



Press Release

MEDIA CONTACT:
Amanda Lewis
Senior Communications Specialist
Cell: 309-218-2305
Email: PR@icc.edu

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Illinois Central College and FCI Pekin Celebrate First Graduating Class of Prison Education Program

East Peoria, IL (05/12/2026) – Illinois Central College (ICC) marked a historic milestone on May 12 as the inaugural cohort of its Prison Education Program (PEP) graduated from the Federal Correctional Institution (FCI) in Pekin. Twenty students—13 men and 7 women—earned their business specialist certificates to expand their career opportunities. ICC’s program is the first in the nation approved by the U.S. Department of Education to allow students who are incarcerated to access Federal Pell Grants for postsecondary education.

“Standing at the front of that classroom, I did not just witness incarcerated individuals earn a higher education credential. I witnessed resilience rewrite its story, potential break through barriers, and human dignity rise higher than any wall meant to contain it, said program instructor Dr. Elizabeth Godinez, Assistant Professor of Business, Legal, and Information Systems.

Families and guests will join graduates in celebrating the milestone during commencement ceremonies held at FCI Pekin. Graduates will receive official Illinois Central College diplomas, and their names will be included in ICC’s commencement program for the College’s May 17 ceremony, which is expected to feature the largest number of students participating in the commencement ceremony in the institution’s history.

For many participants, the program represents more than a credential. It represents a renewed sense of possibility and a pathway toward a different future. One student reflected on the impact of the experience, sharing, “It has given me a huge sense of hope to be the first person in my family to graduate from college and getting out of prison and doing something productive in the community.”

The program represents a national model for expanding access to higher education for individuals who are incarcerated. After initial discussions began between FCI Pekin leadership and then-ICC President Dr. Sheila Quirk-Bailey in early 2023, ICC spent more than 18 months working alongside federal partners to develop the program, secure Higher Learning Commission approval, navigate federal regulatory requirements, and obtain authorization from the U.S. Department of Education for Pell Grant eligibility. The result was the nation’s first federally approved Prison Education Program in a federal facility to provide students who are incarcerated access to Federal Pell Grants for postsecondary education. Through the in-person,

credit-bearing program, students can pursue college credentials that support employment opportunities, continued education, and long-term economic mobility.

Students in the program completed 30 credit hours across 10 college-level courses delivered over approximately two years. Coursework included accounting, business math, management, customer service, finance, sales, marketing, human resource management, professional development, business communications, and technology. The Business Specialist certificate is designed for entry-level employment and serves as a direct pathway toward an Associate in Applied Science degree at ICC.

Brett Gambetti, teacher at FCI Pekin, emphasized the broader institutional and community impact of the partnership. “This program demonstrates the impact of access to education within a correctional setting. Our graduates have committed themselves to growth, accountability, and preparation for the future. Providing opportunities to build skills and earn credentials supports successful reentry into the workforce and the community.”

The May 12 ceremony marks a significant milestone for both the graduates and the partnership between ICC and FCI Pekin, reflecting the impact of access to education and the achievement of students who have completed a college-level program while incarcerated.

ICC and FCI Pekin are currently working together to develop the program’s next cohort, continuing their shared commitment to expanding access to postsecondary education and creating pathways that support student success, workforce readiness, and successful reentry outcomes.

For more information on the Prison Education Program, please visit [ICC’s website](#).

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Illinois Central College is a two-year community college with campuses in East Peoria, Peoria, and Pekin, Illinois, providing a high-quality, affordable education to prepare students to enter the workforce or to transfer to a four-year institution. ICC is the 2020 awardee of the National Community College Charles Kennedy Equity Award from ACCT, a 2022 and 2025 EDA Good Job Challenge Institution, and the Lead College for the state of Illinois’ Workforce Empowerment Initiative. ICC also conducts original research in agricultural fields, including water quality and soil conservation. For more information, visit icc.edu.