

The VOYAGER



MAY 2026



CELEBRATING FCC GRADS

FCC to celebrate Class of 2026 Commencement



INVESTING IN STUDENTS

Jerry Cox's generosity leaves a lasting legacy at FCC.



STUDENT VOICE MATTERS

Student Trustee focused on inclusion and engagement.



FRONTIER COMMUNITY COLLEGE TO HOLD 48TH ANNUAL COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY

Frontier Community College's 48th Annual Commencement Ceremony will be held Friday, May 15, in the East Gymnasium at Fairfield Community High School. The ceremony will begin at 7 p.m.

The Fairfield Community High School Ensemble, under the direction of Mr. Joshua Livesay, will perform the processional to begin the ceremony. FCC President Dr. Sharmila Kakac will deliver the welcome address and announce the President's Award recipient, Emmalynn Vinson. Vinson will also serve as the student speaker, addressing graduates and guests.

Following Vinson's remarks, students who have received program and club awards will be recognized. Dr. Alani Frederick, Dean of Health Professions, will present the candidates for degrees and certificates. Mr. Gary Carter, Chairman of the Illinois Eastern Community Colleges Board of Trustees, and Mr. Jan Ridgely, Trustee of the IECC Board, will confer degrees and certificates.

Dr. Kakac will then deliver the charge to the class. The ceremony will conclude with the recessional, performed by the FCHS Ensemble under the direction of Mr. Livesay.

For guests who need assistance getting to the gym, a golf cart shuttle will be available. Blessed Blooms will have flower bouquets for sale. For those unable to attend, the ceremony will be livestreamed on Bobcat Nation YouTube channel.

Audience members are asked to stand for the recessional and remain in the gymnasium until all graduates have exited.

NEW ATHLETIC CENTER NAMED IN HONOR OF JERRY COX



Jerry Cox holds a proclamation presented to him during the Illinois Eastern Community Colleges Board of Trustees meeting. Pictured, from left, are Gary Carter, IECC Board Chairman; Cox; Dr. Sharmila Kakac, President of Frontier Community College; and Luke Harl, Frontier Community College Foundation President.

In its April 21 meeting, the Illinois Eastern Community Colleges Board of Trustees approved a resolution honoring Jerry Cox, a longtime supporter of Frontier Community College, and granting him naming rights to select elements of the new athletic center currently under construction on campus. Cox has recently made the FCC Foundation the beneficiary of a generous estate gift.

As part of this recognition, the Board approved the designation of the facility's athletic court as the "Jerry Cox Court" and granted full naming rights to the building, which will be known as the "Jerry Cox Athletic Center."

Cox's support of Frontier Community College has been steady over the years, including meaningful contributions to student scholarships, particularly in programs that strengthen the region's healthcare workforce. His giving reflects a commitment to investing in local students and supporting opportunities that directly benefit the community.

Earlier this year, Cox's donation helped make possible a significant enhancement to the new athletic facility. His financial support allowed the college to upgrade from a standard multi-purpose sport flooring surface to a premium hardwood court. This is a valued enhancement that will benefit student-athletes and the college for years to come.



IECC Chancellor Dr. Ryan Gower reads the proclamation naming the future court and athletic center as Jerry Cox Court and the Jerry Cox Athletic Center.

"The Board's decision recognizes not just a single gift, but a pattern of thoughtful, sustained support for IECC and the communities we serve," said Gary Carter, Chair of the IECC Board of Trustees. "Jerry has invested in students, programs, and facilities in a way that will have a lasting impact."

"These gifts are not only exceedingly generous but show Jerry's genuine belief in our mission and the people we serve," said Dr. Sharmila Kakac, President of Frontier Community College. "What makes it especially meaningful is that, through this partnership, he is not just a supporter, but an integral part of our story, our spirit, and our future."

"I've just always believed you take care of your own community. If you can help a few students along the way and make things a little better for the next group coming through, that's enough for me," said Cox.

The Jerry Cox Court and Jerry Cox Athletic Center will serve as central spaces for student engagement, competition, and community activity, reflecting the Board's continued commitment to providing high-quality facilities and opportunities for its students at all four of its primary campuses.

Those who have driven by campus recently may have noticed steel going up at the construction site. A drier spring and favorable weather have helped crews make progress as they continue setting the steel for the building frame.



FCC'S SAMANTHA COOMER BEGINS STUDENT TRUSTEE TERM

During the April 21st meeting of the Illinois Eastern Community Colleges Board of Trustees, Samantha Coomer was officially sworn in as the newest Student Trustee for IECC. The following week, on April 28, a meet-and-greet was held in the Learning Commons at Cox Hall, where family, friends, FCC faculty and staff gathered to meet Coomer and ask her questions.

Although Coomer is still early in her term, she said the experience has been positive so far.

"It's been good," Coomer said. "The adults are really nice, down to earth, and they make me feel very welcome."

Coomer is a Frontier Community College student studying Early Childhood Education. She is active in Student Senate, ISAB, and One Love Christian Club. In addition to taking online classes through FCC, she also works during the day at a local school district.

As Student Trustee, Coomer said she hopes to help organize more events and make campus feel more engaging and inclusive for all students, including those who take classes online.

"I'm an all-online student, and I don't always feel included because I don't know a lot of people on campus and I work full time," Coomer said. "I thought this would be a good opportunity to help students who may be online or who don't feel as welcome get involved with events hosted

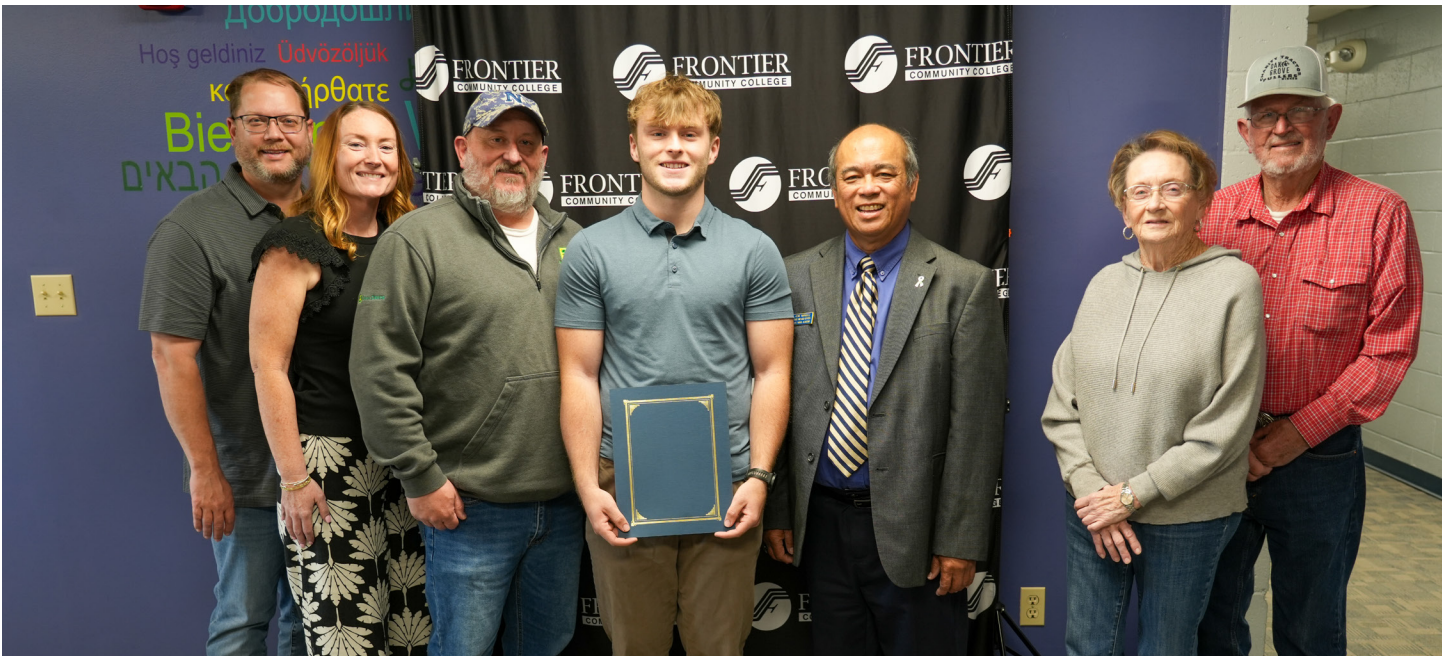


Samantha Coomer poses with a cake during her meet and greet in the Learning Commons at Cox Hall.

by Student Senate and ISAB. I think it would be nice to organize more events and help more people feel included.”

Coomer is not the first member of her family to serve on an education board. Her father, Dan, previously served on a local school board, giving her a personal connection to educational leadership.

Now stepping into her own leadership role, Coomer said she is passionate about making a difference and looks forward to growing as a leader while representing students across IECC.



ANSWERING THE CALL TO LEAD

It takes courage to choose a path of service. It takes discipline to earn a place among the best. And it takes a special kind of commitment to say, “I am ready to lead.”

That is exactly what Frontier Community College sophomore Miller Simpson has done. Beginning this summer, Simpson will start an exciting new chapter as he reports to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.

“It feels amazing,” Simpson said. “It’s something I’ve been looking forward to for a couple of years now.”

But his journey did not begin at Frontier. It started at Fairfield Community High School, where he said his experiences helped lay the foundation for his future. Life lessons can often be learned through sports, and for Simpson, many of those lessons came at The Trainyard, home of Fairfield Mules football.

“I’d say my leadership increased because of playing football at Fairfield Community High School,” Simpson said. “Being on the football team gave me an opportunity to help teach my classmates and the younger guys. I could push them, and they could push me. We made each other better, and that helped me the most with my leadership in preparing for the academy. It was football, both on the field and off the field. I was there for my whole team, and they were there for me.”

Simpson also credits the extracurricular activities he participated in at FCHS for helping him build a strong foundation.

“I did all of my extracurricular activities at Fairfield Community High School with football, track, and FFA,” Simpson said. “I got involved and built a good background.”

The application process for the Naval Academy was lengthy and demanding, both mentally and physically. Simpson said it included multiple interviews, a congressional nomination process, a medical review, a physical fitness test, essays, and extensive paperwork.

“Once the application process started, there were a ton of questions you had to answer, ranging from all aspects of your life,” Simpson said. “I had to interview for a congressional nomination from Congressman Mike Bost, and I did that twice. I also had another interview with someone from the academies. Then there was a medical checkup through DODMERB, the Department of Defense Medical Examination Review Board. It takes a long time. You have to go through all of your medical records from the time you were a baby up until now.”

Simpson said the physical fitness portion included max-effort pushups, max-effort pullups, a basketball throw, a shuttle run, and a mile-and-a-half run.

“Once you get all of that done, you have a couple of essay questions to answer,” Simpson said. “Then you send in the application, and you find out later.”

That answer came in March 2026 while Simpson was working at Lewis Scrap Metal in Burnt Prairie, Illinois. He was at work with his friend, Will Lewis, when one phone call changed everything.

“I was at work at Lewis Scrap Metal with my friend Will Lewis,” Simpson said. “I got a random phone call from a Carbondale area code. I thought it was a scam, but I answered it, and it was Congressman Mike Bost. He told me I had been accepted to the Naval Academy. My heart was



Dr. Sharmila Kakac stands with Miller Simpson in the Mason Hall foyer on Frontier’s campus. Kakac shared that she is proud of Simpson and wishes him the best as he begins his journey at the United States Naval Academy.

JUNE 2026

1-5	Culinary Conquest Kids Camp	10 AM-12 PM
3	Last Day to Withdraw from Intercession Classes	
3	Origami Kids Camp	1-3 PM
5	Last Day of Intercession Classes	
8	First Day of Summer Classes	
11	Wrongfully Convicted Kids Camp	9 AM-12:30 PM
15	Shape & Sculpt Kids Camp	9-10 AM
15	Drawing I Kids Camp	11 AM-12 PM
15	Whispering Colors Kids Camp	1-2 PM
16	IECC Board of Trustees Meeting @ OCC	6:15 PM
16	Canvas I Kids Camp	8-11 AM
16	Canvas II Kids Camp	12-3 PM
16	Lego Battle Bots Kids Camp	8 AM - 12 PM
17	Sign Language Kids Camp	1-2 PM
19	Juneteenth - Campus Closed	

JULY 2026

3	Independence Day Observed Campus Closed	
6	Summer Midterm	
21	IECC Board of Trustees Meeting @ WVC	6:15 P.M.
24	Last Day to Withdraw from Summer Courses	
31	Last Day of Summer Classes	

*FCC Kids Camp classes can be found online at iecc.edu/communityed.

pounding for sure. I told Will, my boss Rob Edwards, and everybody else up there. They were excited for me. I called my grandpa and grandma and told them. Then I waited for my parents to get home, and I told them in person.”

Gene Marquez, Major, USAF Retired, Central-Southern Illinois Area Coordinator and Blue and Gold Officer for the United States Naval Academy Office of Admissions, said Simpson made a strong impression during the process.

“What struck me about Miller in the two conversations I had with him was his command and presence,” Marquez said. “He commanded the room. The leader spoke immediately. His commitment to serve came out during our conversation. His resume included a stellar academic record, and his commitment was unquestionable. He tried twice to get in, and I expect he will take great advantage of this opportunity and serve well.”

Marquez said Simpson’s persistence stood out, especially after he was not appointed the first time he applied.

“Miller has applied for an appointment to the Naval Academy over the last couple of years,” Marquez said. “Each year, his application was considered among more than 16,000 other applications, and from that pool, not even 1,200 are admitted to the Naval Academy.”

Rather than giving up, Simpson enrolled at Frontier Community College after graduating from Fairfield Community High School. Marquez said Simpson used that opportunity to strengthen his knowledge in subjects such as calculus, chemistry, and physics before applying again.

“Miller did not give up when his initial application did not result in an appointment to the Naval Academy,” Marquez said. “He came to Frontier Community College, strengthened his academic background, and came back to apply again.”

As part of the application process, Simpson also sought a nomination from Congressman Bost, went through an interview with a panel of officers, submitted letters of recommendation, provided



Gene Marquez, Major, USAF Retired, Central-Southern Illinois Area Coordinator and Blue and Gold Officer for the United States Naval Academy Office of Admissions, speaks with Miller Simpson's family about what Simpson can expect at the Naval Academy this summer.

academic credentials, and shared examples of his leadership as both a student and community member.

“All of that put together showed the admissions board that Miller really wanted to serve as an officer in the United States military,” Marquez said. “After four years at the Naval Academy, he will graduate and serve by leading sailors and Marines.”

Marquez said Simpson will have the opportunity to earn a Bachelor of Science degree while developing the leadership and professional skills needed to serve as a naval or Marine Corps officer.

“The Naval Academy is an excellent academic venue,” Marquez said. “There are 25 majors, ranging from nuclear engineering and aeronautical engineering to history, economics, political science, and one of the premier cyber warfare and information

technology curriculums in the country.”

As a member of the Naval Academy Class of 2030, Simpson is scheduled to be sworn in on June 25, 2026, in Annapolis. He will receive a “Permit to Report” packet from the United States Naval Academy with additional instructions and a specific time to report for Induction Day, often referred to as I-Day.

Simpson described I-Day as the beginning of basic training at the Naval Academy.

“It’s like basic training for the Naval Academy,” Simpson said. “You wake up early and do a lot of rigorous activities and leadership activities. You learn about the Navy and what is in store for the next nine years.”

That training period will last six weeks. After that, Simpson will have a parents weekend before beginning classes.

“I’ll have a weekend with my parents,” Simpson said. “We’ll watch movies, and there are a couple of good movies coming out that I’ll miss. After that weekend, it’s right back into classes. There’s not a lot of time to mess around.”

Simpson sees the Naval Academy as an opportunity not only to serve his country, but also to see the world.

“I’m definitely excited to serve my country and go to an awesome college,” Simpson said. “I’m mostly excited about seeing the world and knowing the opportunities I’ll get from this academy. That’s what’s on my mind the most. I think it would be cool to see a little bit of everything. I’ve always liked Greece from the pictures I’ve seen. It would be cool to go there, and to Japan,

Germany, and just see the world as a whole over the next couple of years of my life. I think it would be cool and very beneficial to me.”

Marquez said those opportunities are part of what makes the Naval Academy experience so valuable.

“The opportunities Miller is going to experience while he is at the academy will allow him to travel as part of his training to become a naval or Marine officer,” Marquez said. “He could train in Japan, out west in San Diego or Seattle, in Florida, New York City, or with another Navy or Marine unit in Europe. Those experiences can open doors for young men and women from the middle of the country and expose them to future opportunities.”

For Simpson, the message to others who may want to follow a similar path is simple.

“Whoever is reading this, you can do this too,” Simpson said. “I’m not anyone special. I’m just a normal guy. Put your head down, set your eyes on the prize, and go chase your dreams.”



GRIT ON DISPLAY AT FRONTIER’S LINEMAN RODEO

Despite rainy, windy, and cloudy conditions, a strong crowd gathered for the Frontier Community College Electrical Distribution Systems Annual Lineman Rodeo on Saturday, April 18, held at the training poles behind the Workforce Development Center.

A total of 19 EDS students competed in this year’s event, taking part in a series of timed challenges that included the hurt man rescue, mini excavator tire stacking, speed climb, fuse cutout, egg climb, and underslung.

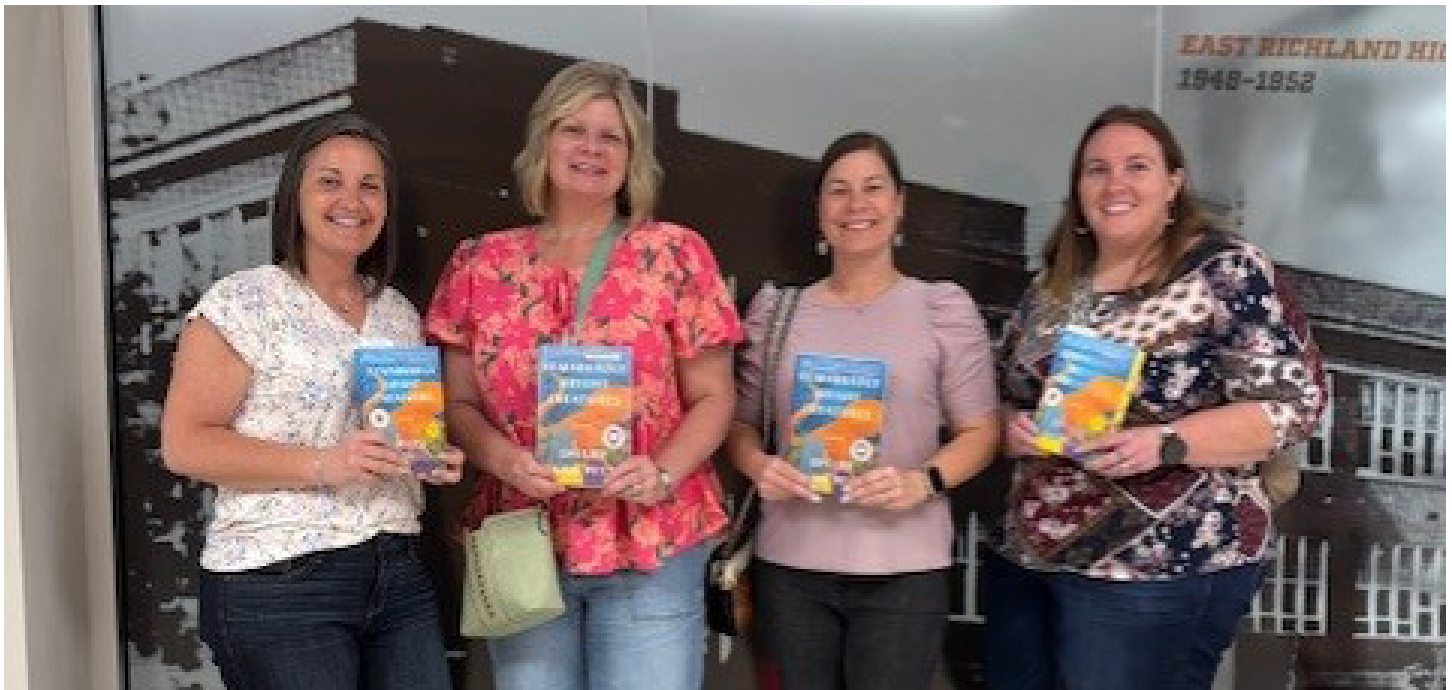
Wyatt Halter claimed the overall title, leading all competitors with 14 points. Tanner Keith finished second with nine points, while Cameron Dawes and Jaxon Funneman tied for third with eight points each. Dillon White rounded out the top five with seven points.

Event winners included Dillon White in the hurt man rescue (1:19.82), Wyatt Halter in the mini excavator tire stacking (43.47), Aaron Meade in the speed climb (18.88), Sawyer Patterson in the fuse cutout (1:28.20), Tanner Keith in the egg climb (28.60), and Wyatt Halter in the underslung (45.73).

This year's Lineman Rodeo was made possible through the support of sponsors Les McCormick Trucking Inc., Tallman Equipment Co., Inc., and Wayne-White Electric Cooperative. The EDS program is led by instructor Dustin Wiggins, and Frontier Community College extends its appreciation to all who attended and supported the event.



Sawyer Patterson watches with anticipation as the Frontier Community College Annual Lineman Rodeo prepares to get underway behind the Workforce Development Center.



FCC STAFF SHARE LOVE OF READING AT AUTHOR MEET & GREET



Shelby Van Pelt, author of *Remarkably Bright Creatures*, signs a copy of her book. The novel was released in 2022, and its film adaptation was recently released on Netflix on May 8, 2026.

In April, four FCC staff had an opportunity they could not pass up.

Lori Noe, Brittany Longbons, Justn Young, and Kara Blanton are big fans of the novel *Remarkably Bright Creatures* by Shelby Van Pelt. When the ladies learned that Ms. Van Pelt would be speaking in Olney, they planned for an after-work trip to hear her presentation. Ms. Van Pelt spoke for nearly an hour, sharing information on the inspiration for the novel as well as insider material on the newly released Netflix movie adaptation of her work. She was able to be an on-set consultant and met Sally Field, who stars as the lead character Tova. After her presentation, attendees met Ms. Van Pelt, and she autographed their copies of the book.

“*Remarkably Bright Creatures* is a book I always refer when someone asks me what to read”, says Lori Noe, Director of Learning Commons. “Narrated from the perspective of Marcellus the octopus, it is a blend of humor, wisdom, grief, and transition”.

Remarkably Bright Creatures is available for check out in the Learning Commons.

A promotional graphic for 'Ignite Curiosity This Summer!' featuring three children in scout-like uniforms sitting on a log. The graphic is set against a blue background with various activity icons in colored circles. At the top right is a circular logo for 'IGNITE CURIOSITY IECC SUMMER CAMPS' with icons for a brain, atom, gear, and lightbulb. The activities listed are: Theater & Media Production (red circle), Forensic Science & Healthcare (dark blue circle), Art, Drawing, Painting & Origami (yellow circle), Cell Towers & Smart-phones (green circle), STEM & Robotics (yellow circle), Sign Language & Mandarin Chinese (red circle), Culinary Arts (green circle), and Cosmetology & Personal Styling (dark blue circle). At the bottom, it says 'Explore. Discover. Learn Together.' and 'ILLINOIS EASTERN COMMUNITY COLLEGES' with logos for various colleges.

FCC IN PICTURES



1 Linda Monge addresses the crowd during the Phi Theta Kappa Induction Ceremony on Sunday, May 3.

3 Miller Simpson receives a hug from his mother.

5 Construction crews have taken advantage of the warm weather to set steel and pour concrete.

2 Tara Farleigh serves cake and punch during Samantha Coomer's Meet & Greet.

4 EDS students enjoy lunch together as they wrap up the spring semester.

6 Rayonna Ridley smiles for the camera during the Phi Theta Kappa Induction Ceremony.