

# COMMUNITY



Metropolitan Community College  
180 RE-ENTRY  
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM



## MCC 180 RAP: THE RIGHT THING TO DO

*Celebrating the 10th anniversary of the nation's largest, campus-based re-entry program.*

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**METROPOLITAN**  
Community College

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# A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Summer often comes with its share of discomforts — sweltering heat waves, persistent mosquitos and enough orange construction cones to qualify as the state bird. Yet even with these seasonal irritations, summer remains a time of celebration. It's a season when we gather with family and friends for backyard barbecues, graduation parties, poolside afternoons, neighborhood parades and firework displays.

We come together — sometimes to rest, sometimes to rejoice. And here at MCC, this summer is no exception. We have much to celebrate.

We began by honoring the accomplishments of our graduates at the 2025 Commencement Ceremonies at Baxter Arena. This year, more than 1,000 students walked across the stage celebrating their achievements, including student speakers Brenda Rodriguez and Aliyah Bollig, who shared inspiring messages of overcoming adversity — testimonies that resonated deeply across a crowd of peers whose paths to MCC were as diverse as their dreams. These moments are a direct result of your guidance, encouragement and support. Thank you for helping make their journeys possible.

Looking ahead, we will mark another exciting milestone as we break ground in Sarpy County at the site of what will become the College's fourth full-service campus. The new Sarpy County Campus will be designed to adapt to the evolving needs of our community and continue the College's legacy of accessible education for generations to come.

In this issue of Community and later this summer, we'll also celebrate a decade of impact through our 180 Re-Entry Assistance Program. What began with a single coordinator, a small group of dedicated employers and a few determined students has become the largest on-campus re-entry program in the nation, offering second chances so many deserve. It's a testament to what vision, commitment and compassion can achieve.

These celebrations and the many more we'll find ourselves part of this summer, no matter how large or small, are equally important in their purpose: to acknowledge progress, honor the people who make it possible and offer a chance to stand together looking at the roads — or in the case of the Sarpy County Campus, the dirt roads — that lie ahead.

Enjoy your well-deserved summer celebrations and vacations. Onward!

*Randy Schmailzl*

Randy Schmailzl  
President  
Metropolitan Community College



## 24 AIA NEBRASKA EDUCATION AWARD



## 28 COMMUNITY COLLEGE MONTH



## 30 FACES OF MCC: RICK PENNINGTON



## 32 CULINARY CUES: BLUEBERRY MUFFINS

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# THE RIGHT THING TO



A 180 RAP program participant takes notes during a forklift operator training class offered at the Fort Omaha Campus.



NG  
DO

# CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF MCC 180 RAP

On Chris Vollman's first night at Community Correctional Center-Omaha, her caseworker, noticing her nerves, gave her an immediate task when she arrived at the work release center — take out the trash.

During Vollman's 16-year incarceration, several years were spent in administrative segregation, confined to her own cell for 23 hours a day. She had grown accustomed to her movement being limited at her prior facility. To being counted by the guards. To the lights being on during the middle of the night. To all the interrupting sounds of a secure facility being secured.

Vollman was addicted to methamphetamine and other drugs and alcohol when she committed the robbery that led to her incarceration at the Nebraska Correctional Center for Women in York. By the time she qualified for work release, Vollman was so used to being on the inside of a prison that stepping out seemed dangerous.

"The caseworker told me to take the trash out, and I was petrified because there wasn't a fence around this building. I didn't feel safe," Vollman recounted. "That caseworker was so nice. He could see what was going on, so he said, 'Why don't I come with you?' There were guards and workers who went out of their way for me when I didn't deserve it."

Breaking the patterns of institutional living can be difficult for people re-entering society after incarceration. Vollman said a little bit of grace during the transition can go a long way — whether coming from someone else or allowing it from within.

No matter the duration of the sentence, system-impacted individuals re-enter a world that has changed. It's typically not a welcoming return. Finding food, shelter and clothing is not easy. Finding employment will be even harder. Reestablishing a sense of belonging is often the hardest.

Since 2015, the Metropolitan Community College 180 Re-Entry Assistance Program (180 RAP), has strived to be a place of belonging for Vollman and other individuals who are transitioning back into the community. It has developed into the largest college-based re-entry center nationwide.

Situated in the heart of North Omaha inside Building 8 on the Fort Omaha Campus, the program celebrates its 10th anniversary in July. MCC 180 RAP has served more than 11,000 people leaving the corrections system in Nebraska through its holistic re-entry programs and services — education, workforce training, job placement assistance, peer mentoring, transition support, basic needs fulfillment and more.

Diane Good-Collins, director of 180 RAP, said having the support of MCC President Randy Schmailzl from the start, and keeping the intention behind the program at its heart, has been key to its success over the years.

"When I told Randy I was advised we were the largest on-campus re-entry center in the nation, he reminded me, 'We didn't start a re-entry program to be the pioneers or be the largest. We did it because it's the right thing to do,'" Good-Collins recalled.

MCC 180 RAP connects people releasing from jail, prison and treatment centers to its on-site education center, job center and food pantry. Good-Collins and more than 80% of 180 RAP staff share similar lived experiences. Peer support is integrated into every aspect of programming and services.

"We are understanding and welcoming. We get what it takes to break the cycles of addiction, negative behaviors and thinking patterns [that bring people into the corrections system]," Good-Collins said.

She designed the program to provide support and resources that weren't always available to her when she was released from prison in 2003.

MCC 180 RAP is also the longest-standing prison education program in Nebraska. Staff members provide on-site credit and noncredit classes and

services at Nebraska prisons and work release centers, including:

- Omaha Correctional Center
- Tecumseh State Correctional Institution
- Nebraska Correctional Youth Facility (Omaha)
- Nebraska Correctional Center for Women (York)
- Community Corrections Center-Omaha
- Community Corrections Center-Lincoln

Through the peer support Vollman found (and now provides) at MCC 180 RAP, her world has changed for the better. Vollman is now several years sober. Sharri Wirth, who is the program manager of MCC 180 RAP, previously worked with Vollman as her sponsor in a 12-step program.

"I didn't know how to hold a job. I thought that if I was tired, then I could go home. I would just clock out and leave. I didn't understand why people were getting mad about it," Vollman said.

Vollman credits the good examples she was surrounded by at 180 RAP for the transformation of her life. When she got out of prison, Vollman said she didn't have much of a relationship with her son, Bailey. He was raised by his grandparents.

"I saw Sharri and Diane — they have great family lives. They are happy and I wanted that, too," Vollman said.

Vollman has repaired her relationship with Bailey. She remembers the moment, a year ago, when her mom told her she was proud of her. Now Vollman is enjoying being a grandmother of two.

"I've learned how to love myself and others. I've learned compassion. I've learned how good life is. It's not always about having a million dollars. I don't have everything I want, but I have everything I need, and it's a happiness I've never had before," Vollman said.

## CRITICAL SUPPORT VIA CREDIBLE PEERS

Wirth said one of the most valuable things people transitioning out of the criminal justice system see at 180 RAP is their peers living fulfilling lives after incarceration. Having others invested in their success makes a difference.

"It's life-changing, and it creates a ripple effect. When you get hooked up with a community and your family, it breaks a cycle," Wirth said.



180 RAP staff from left to right: Chris Vollman, Diane Good-Collins, Brandon Jergensen (seated), Sharri Wirth and Greg Glass.

Vollman draws from her lived experience with the criminal justice system when providing peer support to program participants. Her favorite part of her full-time job is leading orientations with new students because she remembers how she felt when she started showing up to 180 RAP.

“When [people transitioning from the criminal justice system] first come in, 9 out of 10 times, they just look broken. They look so sad. That’s why I love doing orientations,” Vollman said. “First, I smile, shake their hand and tell them my name because they need to know that they are alright — that they are safe, and we can conquer these demons together.”

Brandon Jergensen started taking classes at MCC 180 RAP after having difficulty finding employment while on probation due to the felonies showing up on his background check.

“I’d always been employable, had a really good résumé, so I didn’t think finding a job would be an issue, but it was really difficult — like I never would have imagined,” Jergensen said.

Jergensen, studying to become a chemical dependency counselor, now works full-time as a data specialist with 180 RAP. He provides information and statistics for grant applications and reports — work that gives him a sense of purpose and connection.

“This has been my favorite place to work because I get to serve an underserved population,” Jergensen said. “I’m in Tecumseh [at the state

From left to right, program participants Austin Holleson and Rodney Tanksley work in the computer lab with Elida Padolina, 180 RAP resource associate.

correctional facility] twice a week, and just walking in there, I realize I could easily be there right now.”

Jergensen has come to understand that his individual success in the program is a product of the foundational strength the group has built together through shared experience.

“I know that long-term group therapy is the most effective therapy, especially for people who have a history with drugs and alcohol,” Jergensen said. “It’s a very tight-knit community, and I understand I might be the only person someone else with a similar background may ever meet.”

Successful reintegration can swing on employment and education. Lacking either can be a contributing factor to a decision that leads to an arrest. Gaining either can lead to overcoming past setbacks.

According to the Vera Institute of Justice, people’s earnings on average at the time of incarceration are nearly 45% less than their nonincarcerated peers. The highest level of educational attainment for 64% of people in federal and state prisons is a GED or high school diploma.

## THE HIDDEN WORKFORCE

Prison education programs reduce recidivism and help formerly incarcerated individuals find jobs. As several industries in Nebraska face a labor shortage, Good-Collins said the MCC 180 RAP program provides access to a “hidden workforce.”



Nebraska has more job openings than unemployed workers. More than 90% of Nebraska's 5,800 prison inmates will return to society within three years, the majority of which are in the prime working-age population (25-54) and will reintegrate in Douglas County.

"We're talented, trained and loyal. We're part of the answer. We want to support our families and do good," Good-Collins said.

In today's employment landscape, more organizations are receptive to hiring people with justice-involved backgrounds. When MCC 180 RAP was founded 10 years ago, five local employers committed to hiring people from the program. Today, more than 390 Omaha-area employers are engaged. The employment rate among MCC 180 RAP participants exceeds 99%.

"When COVID happened, employers started beating down our doors for workers. Now it's normal business," Good-Collins said.

Employers engaged with the program are discovering that 180 RAP participants represent a pool of job candidates who have something to prove.

Tim Steinbach, executive director of Ooh De Lally, a restaurant that partners with MCC 180 RAP through its Jump Start Culinary Project, developed in collaboration with the MCC Institute for the Culinary Arts. Ooh De Lally, located in the former home of Mark's in Dundee, provides "a seat at the table for everyone" with a "mission beyond the kitchen."

The 180 RAP Jump Start Culinary Project provides short-term training in the culinary and hospitality industries with the goal of connecting students to entry-level careers. Steinbach said around half of the restaurant's staff is employed through the partnership.

**"IT'S LIFE CHANGING,  
AND IT CREATES A  
RIPPLE EFFECT. WHEN  
YOU GET HOOKED UP  
WITH A COMMUNITY  
AND YOUR FAMILY, IT  
BREAKS A CYCLE."**

— Sharri Wirth, 180 RAP program manager

"[Ooh De Lally employees from MCC 180 RAP] are the ones who are singing our praises the loudest. They are the ones who are happy to come to work every day," Steinbach said. "When there's a special event and we need to ask someone to come in on their day off, the first people to say, 'Yeah, I'll be here,' are the folks who came to us through 180 RAP."

After about 90 days, participants earn a noncredit certificate in Restaurant Basics. If they choose to enter the culinary workforce, they leave qualified

to be a prep cook, line cook or perform hospitality service work. If they want to continue their education, they build upon their earned microcredits at the MCC Institute for the Culinary Arts.

Steinbach said pay for entry-level careers in the restaurant industry is on the rise due to demand.

"There is such need for these workers, so those wages are coming up. If a living wage is \$16 to \$18 an hour in Nebraska, you can beat that pretty easily with most restaurant jobs today," Steinbach said.

Steinbach said one of the things he's come to appreciate most during a career in the industry is the magical ability of a restaurant kitchen to create harmony among an ensemble of personalities who wouldn't typically pair well. Working shoulder-to-shoulder in the kitchen, "they become artists of the highest quality."

"Restaurant kitchens have traditionally always been the safe haven for misfits, a refuge for people who have backgrounds," Steinbach said. "[Ooh De Lally] can be a place where people in our community can get to know [participants in the program] not as people who used to be in prison but as people who are part of our restaurant. The whole idea is successful reintegration. We want to be that soft jumping off spot for folks re-entering the world."

Steinbach said he felt a calling to create a supportive community for people leaving the justice system. Having Good-Collins' support and being able to watch her operate has been inspiring for him.

Forklift training instructor Bart Hilding, at left, leads a one-day certification class at the Fort Omaha Campus.

Article continues on page 10. ➔



# REMEMBERING WHERE YOU CAME FROM

When taking a tour of Building 8 on the Fort Omaha Campus, home to 180 RAP, visitors soon discover they're entering a special environment. To the left, after coming into the building, is a built-in display cabinet, with "Never forget where you came from..." written on a small chalkboard atop. Its shelves are filled with recognition and awards, as well as items "from the inside" — symbols and physical reminders of how far participants have come.

Some of its contents include an inmate pass, prison-provided sweats and jackets, sneakers with inmate numbers written on the heels, dining utensils and several electronic devices not designed to manufacturer specifications.

Inspirational slogans are painted on the walls throughout the building. But it's the words shared during Saturday morning peer support groups — about adapting to life after incarceration, celebrating successes, being honest about struggles and resisting old behaviors — that truly build a sense of collective strength, relatability and compassion. It's a powerful place.



**With access to a host of on-site resources provided through an education center, job center and food pantry, the following basic needs and support services are considered and provided by a staff who understands:**

- Skills and interest assessments
- Career and educational goal setting
- Work readiness and life skills training (credit and noncredit classes)
- Registration assistance, financial aid and scholarship application support
- Continuous coaching, tutoring and mentoring
- Employment support: résumé creation, job referrals, ongoing support
- Transition support for individuals leaving jail, prison, treatment facilities
- On-site wraparound support and referrals to community partners
- Access to the Re-Entry Pantry & Resource Center: basic needs including food, hygiene, clothing, SNAP application assistance, birth certificate and ID acquisition, special needs, etc.
- Peer support groups
- Recovery groups

PRESENT YOUR PROUD OF

ACTIONS CREATE

FUTURE HOW HARD

RESULTS YOU ARE TRYING

DON'T REMEMBERING DREAMS

WISH WHAT ARE YOU DON'T

FOR IT. WHERE UNLESS

WORK YOU CAN'T YOU DO.

FORT IT. YOU CAN'T YOU DO.

YOU FROM FIRST

CAN. FROM MIGHT,

END OF ATTITUDE OF YESTERDAY

STORY. GRATITUDE. IS HIS HISTORY.

NO ONE EVER MADE A TOMORROW

DIFFERENCE IS A MYSTERY.

BY BEING LIKE EVERYONE ELSE. TODAY IS A GIFT.



BEAUTIFY THE WORLD WITH YOUR SMILE



“Diane really wants to help people get to that stable place in their lives because I imagine it’s got to be terrifying coming out. She’s a champion of the highest caliber, and not just for Ooh De Lally, but for all the people who come through MCC,” Steinbach said. “She knows what it feels like when nobody wants to answer your phone call, and nobody will call you back on the 100 applications you put in because you have a background.”

In addition to the Jump Start Project that serves Ooh De Lally, MCC 180 RAP offers noncredit courses for CDL preparation, a construction academy, digital literacy, financial empowerment, forklift training, OSHA training and more. Employment support services include résumé creation, job referrals and ongoing support.

“The re-entry program is an amazing resource to have in the community. There are thousands of people leaving the justice system in the Omaha area who want and need work. When people have work, they’re less apt to reoffend because they receive the training to get into jobs that have real futures,” Steinbach said.

## STANDING IN THE GAP

Wirth said MCC 180 RAP’s ability to help participants navigate overwhelming change keeps many coming back. After serving a 26-year sentence for a second-degree murder conviction, Greg Glass had a lot of change to navigate when he was released last year.

Glass was sentenced in 1998 during the .com boom and re-entered a tech-enabled world on release last March. People do everything on their phones now — on models with all kinds of capabilities that weren’t available when Glass was convicted.

“I’m moving slowly into seeing the world. There’s stuff that I’m just not familiar with. I’m not trying to find myself in situations I don’t understand,” Glass said.

So Glass spends a lot of time at 180 RAP. He is a full-time peer support mentor, working as a liaison for the Jump Start Culinary Project with Ooh De Lally.

On his days off, Glass is often at the Re-Entry Center on campus attending peer support groups and helping out in any way he can. While he acknowledges he is taking on a lot, he’s getting good energy in return.

“I just like being trusted. I’m just trying to work on myself to where I stay being trusted,” Glass said.

Glass recently completed an associate degree in manufacturing, power and process technology. Completing the program fulfilled a promise he made to himself when things weren’t looking as promising — to give school another try if he got the opportunity.

“With a lot of reflection time, I told myself, ‘If I ever get another chance, I don’t care if I have to actually do tutoring, or whatever I need to do, I’m seeing it through.’ Once I actually got the chance, and after meeting Diane and Sharri, there were just too many people that had been supporting me, so I couldn’t mess this up,” Glass said.

As Glass approaches the end of his first year of involvement on campus with 180 RAP, he still feels like he’s in the right place. He no longer sees himself as the shunned young man he identified with earlier in life.

“I think I’ve always been a person that sort of wants to stand in the gap, to build bridges and solve problems,” Glass said. “I went to prison one time, but it was for 26 years. Having to sit in timeout inside of a facility where there’s not necessarily a lot of good stuff going on, I had to sit and think, ‘How do I help somebody?’ ‘How do I pay this forward?’ Because there was a time that I didn’t think that I even deserved to be in society.”

“I had to get into my head and think about, ‘What are the good things about me? What makes me redeemable?’ And then I try to starve those other negative things about myself out,” Glass said.

Glass is still taking things slow and as they come, but he’s moving forward and opening himself to a bigger world with broader horizons than he’s ever seen before.

“I want to see the ocean. I’ve never really left the Midwest,” Glass said.

For Glass and thousands of others who have come through 180 RAP’s doors over the past decade, re-entry is where it starts. Rediscovering what’s possible is where it goes.

**VISIT [MCCNEB.EDU/180RAP](https://mccneb.edu/180RAP) FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE MCC 180 RE-ENTRY PROGRAM.**

# THE GIFT OF A SECOND CHANCE



Since 2015, the Metropolitan Community College 180 Re-Entry Assistance Program (180 RAP) has been a place of belonging, support and source of compassion for individuals transitioning from incarceration. From the Fort Omaha Campus and on site at multiple Nebraska correctional facilities, the program provides life-changing education, training and resources that help rebuild their lives.

## BUILDING A STRONGER COMMUNITY TOGETHER

Your support has helped MCC 180 RAP:

- ▶ Become the largest college-based re-entry program in the nation
- ▶ Serve more than 11,000 people leaving the corrections system in Nebraska
- ▶ Build partnerships with nearly 400 Omaha-area employers engaged with the program
- ▶ Establish an employment rate greater than 99% among program participants

While funds are not given directly to participants, donations to the 180 Re-Entry Assistance Program Growth Fund help cover essential needs such as:

- ▶ Housing and utility deposits
- ▶ Household items
- ▶ Job readiness support
- ▶ Transportation assistance
- ▶ Educational support

Help support the next decade of second chances  
at [bit.ly/ReentryAssistanceGrowthFund](https://bit.ly/ReentryAssistanceGrowthFund)  
or call 531-MCC-2346 today.



Metropolitan  
Community College  
**FOUNDATION**



Quilters We Are group displaying finished quilts at the Omaha Public Library's Charles B. Washington branch. Seated from left to right: Pat Morris, Laura Donnelly, Debra Parks, Cathy Forte. Standing from left to right: Vera Jackson, Kathy Bachmann, Norma Craig, Phyllis Midkiff, Shirley Coffey, Jackie Whitaker, Celelia Alexander, Deamber Wilburn and Dalma Seitelbach. Not pictured: Linda Hartmann, Carol Bilunas and Michele Jones.

## QUILTERS WE ARE: CREATING THE FABRIC OF COMMUNITY FOR MCC 180 RAP PARTICIPANTS

For the past 20 years on Tuesday evenings at a north Omaha library, a quilting group has gathered with a shared passion to provide a different kind of wraparound support to Omaha-area nonprofits.

"Wrapping yourself in a quilt is like wrapping yourself in a big hug," said Pat Morris, a longtime member of Quilters We Are, which began meeting at the Omaha Public Library's Charles B. Washington branch two decades ago.

Since 2023, the group has donated more than 200 handmade quilts to participants in Metropolitan Community College's 180 Re-Entry Assistance program (180 RAP).

For people transitioning from incarceration — where personal items are restricted, bedding is standard issue and nothing is designed with the comfort of the end user in mind — a gift so personal at a time so critical has a way of uplifting individuals, said Diane Good-Collins, director of MCC 180 RAP.

"When Quilters We Are donates to the MCC 180 Re-Entry Assistance Program, they are not just meeting basic needs, they are connecting people to comfort and increasing emotional wellness," Good-Collins said. "I've seen faces soften when gifted one of the quilts made by the group. It's an incredible thing to witness."

The group thrives by sharing a collective love of quilting and community with one another. It is through the group's consistency, relationships among members and open-door policy that Quilters We Are has endured.

On a typical Tuesday evening, around a dozen women of varying experience levels begin to arrive at the library around 4:30 p.m., picking up where they left off on their quilting projects from last week. If they forget to shut the door to the meeting room they will occupy for the next three hours, a gentle reminder from a librarian to lower the volume is sometimes warranted, said group organizer Dalma Seitelbach.

Quilters We Are relies on donated materials and equipment, as well as the library's community space where materials and projects are stored, to carry out their work. The closets in the community room are filled with finished quilts, and when they reach capacity, Seitelbach makes deliveries to organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Youth Emergency Services, Ronald McDonald House and many more.

The group also takes on special causes, like in 2022 when they sent 51 quilts to eastern Kentucky residents impacted by historic flash flooding.

"Our mission is to do something positive in the community and [MCC 180 RAP] is part of the community. It makes us proud to support the program," said Seitelbach, who delivered 20 quilts to 180 RAP in May.

At the close of each session, completed quilts are displayed and photographed at the front of the class, then posted to the group's Facebook page.

Patterns that didn't look like they belonged together at the beginning of class are artfully unified. Attendees celebrate one another's work, sharing secrets of the craft and challenges they worked through to finish their textiles.

Daria Archie, who is retired, has been attending for close to 10 years. She said she appreciates her skill development, the group's camaraderie and the unintentional gains she's made by continuing to show up.

"I didn't know anyone when I started coming, but you learn little things and then you get to know one another. When one of us is missing, we notice. It's like a little family," Archie said. "The other thing I like about it is that it gets me out of the house. I'm coming to see what's going on, for the joking and having fun. It's therapy for me, both physical and mental.

"[Quilting] works your hand-eye coordination and your motor skills. It's a constant, go, go, go, and you don't realize how much you're doing. The mental part of making a quilt is that your material is like a puzzle, except you're cutting out the pieces, then putting them together."

Quilters We Are includes individuals who are seasoned in the craft, like Laura Donnelly, the daughter of a seamstress who learned how to sew from her grandmother at age five. She taught needlepoint classes to other women in the 1980s and started coming to Quilters We Are in 2022. She estimates she can turn around an entire quilt in 48 hours.

Her tablemate, Norma Craig, started coming with Donnelly in 2023, about eight months after her husband passed away. She had never quilted before joining the group but had always wanted to try it, she said.

"[Laura got me started] — I sewed buttons that whole summer. She taught me everything that I know," said Craig, who has become an accomplished quilter over the past two years with the group. "It's wonderful. I love it every day."

For Cathy Forte and Jackie Whitaker, who each have attended for the past 15 years, it's all about giving back.

"It doesn't matter to me who gets the quilt. As long as they need it, I'm good with it," Forte said.

Whitaker, who started coming after a friend from church invited her, said in addition to having fun, her participation is pretty straightforward.

"I'd rather do something instead of nothing. It's a small way I can help someone without looking for anything in return, and that makes me feel good," Whitaker said.

When asked about how she hopes the donated quilts are received by 180 RAP program participants, Archie emphasized the sense of agency that comes with owning something.

"It would be nice to have something that I could claim as my own. If you're coming out of situations like [incarceration], you're probably not going to be getting a whole lot," Archie said. "With these quilts, the fact is, we're giving them something where they can say, 'This is mine, and I know it's mine because nobody else has one like it.'"

Quilters We Are has been stitching together friendships and supporting their community from the Omaha Public Library's Charles B. Washington branch since 2005.





TALKINGTON HAMMERING A PIECE OF METAL AT THE BLACKSMITH SHOP OF OMAHA.

# TALKINGTON FORGES PATH FROM MILITARY SERVICE TO BLACKSMITHING AT MCC

Adam Talkington's transition from a career in military intelligence to civilian life has been a journey of reinvention, ultimately leading him to Metropolitan Community College's South Omaha Campus. After dedicating 25 years to service in the Army, Talkington is embracing a new passion — blacksmithing.

As a military veteran, Talkington is taking advantage of free tuition at MCC through Veterans Affairs (VA) and its Veteran Readiness and Employment program. After picking up blacksmithing as a hobby in 2012, he is now pursuing an associate degree in welding from MCC.

From moving frequently in his childhood as a self-proclaimed "military brat" to obtaining a master's degree in nuclear engineering for various Army assignments, Talkington has spent many years traveling the world and dedicating himself to service. Since retiring in 2017 after spending three years in government service following his career in the Army, he said he has enjoyed the freedom to chase his own passions.

Retirement has provided Talkington with ample time and opportunity to fully immerse himself in metalworking.

"As a blacksmith, I can force metal to do what I want by pounding it in various places," Talkington said, "and with the machining program here, I can make metal do what I want by taking away material. I guess you can call me a metal head, but a different kind of metal."

Talkington said he enjoys the release he experiences with blacksmithing in retirement.

"Blacksmithing is relaxing, and there's a sense of satisfaction that you get with everything that you're doing because you can see the impact. You can see the effect

while you're doing it. When you make mistakes, there's a way to fix it," Talkington said. Family plays a big role in Talkington's connection to MCC. His introduction to the trade came through his father-in-law, an expert blacksmith who also teaches noncredit classes at MCC. Although it started with family ties, Talkington said he was drawn to the welding program at the College because of its course offerings and the opportunity to learn from knowledgeable instructors.

His wife, Brigit, is an adjunct communications instructor at MCC, and his five children have all taken noncredit silversmithing classes.

For Talkington, blacksmithing is both a creative and physical outlet — a stark contrast from the high stakes and intensity of his military career.

"[Nuclear engineering required] significant mental effort and limited physical effort. [With blacksmithing] you've got physical effort that you're putting in, and you get immediate feedback. If I'm pounding on a piece of metal and it isn't going the way it's supposed to go, I can either fight with it, I can fix it, or I can start over, and it doesn't mean a thing," Talkington said.



**TALKINGTON'S MILITARY SERVICE TOOK HIM TO MANY PLACES IN THE WORLD, INCLUDING THE BALTIC REGION. VETERANS AND MILITARY RESOURCE CENTER (VMRC) VISITORS ARE ENCOURAGED TO PUT PINS ON A WORLD MAP SHOWING WHERE THEY WERE STATIONED.**

## FINDING SUPPORT IN THE CLASSROOM

Although he is still new to blacksmithing, Talkington dreams of opening his own shop one day. Until then, he enjoys learning about the different metals and techniques that contribute to quality craftsmanship.

“Welding is part of that, machine tooling is part of that and metallurgical studies are part of that,” Talkington said. “MCC offers two of those — the welding and machining. This is a good place to put the skills together to be a better blacksmith.”

To master blacksmithing, Talkington recognizes the importance of welding and machining skills, both of which MCC offers through its credit programs.

“I don’t want to just dip my toe into the welding pool,” Talkington said. “I want to understand it.”

In his classes, Talkington said he enjoys learning how to create both functional and artistic pieces, from knives and tableware to decorative planters, fences and gates. Along with the guidance he receives from MCC instructors, he has also found a mentor in Elmo Diaz, who teaches noncredit blacksmithing classes on behalf of MCC at The Blacksmith Shop of Omaha.



**TALKINGTON, MIDDLE WEARING BANDANA, HAS FOUND A MENTOR FOR BLACKSMITHING IN ELMO DIAZ, AT RIGHT, WHO TEACHES NONCREDIT CLASSES AT MCC.**

In addition, Talkington said he values the College’s small class sizes, the like-minded community and the hands-on learning from instructors such as John Banark and David Lueders. He appreciates how MCC instructors challenge students while also meeting them at their skill level to ensure their success.



**MCC INSTRUCTOR JOHN BANARK WORKS WITH TALKINGTON IN THE MACHINING LAB ON THE SOUTH OMAHA CAMPUS.**

Talkington also finds the collaborative learning environment at the College to be a rewarding way to spend time in retirement. It also creates a positive experience for nontraditional students.

“It’s interesting and fun,” Talkington said. “The classes here are set up so that there’s an expectation of work, but it’s something that I can do for myself, something that I can help others to do, as well. It’s all individual work, but it’s group-minded, so everybody helps each other, and it makes its own little community.”

## A COMMUNITY FOR VETERANS

Another reason Talkington chose MCC was its strong support of veterans and the various programs and opportunities available through its Veterans and Military Resource Center (VMRC). Located in the Center for Advanced Manufacturing on the South Omaha Campus, Talkington said he noticed the office when he entered the building. The VMRC is a dedicated space that provides military-connected students with academic and career guidance, assistance with VA resources, counseling, tailored advising and other services.

From a student veterans organization to private study areas and a meditation room complete with a massage chair, the center provides a sense of belonging and camaraderie, allowing students to connect and share their experiences. Daniel Mohr, an Air Force veteran and the Center’s director, said the VMRC staff is committed to helping veterans reach their educational and career goals as they adjust to civilian life. That support extends to veterans’ families, as well.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: THE VMRC STAFF, NICK BEEBE, NIKI JAMES, DAVE REYES, FAIR REZANKA, GRANT HOOVER AND DANIEL MOHR.

Mohr said he aims to provide students with a caring environment and a safe space. He finds it especially gratifying when graduates return to share their updates.

"I love it when students come back and say, 'Hey, I'm just popping in to see how you're doing,' or 'I just want to tell you what's going on in my life,'" Mohr said. "It makes me feel like we've made a very positive impact."

## A LIFELONG LEARNING MINDSET

"This past quarter, we had about 680 military-connected students," Mohr said. "If you're a family member, active duty, Guard and Reserve, separated, a veteran — we're going to help you out."

The VMRC serves as a welcoming space where veterans can decompress from classes and everyday stressors. Mohr said he and his staff also conduct outreach calls to check in with students and provide assistance when necessary.

Additionally, the VMRC connects veterans with the Veterans Business Outreach Center and programs such as Guitars for Veterans, which helps people impacted by post-traumatic stress disorder and other service-related trauma.

Regardless of students' backgrounds or aspirations, Mohr said VMRC staff seek to guide them toward the resources they need to achieve their goals.

"If people have the courage to get out of their car and walk in here," Mohr said, "I'm not going to send them away and say, 'Come back in a week.' Instead, we're going to help them out on the spot."

Talkington is one of many students who have found a home at the VMRC.

"There's a lot of good sources of comfort here," Talkington said. "I can come in here and relax with like-minded people who have similar experiences, and it doesn't hurt the fact that they offer free snacks and computer access. At least for me, it makes going back to school 20-plus years later more comfortable and more enjoyable."

MCC supports learning at all stages, whether students are beginning their college journey or returning to education after years away from the classroom. Compared to large university systems, Talkington said he appreciates the community college structure.

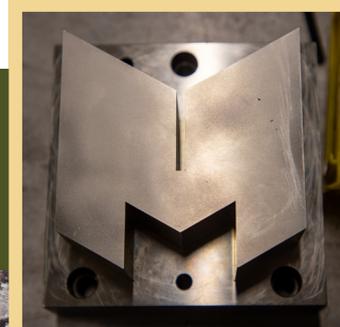
Talkington also values the collaboration between the VA and MCC to equip him with the necessary tools for success. This partnership was a key factor in his selection of the College over other institutions.

"It's like an equal sign," Talkington said. "The VA and MCC work hand in hand. I looked at what was available for welding other than going to a specific welding school, which I didn't want to do because I had other things that I wanted to do as well. [MCC] also works for my wife for employment. [MCC] works for my kids. The dynamic just works."

Talkington said he would not be pursuing further education if the College did not have the classes he needed. He credits MCC and the VMRC for helping him work toward his blacksmithing dream and encourages other military-connected students to take advantage of similar opportunities.

"I'm still new at this," Talkington said. "I'm new at blacksmithing, I'm new at machining, I'm new at reintegrating with community college, so I'm still learning. Every day is a learning experience, but I would say that if there were any other students like me who want to self-improve through continuous learning, and they're somehow connected with the military, they should certainly give this a try."

VISIT [MCCNEB.EDU/VMRC](https://mccneb.edu/vmrc) FOR MORE INFORMATION AND SERVICES AVAILABLE AT THE VETERANS AND MILITARY RESOURCE CENTER.





Katherine Riggs

Emma Frazier

## “MCC Made” podcast gives voice to people behind College stories

As listeners tune in to Metropolitan Community College’s “MCC Made” podcast, they are hearing more than just a conversation about the College. Launched at the end of last year, “MCC Made” is hosted by Emma Frazier and Katherine Riggs. The bi-weekly podcast highlights MCC stories through interviews with alumni, students, faculty and community partners.

Known for their humorous and insightful discussions, Frazier and Riggs have undeniable chemistry that puts guests at ease and helps them join in the fun while sharing their impactful experiences at MCC. Their banter is effortless, stemming from a friendship that began when Frazier joined the College’s marketing team in 2022 before becoming strategic factotum for the President’s Office at the close of 2024.

Riggs, who serves as internal communications coordinator for MCC, bonded with Frazier over a love of pop culture, current events and anything with a hint of scandal. That familiarity and trust is a key part of the show.

A pre-podcast tradition of sharing their weekly “pick” every Monday of something they either loved or strongly disliked has evolved into the cold open of their hour-long podcast, bringing their dynamic energy to a wider audience.

“We’re so comfortable with each other, and we’re not afraid to sound weird or goofy because we know the other person will match it or go over the top,” Riggs said.

With 16 episodes now released and several more in production, the series is produced internally on the Fort Omaha Campus and distributed by Hurrdat Media. Under the leadership of Nannette Rodriguez, executive producer for the podcast and College marketing officer, and with the technical skill of Nate Tweedy, senior video production specialist, the show achieves high production value and has quickly hit its stride.

To develop the podcast, Frazier and Riggs worked closely with the President’s Office, ensuring it aligned with the College’s goals while providing a new format to share in-depth stories of impact that give listeners a picture of the breadth, accessibility and reach of MCC programs.

“These are stories that help you get to know the people in our programs,” Riggs said. “We feature people who help make the College run, who make it successful or are successful because of what



they've learned at this College. We're just trying to spread that far and wide."

Through "MCC Made," Frazier and Riggs share information about innovative programs like the College's Mobile Device Repair Academy, the Math Readiness Project and Sponsorship for the Trades programs. The podcast follows alums who found their footing at MCC and are making valuable contributions to their communities. Each episode brings an opportunity for discovery, detailing opportunities to access education, resources and experiences available to learners of all ages.

Frazier and Riggs' journalistic skills are also an asset to the show. Riggs, who previously worked for the Omaha World-Herald and the Ralston Recorder, contributes an innate curiosity. Frazier, meanwhile, has a knack for steering conversations naturally, never relying too heavily on prepared questions.

"I will have questions, but nothing is a gotcha," Frazier said. "This is a conversation, a chat, not an interview."

This approach is exactly what sets "MCC Made" apart. While the podcast covers informative topics, Riggs said the goal is to tell uplifting, positive stories in a conversational style rather than sounding like a formal "60 Minutes" interview.

As a journalist, Riggs values how the podcast conveys a person's meaning through verbal tone, unlike written storytelling, where context can sometimes be lost.

"You can hear someone's personality without worrying if it's going to translate to the written word," Riggs said. "I think that's a big one because sometimes somebody will say something jokingly, and you think, 'I'd love to include that, but reading that flat on the page, the intended meaning can get lost.' Well, if you listen to it, you can tell it's a joke, and there's more spontaneity in this format."

In this regard, the podcast allows people to learn about MCC through the co-hosts' lively dialogue.

"You get to know us better, and then you start to trust us with talking to people who are doing really cool things. I think it just adds an authentic familiarity to our programs. Some of them feel more tangible by hearing directly from people participating in them," Frazier said.

As they continue their podcast, Frazier and Riggs are excited to feature more MCC voices. Their dream episode is a "Hot Ones"-style interview with Brian O'Malley, dean of Culinary, Hospitality and Horticulture. To spice up the conversation, culinary students would craft custom hot sauces intensifying in heat for Frazier, Riggs and O'Malley to sample with wings, adding an MCC twist to the popular YouTube series.

Whether guests are MCC graduates or simply have a connection to the College, Frazier and Riggs are eager to share their stories with the College community in an accessible format.

**"These are stories that help you get to know the people in our programs. We feature people who help make the College run, who make it successful or are successful because of what they've learned at this College. We're just trying to spread that far and wide."**

**– Katherine Riggs, "MCC Made" co-host**

"Higher education can tend to be very serious, stuffy and buttoned-up. I think the podcast gives us a way to get news about things happening here in a much more relaxed, approachable way," Riggs said.

In each episode, Frazier and Riggs also emphasize the value of community colleges and their role in helping people gain skills, certificates or degrees.

From interior design to restaurant service and welding, "MCC Made" explores the wide range of courses and opportunities available at MCC.

"I don't know that we go a single episode without talking about how great community colleges are, or specifically Metropolitan Community College," Frazier said. "Four-year colleges are great and absolutely have their place, but community colleges are also amazing and are really the backbone of the community. Whether you're getting an associate degree or a certificate to get a promotion at work, the opportunities for people at a community college are endless. There's something for everybody here."

**Check out the latest episodes of "MCC Made" on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and YouTube. If you've got an idea or a question for the show, you can email Frazier and Riggs at [mccmade@mccneb.edu](mailto:mccmade@mccneb.edu).**

# ASK THE MCC EXPERT:

## CREATE A POLLINATOR HABITAT IN YOUR HOME GARDEN



**Kris Engler**

Bustling with birds, bees and bugs, pollinator gardens breathe life into neighborhoods, transforming them into much more than a green space. Knowing what to plant and where, though, stops many from creating these efficient, beneficial spaces.

That's where Kris Engler comes in.

Engler is an instructor in the Metropolitan Community College Horticulture, Land Systems and Management program who has spent 12 years teaching students about landscape design, sustainability and natural systems.

One of her passions is helping people transition from traditional turf lawns to designing biodiverse, native habitats, enhancing curb appeal and supporting essential pollinators — animal species that pollinate flowers.

As urban sprawl encroaches on natural landscapes, Engler said pollinators often struggle to find food and shelter. Pollinator gardens are purposefully designed to attract and support pollinators like bees, butterflies and other insects by integrating nectar- and pollen-rich plants. These plants sustain ecosystems and improve biodiversity.

"It's important to have a pollinator garden because these plants will bring in the insects that will then pollinate the plants you want to harvest and grow fruits and vegetables," Engler said. "When we think of pollinators, we typically think about cute, fuzzy bees, and those are an important part of the pollination system, but there are so many different pollinators out there that we need to support."

Biodiversity is key to a healthy ecosystem, ensuring organisms have access to necessary food sources. Pollinators such as bees, wasps, butterflies, moths, flies, beetles and birds play a vital role in plant reproduction. Without them,

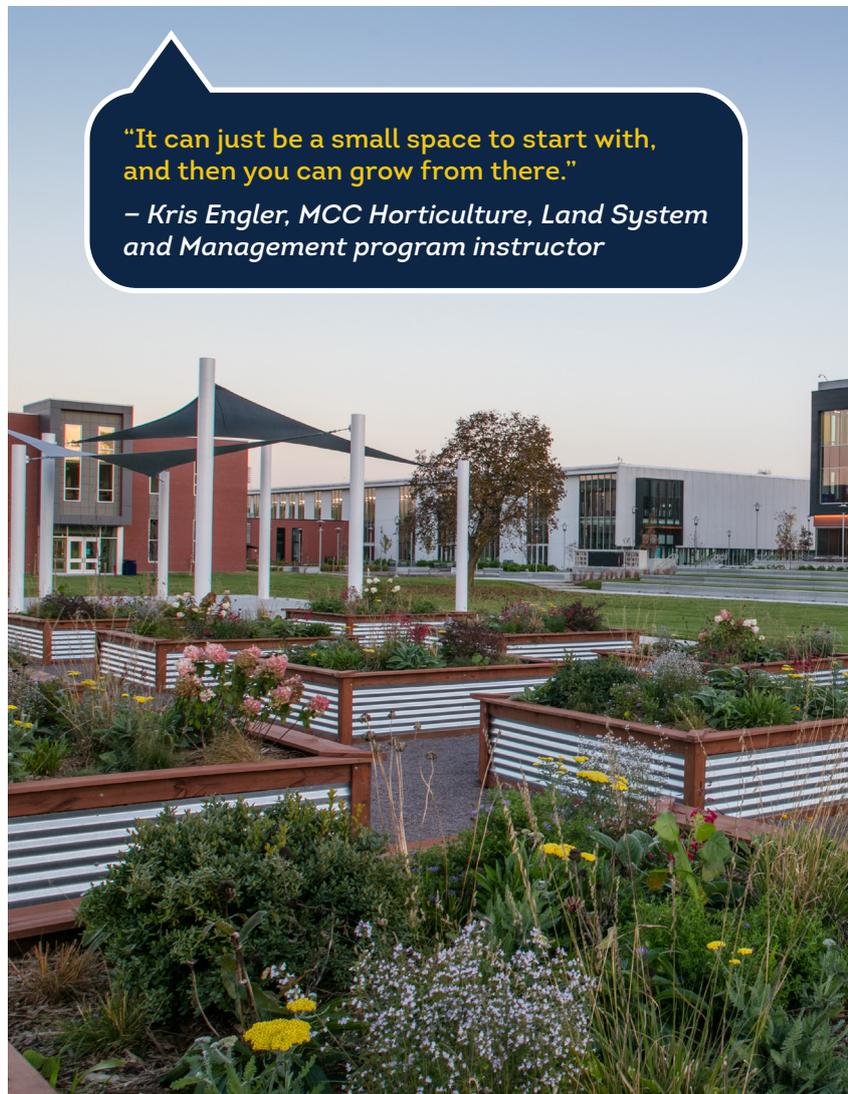
many fruits, vegetables and flowers would struggle to grow.

"It's so important because everything is part of a system," Engler said. "It's a giant web, and when we lose one piece of that web, everything can collapse."

Historically, Nebraska has been a tallgrass prairie where native plants nourished pollinators. Modern landscaping prioritizes turf lawns, which do little to support wildlife. Engler encourages homeowners to plant native

**"It can just be a small space to start with, and then you can grow from there."**

*– Kris Engler, MCC Horticulture, Land System and Management program instructor*



grasses and trees to help restore ecological balance and supply food sources for pollinators year-round.

“It can just be a small space to start with, and then you can grow from there,” Engler said. “Even that is going to help with the native plants, the native insects, the pollinators. Every little bit helps.”

## PREPARING A POLLINATOR GARDEN

When starting a garden, Engler said the first step is to assess the site conditions, including sun exposure, soil composition and drainage. Simple soil tests can determine whether the ground is clay-heavy, sandy or rich in silt, as each soil type affects drainage and plant suitability.

Gardeners should also consider their maintenance preferences when choosing plants. While native Nebraska plants require less care than non-native varieties, they still need regular watering and upkeep, particularly in their first year.

“Everything needs care that first year. But after the first year, once they’ve been established, usually there’s a lot less maintenance and care that goes into them,” Engler said.

## RIGHT PLANT, RIGHT PLACE

Engler said the key to a successful pollinator garden is choosing the right plant for the right location. Planting for every season ensures a consistent food supply for pollinators migrating through or overwintering in Nebraska.

In the spring, Engler said she loves the pasque flower (*Pulsatilla patens* var. *multifida*), a purple bloom with a yellow interior. For summer, she recommends purple coneflowers (*Echinacea purpurea*), black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia*) and tickseed (*Coreopsis*), a vibrant yellow flower.

For fall, Engler favors the goldenrod (*Solidago*), Nebraska’s state flower. Often mistakenly blamed for allergies, it blooms at the same time as ragweed and is a critical late-season nectar source for bees. In winter, Engler suggests colorful native grasses such as little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), switchgrass (*Panicum*) and Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), which are easy to maintain and well-adapted to the Nebraska climate.

“I love the native grasses,” Engler said. “They are gorgeous. They give you that winter interest, and they have a lot of texture. The movement in the fall is one of my favorites, too, when they catch the breeze and sway.”

## MAINTAINING A POLLINATOR GARDEN

To nurture a garden site, Engler advises removing turf grass by covering it with plastic and mulch to smother growth. Measuring the area based on spacing requirements also gives plants enough room to thrive.

For best results, she recommends using plant plugs instead of seeds. Unlike native seed mixes, which tend to blow away and become bird or mice food, plugs establish more reliably and give clear indications of plant health. While they may cost more initially, they are a worthwhile long-term investment.

To prevent plants from dying out, Engler said gardeners should dig up native grasses every three to four years. Homeowners can divide the grasses by cutting through them with a shovel and replanting the sections throughout the garden in order to avoid overcrowding.



### TIP #1:

On a budget? Put your Omaha Public Library (OPL) card to work. OPL’s Common Soil Seed Library lets members “check out” 15 seed packets a month. The seeds are locally sourced and include a variety of vegetable, fruit, herb and flower variants, including flowers recommended by Kris Engler and pollinator mixes. Seeds are available at every library branch and change every season.

Beyond grasses, Engler said planting native trees like cherry or plum also support pollinators such as caterpillars and birds.

"I'm not saying don't put out the bird feeder, but if you can plant a native to bring in those caterpillars and food sources, that's going to be amazing," Engler said.

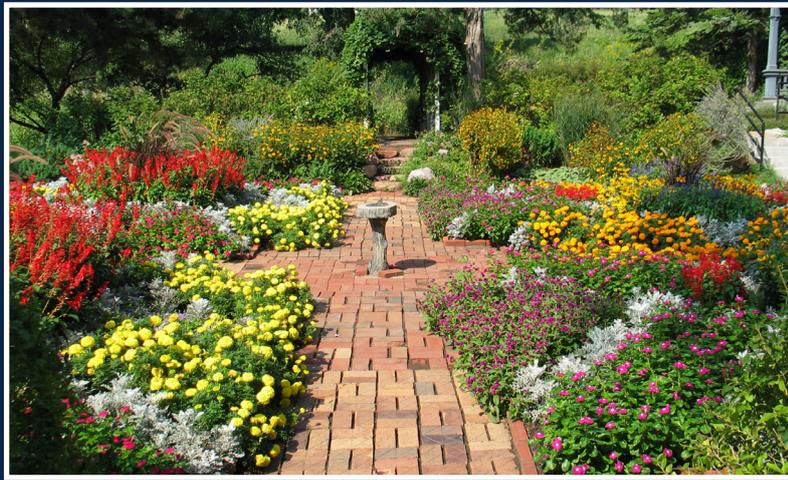
## CULTIVATING FURTHER KNOWLEDGE

Engler encourages gardeners to explore local resources like the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum's (NSA) "Bloom Box" program, which sells customized pollinator garden plans. In addition, NSA hosts spring plant sales and offers a Facebook group for Bloom Box participants.

Among other organizations and groups, enthusiasts can also join the Nebraska Extension Master Gardener Volunteer Program, which provides science-based horticulture education and volunteer opportunities.

### TIP#2:

Looking for inspiration for your home landscape? The Fort Omaha Campus has you covered. The spaces in the vicinity of Building 29 and the raised beds across the way are teeming with blooms this time of year. Pay attention to the selected plantings, where they are planted, how they are spaced and watch their life cycle progress through the seasons. Then think about a space in your own landscape that can provide a similar habitat and dig in!



## BLOOM AND ZOOM

We know from the opening minutes of any horticulture department plant sale that there are lots of plant lovers at MCC. If you have a garden space that serves as your happy place, we'd love to see it. Send your garden photos to [bmayers@mccneb.edu](mailto:bmayers@mccneb.edu), and look for a social media post later this summer that celebrates the great spaces you've created.

"They basically will teach you everything about the home gardens, and then you put in volunteer hours to help other people learn," Engler said, "so it's a great organization to get involved in."

Additionally, MCC offers credit and noncredit horticulture courses on native plants, perennial gardening and sustainable landscape design. Looking ahead, Engler is eager to expand these educational opportunities.

"We're continuing to build," Engler said, "so hopefully we'll have a couple more classes that are geared towards pollinators and native plants, and how to get the most out of those."

No matter the plot size, Engler said creating a native pollinator garden is a meaningful way to promote biodiversity.

"It's so much fun," Engler said. "It's amazing to see all the different plants bloom and different insects coming in and the color. It doesn't have to be huge. It can be a small area, but you can still have a lot of biodiversity there."



At MCC, our instructors have a wealth of knowledge they want to share. Starting with this issue of Community, we're starting an Ask the MCC Expert series to invite MCC faculty and staff to share practical tips with our readers. If you're a faculty or staff member who wants to share your passion, reach out to Brian Ayers, Community editor, at [bmayers@mccneb.edu](mailto:bmayers@mccneb.edu).

# BREAKING GROUND IN SARPY COUNTY

Metropolitan Community College is expanding its footprint in Sarpy County! In June, the College broke ground on the future site for its first full-service campus build since 1980. Located at Highways 370 and 50, construction of the Sarpy County Campus extends in motion the College's strategic plan to offer mixed-used development for future-focused academic facilities, meeting the evolving interests and needs of the fastest-growing county in Nebraska.



Metropolitan Community College  
**COMMUNITY AND  
WORKFORCE EDUCATION**

## MCC SARPY CENTER: A DESTINATION FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND LIFELONG LEARNING

The MCC Sarpy Center, co-located along with La Vista Public Library, is a dynamic community hub for noncredit personal and professional development. MCC Community and Workforce Education classes provide in-demand training for today's careers and access to lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Explore some of the upcoming courses available at the MCC Sarpy Center:

- 10-Point Pitch Card Game
- Basic Techniques of Digital Photos
- Beginner 3D Design with TinkerCad
- Canasta Card Game: A Card Mastery Retreat
- Cybersecurity
- Drones
- Getting to Know Your Android Phone
- Google Workspace for Beginners
- Hoverboard
- How to use AI using ChatGPT
- Introduction to American Sign Language
- Introduction to Genealogy
- Introduction to Poker
- Ukulele for Beginners



Visit [mccneb.edu/CE](https://mccneb.edu/CE) and select the course schedule by location option to see a full list of upcoming classes at the MCC Sarpy Center.



# AIA Nebraska honors Ling for expanding access to AEC careers

Seeking work-life balance, Stephanie Ling decided to leave her career as a working licensed architect in 2017 to pursue work in higher education. While she was interviewing to become an instructor at Metropolitan Community College, she imagined how she could shift the focus of the Architectural Design Technology program to position students for success.

Her goal: Expand access to architecture, engineering and construction (AEC) careers to meet a growing workforce demand.

"I saw the opportunity and could tell this was going to be a good change for me," Ling said.

What was a good career change for Ling also worked out well for the local AEC industry and for students seeking careers in it. Ling's decision to go into education was validated by her peers. The American Institute of Architects' Nebraska chapter recognized Ling's contributions to the profession, presenting her with the 2024 Architectural Design Education Award.

## Designing her future

Ling was immersed in design growing up. Her mom, Anne Peterson, is a retired licensed landscape architect, and her younger brother, Joel Peterson, is a licensed professional engineer for HVAC systems. Ling also started a family with husband, Jay Ling, a professional engineer and project manager.

Ling credits her mother, as well as her husband, as key influencers in her decision to change careers. Anne's determination and resilience as a single mother working in a male-dominated field in the '80s and '90s shaped how Ling viewed work.

"She was the only woman who wasn't a secretary on two floors at her company. As a single mom, she really struggled to work in the man's world of 9 to 5," Ling said. "If we were sick, she couldn't work those hours and ended making up the time overnight. Sometimes we'd sleep under her desk at the office. So, Joel and I, we just had this experience of tenacity."

After nearly a decade in commercial architecture, Ling entered education just as 3D building modeling software like Revit was revolutionizing the field through its efficiencies in project design, documentation and management. The problem: the industry lacked a workforce trained to use it.

Becoming a licensed architect typically involves a combination of an accredited bachelor's or master's degree, on-the-job-experience and passing a series of lengthy exams. Today, the education portion of this process takes a minimum of five to six years. By contrast, the MCC Architectural Design Technology program helps students get access to emerging careers in the field in two years, a huge benefit to the industry and to students by shortening the timeline to access entry-level jobs with sustainable wages.

"People need skills to go to work in two years, not just in four or six years. I'm always looking for ways to make the program more accessible without undermining the quality of what students are learning," Ling said.



*Stephanie Ling, MCC Architectural Design Technology instructor*

### **Expanding experience in BIM**

Transitioning the program to meet the broader AEC industry needs was challenging, but it made for a far more relevant program, beneficial to more area companies.

Before a program like the College's existed, learning building information modeling (BIM) software happened on the job — and at a high training cost for a licensed architect or design firm. To Ling, leaving a technology so fundamental to the industry out of formal education seemed like the kind of inefficiency BIM software exists to rectify.

Traditional architecture programs may spend as little as six hours of BIM-specific training across six years. At MCC, students spend a full year on it.

"Stephanie has worked to shift the focus of the architectural design program to better serve the AEC industry's needs for qualified building information modeling technicians and innovative design thinkers," wrote Ross Miller, principal at FormGrey Studio in the AIA Nebraska nomination letter he submitted on Ling's behalf. "[Before Ling developed the MCC program,] the only option for students to earn a National Architecture Accrediting Board-certified degree in architecture in the state of Nebraska was to attend the program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). It is critical that students in Nebraska have additional options and opportunities to pursue a professionally accredited architecture degree."

When Ling began working at MCC, the architectural design program was hosted at the Elkhorn Valley Campus and the curriculum was more relevant to the creative arts and hobbyist home designers. Fewer than 30 students were enrolled in 2017. By the 2023-24 academic year,

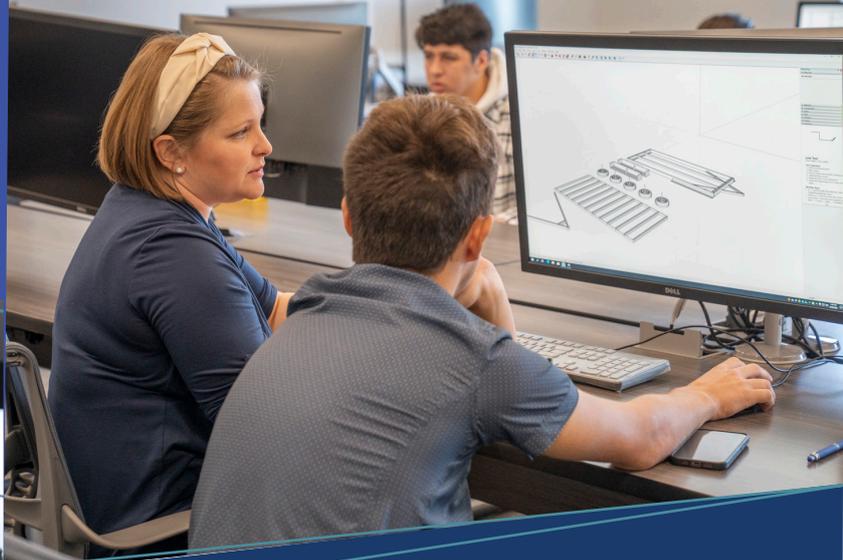
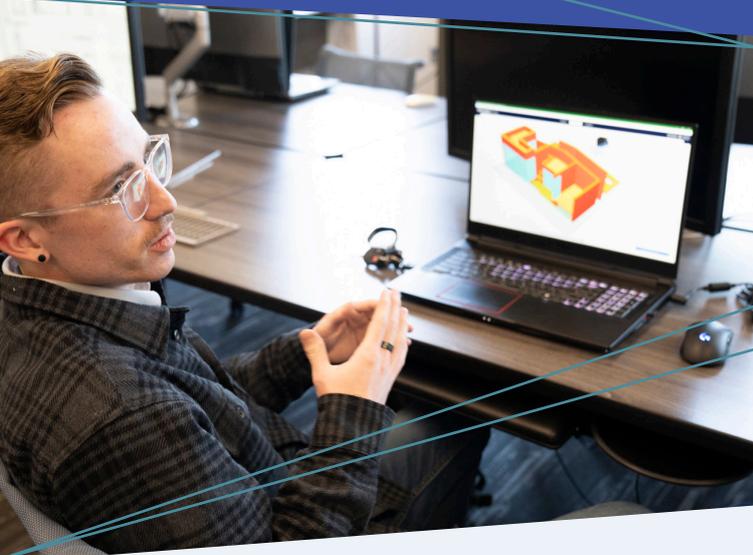
the program's headcount rose to 169, from 89 in 2021-2022. By the close of the current academic year, more than 30 students are expected to complete their MCC Architectural Design Technology program of study.

Ling grew the program by creating a foundation of knowledge for students to be able to speak the language of architecture, understand the processes the AEC industry relies on and have the same aptitude on a construction site. Several core classes within the program prioritize off-campus tours to industry partner companies and active jobsites to facilitate students' ability to connect what they're learning in the classroom to the real world.

"Classic architecture school does not teach the practicalities of buildings. They put being a designer on a pedestal. They teach you to design think, design problem-solve and design make, which is great, but only about 20% of architects end up designing on a day-to-day basis," Ling said.

That leaves a majority of professionals starting their careers in architecture with high ability but lacking some of the basic language used in team meetings or knowledge of how all the AEC professions work together.

"It's terrible when you enter the industry with this design skill set but you don't know what anything is called or how anybody works together. You don't know how to use the software. You're expected to teach yourself every day. It's just really overwhelming," Ling said. "My goal is to help our students feel confident to be in a room with professionals, working on real projects and to be inspired to teach themselves, but within a framework that they could learn the basics of Revit so they can run with it when they get to industry."



*Ling reoriented the MCC Architectural Design Technology program to focus on building information modeling software skills, expanding access to careers for technicians in the AEC industries.*

Now housed at the Construction Education Center at the Fort Omaha Campus, MCC Architectural Design Technology students learn alongside students developing skills used by trade partners of architectural firms, like general contractors and subcontractors.

With an MCC associate degree, graduates of the program are qualified for careers as BIM managers, specialists and technicians, as well as Revit drafters and more. In addition to these core architectural technology jobs, construction companies are creating virtual design and construction (VDC) jobs, an area of exponential industry employment growth MCC students can step into upon completion, Ling said.

Wholly unrelated industries also have needs for workers with 3D modeling skills, such as manufacturing, real estate and even gaming. BIM technicians have the applicable educational background in demand by these sectors.

“Builders are using the models that BIM designers create to make construction better. At MCC, we’re trying to create a whole group of people who can be helpers to industry,” Ling said.

MCC is also a resource for graduates of four-year institutions like UNL, Iowa State and Kansas State seeking to advance their design skills through continuing education. The College’s quarter structure allows working professionals to take advantage of multiple course offerings with a shorter time commitment.

“Redesigning the program was stressful and overwhelming, but after two years, we started to reap the benefits. People are starting to springboard into careers and come back to me and tell me, ‘I have this awesome job,’” Ling said.

One of those students was Amy Sexton, who is nearing completion of her architecture bachelor’s degree and professional license. She credits Ling’s leadership of the program and 1-on-1 guidance to helping her reimagine her career midway through it.

### **Leveraging technical skills during the creative process**

One of Sexton’s favorite experiences on the way to her associate at MCC was working with Ling and two other architecture design technology students on drafting the building plans for one of the Capstone houses that MCC Construction and Building Science Technology students used when assembling a modular home. At the end of the school year, the affordable house was transplanted and sold in the nearby Miller Park neighborhood.

“We were doing the drawings that the construction students were building right behind us. As we finished our design, they were literally building it out. To go into that bay and see it being built was so impactful. It was so exciting. It felt really small on paper. Someone’s living there now,” Sexton said.

Sexton credits Ling with providing added value during her education through her general availability to students and through mentorship. Ling has maintained her architectural license since becoming an instructor at MCC. Sexton said Ling’s connections to industry were helpful in keeping her informed about opportunities for further development. Ling also helped Sexton refine her portfolio.



***“Builders are using the models that BIM designers create to make construction better. At MCC, we’re trying to create a whole group of people who can be helpers to industry.”***

*- Stephanie Ling, MCC Architectural Design Technology instructor*

Sexton said she helped herself by letting her eagerness to learn be known through classroom participation and taking pride in her assignments. Daniel Bolt, the founder of architectural firm SCOPPA, who also works as an adjunct instructor at MCC, took notice of Sexton’s engagement in the program, her determination and the quality of her student work. Bolt offered her contract work, which eventually turned into a full-time job as a designer at the new architecture firm.

“Working at SCOPPA is exactly what I was looking for. Being at a small firm, where I’m the first employee, I get to work on projects from start to finish. It’s been really formative, and it’s what is allowing me to be able to look at getting licensed within the next year,” Sexton said.

Ling said accepting the education award from AIA Nebraska at the University of Nebraska’s School of Architecture as an instructor at a community college underscored the importance of a new avenue for career education in the field.

“What meant the most was that architects recognized how this program expands access to the field,” Ling said. “We created something that didn’t exist before at MCC, and now people have another way in.”

**Ready to draft the plans for a rewarding career in architectural design technology? Visit [mccneb.edu/Architectural-Design-Technology](http://mccneb.edu/Architectural-Design-Technology) to learn more about degrees and certificates offered.**

# Celebrating COMMUNITY COLLEGE Month at MCC



In April, Metropolitan Community College celebrated National Community College Month with the theme #BestDecisionEver. At any Metropolitan Community College campus on any given day, there's a lot happening. From K-12 engagement to sponsorship programs and career education opportunities, here are a few events that took place during #CCMonth that help make MCC the right choice for students and a great resource for the community.

## START YOUR ENGINES

More than 120 high school students learned about opportunities in the automotive industry during the 2025 Automotive Career Exploration Day on April 4 at the Automotive Training Center on the South Omaha Campus.

In collaboration with 20 industry partners, 12 stations showcased various hands-on skills, such as dent repair and vehicle painting, as well as lab tours.

Current MCC automotive students also attended a meet-and-greet with industry partners to kick off April.

Trish Ruffino, H&H Automotive talent acquisition business partner, attended and spoke to current and prospective general automotive program students.

"[MCC] can massage their programs into what we're needing in the industry," she said. "With all the technology that's developing in cars today, it's nice to see that they listen to us and teach their students what we're looking for in the industry."

One student considering his options was Mikhail Gass, a first-year welding student. During his senior year at Westside High School, he participated in the MCC Automotive Technology program and decided to explore welding at the College after graduation.

"It's just a great way to experience new trades and possibly new jobs," he said.

## THE DOCTOR IS IN

MCC Health Professions hosted its first Health Professions Education Symposium also on April 4 at the South Omaha Campus. Over a dozen health care professionals attended, ranging from nurses to surgeons. Each received four Continuing Education Units (CEUs) for attending an afternoon packed with subject matter experts leading sessions covering workplace issues affecting health care professionals.

Brenda Ballou, director of Student Experiences for MCC Health Professions, said providing a free professional development opportunity to health care workers was important to the department's faculty and staff.

"It's our way of giving back to our nurses and doctors, who normally would have to pay to attend sessions like these," Ballou said.

The topics were varied, which Hal Strough, Ph.D., MCC Health Professions dean, said were by design and included workplace violence, culturally appropriate health care, effective communication in health care and preventing burnout.

Rachel Heinz, director of programs for the Health Center Association of Nebraska (HCAN), said Daniel Zak's talk on preventing workplace violence was particularly useful. She said she'd like Zak, Ed.D., and founder of Aequitas Behavioral Assessments and Consulting, to teach classes to all the HCAN clinics on workplace violence and safety.

MCC Health Professions plans to make the symposium an annual event.



Top left: Nearly 140 MCC students participated in the SkillsUSA Nebraska Championships in Grand Island. Top middle, top right and bottom right: High school students participate in Automotive Career Exploration Day on the South Omaha Campus. Bottom left: Around 100 MCC students recognized for enrolling in MCC sponsorship programs on Signing Day at the South Omaha Campus.

## CELEBRATING STUDENTS

Throughout April, MCC celebrated students for their talent, drive and success.

First, MCC sent nearly 140 college and high school students to the SkillsUSA Nebraska Championships in Grand Island.

For the first time, MCC sent three students to compete in the Information Technology Services competition. Before results were announced, instructor Guillermo Rosas said he was happy to use this competition as a steppingstone for the program.

The next day he learned that all three of his students — Liam Blanchard, Codie Parsons and Enzo Del Balzo — placed, with Blanchard receiving a gold medal.

In total, MCC students received 60 medals, with 18 students receiving gold. Students that received gold qualified to compete at the SkillsUSA National Leadership & Skills Conference in Atlanta in June. All 60 students who medaled at the event are eligible for \$500 to \$1,500 scholarships from the MCC Foundation. Students who place in Atlanta can also earn additional scholarship funding.

Then, in mid-April, about 100 students were recognized at the College's annual Signing Day ceremony. The event celebrates incoming and current students who have been selected by local partners for sponsorship.

Student sponsorships are innovative training programs that allow students to be employed by industry partners and earn sustainable wages while pursuing their education. Industry partners also pay for the sponsored student's tuition at MCC.

One student signing into the program was Vernon Harrison. Harrison was employed at Fiserv when he learned the company offered him a sponsorship through MCC. He decided to apply and is entering the Manufacturing Technology Engineering program. Upon completion, he said he will receive a boost in pay, creating more financial stability.

During his remarks at the event, Scott Broady, dean of MCC Skilled Trades and Technical Sciences, recalled the College's first Signing Day event in 2018. It featured founding sponsor, Lozier Corporation, which sponsored the first five MCC students. Today, the program is supported by 60-plus area employers, creating great career opportunities for more than 300 MCC students each year.

Congrats to students who signed on with Baxter, Brand Hydraulics, Edwards Auto Group, Elliott Equipment Company, Fiserv, The H+H Group, Lincoln Premium Poultry, Lozier, MH Equipment, Papillion Sanitation, Sid Dillon, SOS Heating & Cooling and Tyson Foods at Signing Day 2025.

# FACES OF MCC

In 1995, I worked at Valmont Industries for seven years when a supervisor left MCC pamphlets about a degree being offered — an Associate of Applied Science in Automated Manufacturing Technology. At the time, we were introducing robotics to our manufacturing plant, and I thought this would be a fantastic way to get into the field.

I had enjoyed using computers in high school, but I never wanted to sit in front of a screen all day as a programmer, which a school counselor had once suggested. I assumed robotics would be similar to the computers I had used, and I saw this as a way to get off the production floor. Little did I know how much computers had evolved in the seven years since I'd graduated high school.

After graduating from MCC, my proudest personal accomplishment has been completing my dissertation and receiving my Doctor of Business Administration (DBA). I realized that education would not be a sprint, but a marathon. I started with MCC in 1995 and completed my DBA in 2017.

Completing my education later in life meant that my three sons were able to witness the results of my hard work. Each has since earned a bachelor's degree, and one has already completed his master's.

MCC gave me the confidence to continue my education. I took courses in Microsoft Office, CAD (computer-aided drafting), MS-DOS (Microsoft Disk Operating System), logistics and writing. These courses provided the foundational knowledge that helped me complete a Bachelor of Science at the University of Nebraska Omaha and become a manufacturing engineer. I still regularly use many of the skills I learned at MCC.

Dr. David Ho was instrumental in developing my initial knowledge of supply chain and quality management. At the time, I was taking a new course in logistics management, not realizing how influential it would be in my future.

Instructor Tom Brant also played a key role in helping me build a strong foundation in writing — skills that I've used throughout my career and academic journey.

# Rick Pennington

*Associate of Applied Science Advanced Manufacturing Technology — 1997  
Supply Chain program director and associate professor, Bellevue University*



Shortly before graduating with an Associate in Applied Science in Automated Manufacturing Technology in 1997, I received a paid, full-time manufacturing engineering internship with Valmont.

In 2000, I advanced into a manufacturing engineer role after completing additional courses toward my bachelor's degree. I graduated from a dual degree program from UNO/UNL in 2002 with a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Technology. My daily responsibilities included process design and machine programming, built on the fundamentals I had learned at MCC.

While pursuing an MBA at Bellevue University (BU), I transitioned into a quality manager role and graduated in 2010. Around that time, I began teaching supply chain management as an adjunct professor at BU. In 2017, I left the private sector to join BU full-time as an assistant professor in the

College of Business. That same year, I completed my dissertation, "Integration of a Quality Management System Within the Supply Chain: An Empirical Case Study," at Northcentral University.

Today, I serve as the supply chain program director and an associate professor. One of the recent highlights of my career at BU was launching a Master of Science in Supply Chain Management program in 2023.

The foundational education I received at MCC has been instrumental in both my career and academic path. The support and encouragement from professors, counselors and staff at MCC played a vital role in my journey.

# CULINARY CUES FROM THE ICA

In each issue of Community Magazine, MCC Institute for Culinary Arts (ICA) faculty will select a recipe or tip to share — straight from the classroom. Instructor Cathy Curtis brings a classic from the bake shop to start your day.

## Breakfast classics: Blueberry muffins

Blueberry muffins are a staple for on-the-go breakfasts and quick snacks, but not every muffin is created equal. The tried-and-true recipe below is the same one that culinary students bake in the second quarter of the program when they take their first baking class at the ICA (Baking I). They are tested on it during their midterm practical exam. Test yourself at home by giving this recipe a try, and don't forget to enjoy the grading process!

**Source:** Baking I course documents (adapted from "On Baking," Labensky, 4th ed.), ICA at MCC

**Yield:** About nine standard-size muffins

### Ingredients

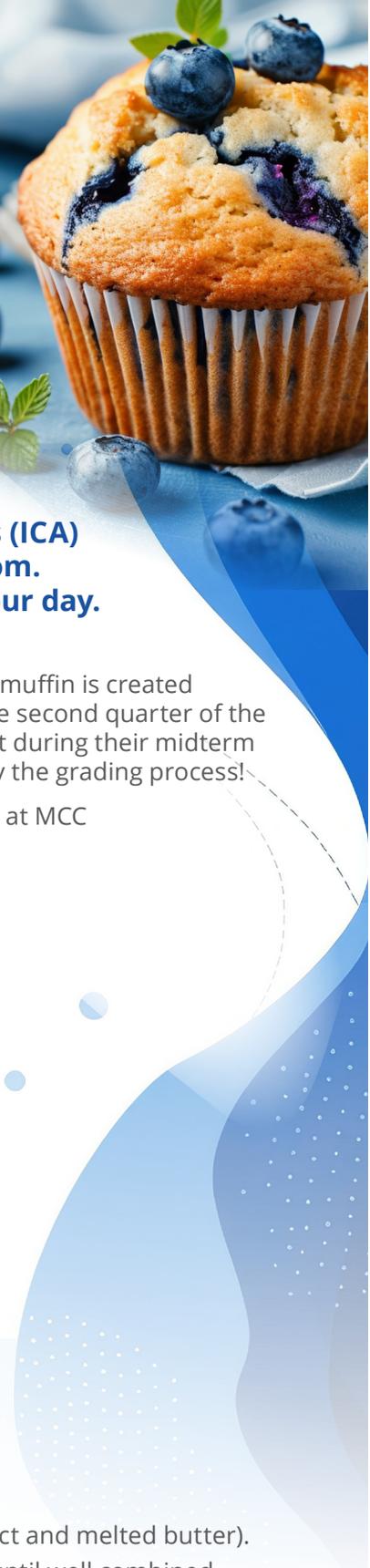
- |       |                  |                                      |
|-------|------------------|--------------------------------------|
| • 1   | each             | egg, large, lightly beaten           |
| • 4   | ounces (118 mL)  | milk, warmed to room temperature     |
| • ½   | teaspoon (3 mL)  | vanilla extract                      |
| • 2   | ounces (57 g)    | butter, melted and cooled slightly   |
| • 6   | ounces (170 g)   | cake or pastry flour                 |
| • 2 ½ | ounces (71 g)    | granulated sugar                     |
| • 2   | teaspoons (9 g)  | baking powder                        |
| • ⅛   | teaspoon (0.6 g) | iodized salt                         |
| • ½   | teaspoon (3 g)   | lemon zest                           |
| • 2 ½ | ounces (71 g)    | blueberries, fresh, washed and dried |

#### Optional:

- |           |                      |
|-----------|----------------------|
| as needed | coarse sanding sugar |
|-----------|----------------------|

### Instructions

1. Preheat the oven to 375° F (convection 350° F).
2. In a medium mixing bowl, using a whisk, combine the wet ingredients (egg, milk, extract and melted butter).
3. Into a large mixing bowl, sift the flour, sugar, baking powder and salt, and then whisk until well combined.
4. Into the dry mixture, add zest and blueberries and gently toss to coat.
5. Into the dry ingredients, add the wet ingredients and with a rubber spatula, gently fold only until the ingredients are combined and mostly moistened. Some lumps are fine.
6. Scoop the batter into a paper-lined muffin pan, using a portion scoop to ensure even portioning (they should be  $\frac{3}{4}$  full). Sprinkle sanding sugar on top of muffins if using.
7. Place in the oven and bake for about 10-18 minutes (depending on the size of the muffin tin) or until a toothpick comes out clean and the tops are lightly browned. Check them sooner rather than later — you can always put them back in, but once they're overbaked, they'll be dry when they cool.
8. On a rack, let cool for five to 10 minutes before removing from the muffin pan, and place directly onto the rack to cool completely.
9. In an air-tight container, store at room temperature for up to five days. (For longer storage, freeze in an airtight container for up to three months.)





# IGNITE YOUR BUSINESS POTENTIAL AT THE NEW **MCC Business Development Center**

*MCC at The Ashton, 1106 N. 12th St. | Millwork Commons*

Are you ready to **start, grow or reinvent** your business journey? Whether you're launching a purpose-driven venture, scaling your company, upskilling your team or entering new markets — the College's new Business Development Center is your gateway to bold, practical and future-ready business training.

Housed inside the dynamic Ashton Building in Millwork Commons, our center empowers entrepreneurs, innovators and changemakers with hands-on learning and industry-focused training.

#### **What we offer:**

- Personalized small business consulting and coaching
- Modern meeting and collaboration spaces
- Entrepreneurship and business education across industries
- Networking events and peer-to-peer learning
- Digital badges, microcredentials and fast-track training pathways

At MCC, we believe business growth should be accessible, actionable and inspiring. Whether you're just getting started or leveling up, **your next move begins here.**

**Contact [BusinessDevelopment@mccneb.edu](mailto:BusinessDevelopment@mccneb.edu) or call 531-MCC-7233 for more information.**

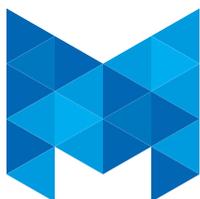


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