bring

- FSA ID
- 2024 Tax Return

Tuesday, March 31 | 3-6 PM

Workforce Development Center Room 32

Questions? Call 618.842.3711, ext. 4116



FCC Chemistry Instructor Steve Hnetkovsky runs in a marathon.

FCC'S STEVE HNETKOVSKY GOES THE DISTANCE

Running is more than a sport—it's a test of heart, discipline, and the quiet determination to keep moving forward when every step gets harder. From the historic Olympic triumphs of Eliud Kipchoge, who redefined the limits of the marathon, to the inspiring perseverance of Joan Benoit Samuelson, the first women's Olympic marathon champion, distance running has long showcased the power of human endurance. Legends like Haile Gebrselassie and Paula Radcliffe have pushed records and expectations, reminding us that every great run begins with a single step—and the courage to take the next one.

Frontier Community College chemistry instructor Steve Hnetkovsky brings years of running experience. His journey began in junior high school, and he began taking the sport more seriously in the early 2000s.

"I ran cross country in junior high and always enjoyed the sport. I ran on and off through college and my working career as well. I became more serious about running, mostly as a form of exercise, in the early 2000s and began running 5Ks, 10Ks, and eventually half marathons and then marathons. My real goal isn't racing—it's to run 1,000 miles per year, and the races help keep me motivated."

Proper stretching and smart nutrition set the foundation for a strong, safe run. Dynamic stretching helps warm up muscles, improve flexibility, and reduce the risk of injury, while the right pre-run

fuel gives your body the energy it needs to perform and endure. For Hnetkovsky, stretching, nutrition, and flexibility are key.

“The older I get, the more important stretching, weight training, and flexibility are to my preparation. Once I started doing functional strength training with sandbags and farmer carries, I was surprised that it improved my race times and my end-of-race energy.

Nutrition is also key—I focus more on less processed and energy-dense foods, as well as calorie intake. Weight is the enemy of long-distance runners, so maintaining a near-ideal weight is important.”

No run is ever the same. The weather shifts, your energy rises and falls, and each mile brings a different mental and physical challenge. That’s the beauty of running—every outing is a fresh experience, a new story written one step at a time. When asked about the most challenging marathon he has run, Hnetkovsky shared his experience at the Nashville Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon a few years ago.

“My daughter and I ran the Nashville Rock ‘n’ Roll Marathon a few years ago, and the course was very hilly with a lot of elevation changes, and it was hot as well. I had to adjust my goal finish time as a result. Running is humbling sometimes, and you don’t always have the race performance you had planned. I guess the lesson is that adjusting your goals and being flexible are part of life. In the end, I don’t think about what my race time was—I remember spending a weekend with my daughter and making memories. If you ask either of us about that race, we will say, ‘Nashville is hilly!’”

While running is quite different from teaching in the chemistry lab, Hnetkovsky says the discipline he developed through running has carried over into the classroom.

“Running and training for races has taught me that discipline is a decision. It’s easy to have what I call the ‘too’s’ excuses—you know, it’s too hot to run, or too cold, too early, too windy, etc. When people ask me how I maintain discipline, I usually say the running is the easy part—the decision to run every week is the hard part. But once you decide to do it, it’s easier—you just do it. The same goes for my work. I enjoy teaching, but sometimes grading papers is something I want to put off, and I usually tell myself to just do it. I feel better once it’s accomplished, and I did not use one of the ‘too’s’ as an excuse.”

Hnetkovsky runs three days a week and works out three days for 45 minutes, so the time demands are manageable. Getting a workout and a run in is better than not doing them at all. He prefers to run outdoors, though the winter months and shorter days in December and January can make that challenging. During those times, he has utilized the Bobcat Den to stay active.

When asked what advice he would give students or colleagues interested in long-distance running or setting big personal goals, Hnetkovsky emphasized starting slow.

“Start slow. Many people tell me they can’t even run a mile, and I tell them that I couldn’t either when I first started. A good rule of thumb for building endurance is: run faster or farther, but not



both in one run. Don't increase mileage more than 10% per week. Lastly, it's OK to walk if you need to!"

**FRONTIER COMMUNITY COLLEGE
ELECTRICAL DISTRIBUTION SYSTEMS
PRESENTS:**

LINEMAN RODEO

**Saturday, April 18
9 a.m.**

**FCC Workforce
Development
Center**

**Watch our EDS
students challenge
each other in timed
events such as speed
climb, hurt man
rescue, and more!**

**Lineman Rodeo t-shirts
will be available for
purchase!**

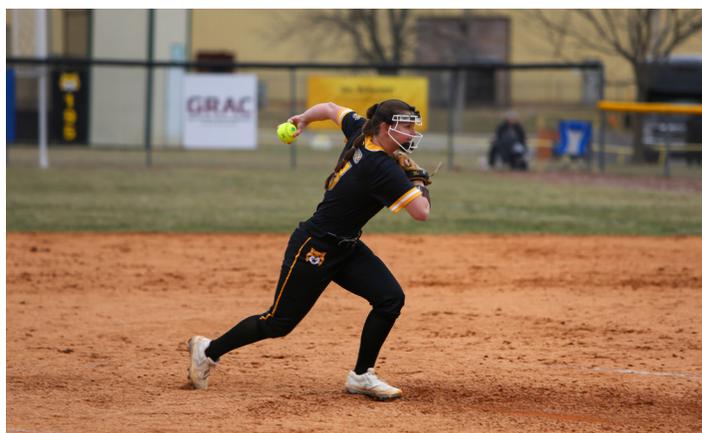


iecc.edu/fcc

618-842-3711



FCC IN PICTURES



1 Sarah Rush addresses crowd at FCC Meet the Candidates Forum on Thursday, February 19 at Workforce Development Center.

3 FCC's Kara Blanton and Brittany Longbons enjoy breakfast during National Employee Appreciation Day on Friday, March 6.

5 Kasey Lowe reaches first with hit at Bobcats opener. at FNB Field on Wednesday, February 25.

2 A student in Steve Hnetkovsky's chemistry class examines the contents of a test tube during a lab activity.

4 An aerial view of construction progress on the athletic facility, captured Friday, February 27.

6 Lexi Miller delivers a pitch during the Bobcats' home opener against St. Charles Community College on Wednesday, February 25.