

STATE OF WISCONSIN

Wisconsin Technical College System Board

2017-19 BIENNIAL REPORT

October 2019



Wisconsin Technical College System Board

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Madison, Wisconsin 53705
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[Wisconsin Technical College System](http://www.wisconsin.edu)

Morna K. Foy, President

AGENCY OVERVIEW

Mission and Purpose

Chapter 38, *Wis. Stats.*, provides that the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) Board is responsible for the initiation, development, maintenance and supervision of programs with specific occupational orientation below the baccalaureate level. These include associate degrees, training of apprentices and adult education below the postsecondary level. In order to foster economic development and expansion of employment opportunities, the principal purposes of the System are to provide occupational education and training and retraining programs necessary for full participation in the workforce and to provide customized training and technical assistance to business and industry. Additional purposes of the System are to cooperate and contract with secondary schools, provide collegiate transfer programs, offer basic skills education, offer community service programs and self-enrichment activities, and address barriers created by stereotyping and discrimination.

Partner Agencies

WTCS maintains close working relationships with:

- the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) to offer employment services, related instruction for registered apprenticeships, labor market information and other programs;
- the Wisconsin Higher Education Aids Board (HEAB) to administer financial aid programs that benefit WTCS students;
- the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to develop technical and adult education opportunities for all people in the state and to facilitate articulation between secondary and postsecondary programs;
- the University of Wisconsin System (UWS) to serve state residents by increasing opportunities for postsecondary education and training;
- the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC) to identify and develop strategies that strengthen Wisconsin's workforce, business and industry; and
- the Department of Corrections (DOC) offering Adult Basic Education (ABE) and Career Technical Education (CTE/Vocational) programs at 18 correctional institutions and nine correctional centers for eligible inmates who are identified as having academic or vocational need.

WTCS Board

As the WTCS governing body, the WTCS Board is structured to reflect its mission and diverse responsibilities. The Board consists of 13 members, including three ex officio and 10 non-salaried members appointed by the Governor. As established in Chapter 38, *Wis. Stats.*, the three ex-officio members are the DWD Secretary (or designee), the UWS Board of Regents President (or designee) and the State Superintendent of DPI (or designee).

Of the ten appointed board members, one represents employers, one represents employees, one represents farmers, one represents students and six represent the public as at-large members. Appointed board members serve staggered, six-year terms, with the exception of the student representative, who serves a two-year term. The WTCS Board is empowered to determine the organization, plans, scope and development of postsecondary technical and adult education; appoint a System President; approve the qualifications of district educational personnel and courses of study; establish system-wide policies and approve district proposals for facilities development and land acquisition. The Board establishes procedures and criteria for determining course credit, state aid, uniform accounting for financial programs and other data required of the colleges.

During the 2017-19 biennium, the following individuals served on the WTCS Board:

Member	Representing	Residence
Becky Levzow, Vice President, 2017-19	Farmers	Rio
W. Kent Lorenz	Public	Oconomowoc
Terrance McGowan	Employees	Pewaukee
Dr. Rodney Pasch	Public	Elroy
John Schwantes	Public	Elkhart Lake
Kelly Tourdot	Public	Waunakee
S. Mark Tyler, President, 2017-19	Public	Woodville
Vacant	Student	
Stephen Willett	Employer	Phillips
Mary Williams	Public	Medford

The following ex-officio members served on the Board during the 2017-19 biennium:

Member	Representing
Tony Evers	State Superintendent of Public Instruction
Dr. Eve Hall	University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents Designee
Ray Allen	Secretary, Department of Workforce Development

WTCS Board Policies

The WTCS Board has the authority to establish system-wide policies. The WTCS Board uses a two-step process to consider policy changes and ensure the opportunity for member input. Draft policy recommendations are first developed by the WTCS Office in consultation with various stakeholders. The System President presents the draft recommendations to the Board for discussion. System Office staff incorporate the comments of the Board into the draft recommendations. At a subsequent Board meeting, the System President presents the final recommendations to the Board for its action. Policies approved by the WTCS Board are published in its [policy manual](#).

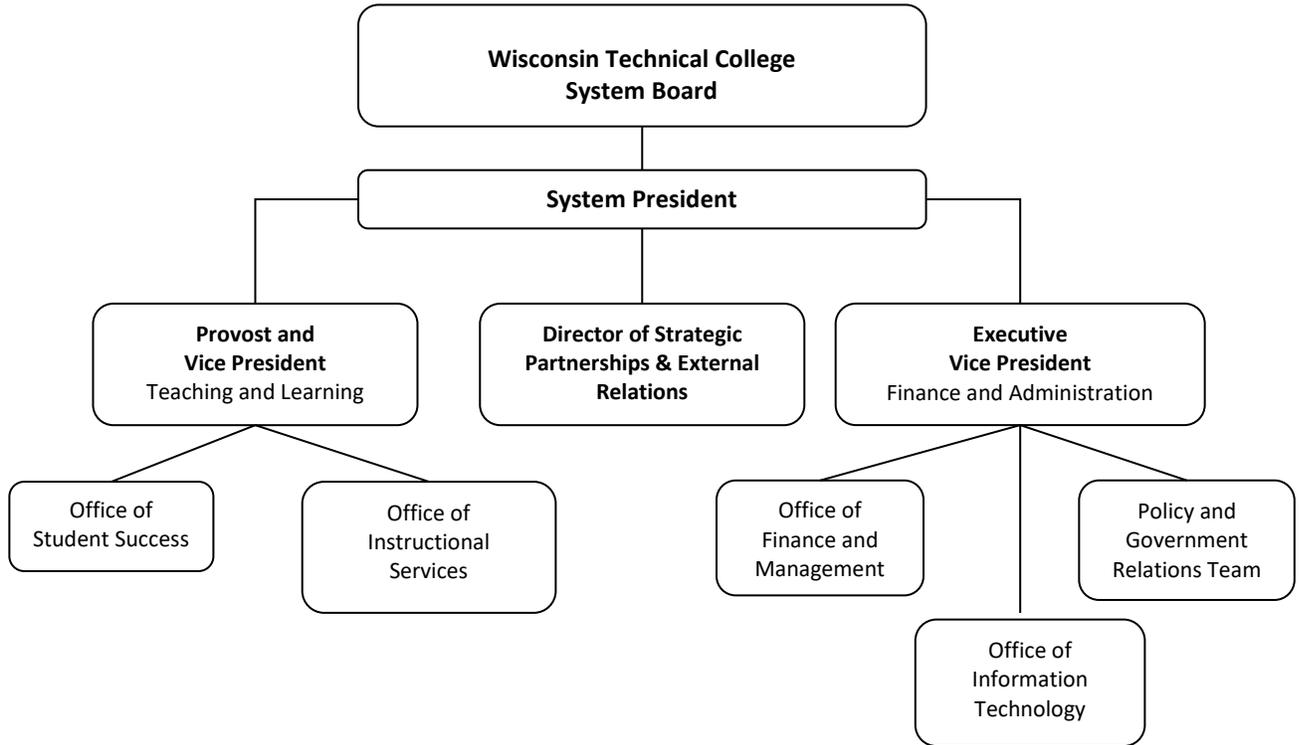
System Office

A System President, who serves at the pleasure of the WTCS Board, leads the WTCS Office. The WTCS Office ended the biennium with 56 full-time equivalent (FTE) authorized positions, in addition, 6.5 FTE authorized positions at the Educational Approval Board (EAB). EAB, which regulates the operation of for-profit postsecondary schools in Wisconsin, was attached to the System Office for administrative purposes under 2005 Wisconsin Act 25.¹ Major staff responsibilities are as follows:

- The *Offices of Finance and Management and Information Technology* have oversight responsibility for operations including accounting, budgeting, procurement, payroll, human resources, facilities and information technology. The offices distribute state aid and provide guidance to the technical colleges in developing financial policies and standards. In addition, the offices assist the Board in determining student fees and tuition rates and in approving district facility development projects. The offices are also responsible for the management of information and oversight of district budgets and enrollments.
- The *Office of Instructional Services* has responsibility for program definition, approval, evaluation and review. It focuses on programs in agriculture, office services, marketing, home economics (including family and consumer education), health occupations, trade and industry (including apprenticeship, fire service, law enforcement, safety, technical and vocational training), general education, personnel certification and environmental education. It also serves as a liaison to secondary schools.
- The *Office of Student Success* is responsible for the coordination of state and federal grant programs, student financial aid, federal projects for the disabled and disadvantaged, adult and continuing education outreach, adult basic education, English language learning and Workforce Investment Act projects. It also serves as a liaison to business and industry.
- The *Policy and Government Relations Team*, which reports to the executive vice president, provides leadership for system-wide policy analysis and development, public outreach and federal and state government relations. It is responsible for the coordination of system-wide budgeting and planning, research and labor market information.
- The *Strategic Partnerships and External Relations Director* serves as a member of the agency's leadership team. The Director is the WTCS Public Information Officer and functions as the liaison between WTCS and a wide variety of internal and external partners.

¹ EAB was subsequently incorporated into the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services under 2017 Wisconsin Act 59.

Wisconsin Technical College System Board and Office



Alternative Work Patterns

WTCS Office policies have permitted alternative work patterns since 1976. In 2005, the WTCS Office adopted a revised policy that permits any employee of the agency to request an alternative work pattern. Alternative work patterns include, but are not limited to, part-time, shared-time and flex-time schedules. Employee and agency work needs are accommodated through the use of non-standard work weeks and straight shift work. During the 2015-2017 biennium, more than two-thirds of employees participated in some type of alternative work pattern.

WTCS College Districts

Currently with 51 campuses, the 16 WTCS colleges deliver career and technical education to meet the needs, interests and abilities of their students and the demands of the labor market. To assist the colleges in their missions, WTCS Office staff provide the colleges with technical assistance and help to coordinate activities and support services.

Each WTCS college has unique demographic, geographic and economic characteristics. Programs are tailored to meet local needs within the uniform program standards established by the WTCS Board. Each technical college is governed by a district board appointed by local elected officials. Similar to the WTCS Board, district board membership is intended to reflect the diversity of district stakeholders. Excluding the Milwaukee Area Technical College (MATC), membership for each of the remaining 15 district boards is comprised of nine members who must be residents of their respective districts: two members representing employers, two representing employees, a local K-12 school administrator, a state or local elected official and three at-large members.

MATC's District Board is also comprised of nine members, seven of which must reside in Milwaukee County. Membership in the MATC District Board is as follows: five represent employers, three represent employers with 15 or more employees and two members represent employers with 100 or more employees. In addition, at least two members must represent employers that are manufacturing businesses. A person representing an employer must have at least two years of experience managing a business entity, non-profit, etc. with at least 15 employees or at least 2 years of experience managing the finances or hiring of personnel of a business entity or non-profit, etc., with at least 100 employees. Finally, MATC's Board includes a school district administrator, a state or local elected official and two at-large members.

District boards are empowered to levy taxes on property, provide facilities and equipment, contract for instructional services and appoint a college president who serves as chief executive officer for the district. (See map on next page.)

WTCS College Districts and Campuses



MAJOR PROGRAM GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

Expand the Pool of Skilled Workers in the State's Labor Force

The WTCS Board continues to approve demand-driven, cutting-edge career and technical education and training programs developed by Wisconsin's technical colleges in collaboration with Wisconsin's businesses and industry, labor and other partners. The colleges have developed state-of-the-art programs in emerging industries like biotechnology, manufacturing robotics and renewable energy. At the same time, the colleges continue to deliver graduates in core programs to meet Wisconsin's ongoing demand for construction, information technology, public safety and health care professionals. To accomplish this and operate with the highest degree of efficiency, the WTCS Board discontinues about the same number of programs as it approves each year.

Conducted every four years since 1980, the Employer Satisfaction Survey measures employer satisfaction with the skills and abilities of WTCS graduates. Feedback from employers has consistently shown that WTCS graduates continue to meet or exceed employer expectations compared to other new employees, in both occupational abilities and other core skills. In the most recent survey, employers report WTCS graduates meet or exceed employer expectations in the following areas:

- mastery of knowledge in their fields (88 percent);
- ability to perform technical skills (91 percent);
- ability to communicate effectively (89 percent);
- relevance of skills and knowledge (87 percent);
- mastery of "STEM" (i.e., science, technology, engineering and mathematics) (82 percent); and
- overall preparedness for employment (89 percent).

Ninety-six percent of employers said they would hire a WTCS graduate again and 98 percent of employers felt that their local technical college was important or very important to the success of their business.

The complete results from the latest survey are available on the [WTCS publications and resources page](#).

Career Pathways

WTCS is continuing its work with a wide variety of internal and external partners to develop pathways "to and through" postsecondary education that seamlessly link education and work throughout an individual's career. For middle and high school students, career pathways increase awareness of the academic preparation needed for postsecondary education. In addition, high school students can earn technical college credits that also fulfill graduation requirements — "dual credit" — at no cost to the student or their family.

At the postsecondary level, WTCS is working in partnership with employers to "stack" technical college credentials: short-term certificates, technical diplomas and associate degrees in a way that supports career advancement based on employer-identified needs and an individual's career goals and timeline.

Increase Postsecondary Educational Opportunities

WTCS used a variety of methods to increase postsecondary educational opportunities over the 2017-19 biennium. WTCS colleges continued to provide training opportunities for incumbent workers, develop career pathways to address skills shortages and offer low-income adults clear and reliable courses of action to progress in their careers.

Employer-specific worker training is a critical component in meeting the needs of new and expanding businesses in Wisconsin. In the 2017-19 biennium, WTCS colleges continued to serve on average over 87,000 individuals annually through customized instruction contracts with businesses, in which the colleges design and deliver customized instruction and technical assistance, either on-site or on-campus.

Employers and workers continue to place a high value on incumbent worker training and WTCS developed a survey instrument to gauge the economic and other impacts of this training. Results from the survey indicate that most respondents believe WTCS contract training meets or exceeds their expectations, allowing them to improve productivity, achieve cost savings, increase sales and retain or create jobs.

Adult career pathways created by WTCS colleges also commonly include remedial education “bridges” that allow students who need basic instruction, including English language learning to address those needs without postponing their entry into postsecondary occupational programs. One strategy for bridge programs pairs basic education and occupational instructors in the same classroom so that students can improve their basic academic abilities and at the same time earn a certificate-level credential that will help to improve their employment outcomes.

Closing the Achievement Gap

The enrollment of students of color, as a proportion of the overall student body, continues to climb, increasing from 24.5 percent in 2008-09 to 29.8 percent in 2017-18. This compares favorably with the percentage of persons of color in Wisconsin as a whole, which was about 13.8 percent according to the 2010 Census. Over the last nine years, the percentage of students of color graduates has increased from 14.8 percent in 2008-09 of total graduates to 20.5 percent of total graduates in 2017-18. The number of WTCS students of color transferring to UWS institutions continues to increase. In 2011, students of color composed 14 percent of WTCS students transferring to UWS. In the fall of 2017, (the latest data available) students of color composed 18 percent of WTCS students transferring to UWS institutions.

2017-19 BUDGET AND POLICY

Several budget and policy changes to WTCS were made under 2017 Wisconsin Act 59 (i.e., 2017-19 biennial budget act).

Wisconsin Grants Increase

The legislation increases Wisconsin Grants for eligible low-income WTCS students by \$6.9 million over the biennium: \$3.2 million in 2017-18 and \$3.7 million in 2018-19. Total WTCS Wisconsin Grants available: \$22.5 million in 2017-18 and \$23.0 million in 2018-19.

Veterans-Related Provisions

After receiving an enrolled student's official joint services transcript from the Department of Defense, a WTCS college must accept all American Council on Education credit recommendations included in the transcript and award academic credit to the student in accordance with these recommendations. In addition, the college must accept all credits included in the Community College of the Air Force transcript and award academic credit accordingly.

Wisconsin Act 59 also expands eligibility for the Wisconsin GI Bill for surviving spouses, spouses and children.

Permanent 30 Percent Statutory Cap on Outcomes-Based Funding

The legislation permanently establishes a 30 percent statutory cap on the amount of general state aid distributed to WTCS colleges based on the outcomes-based funding model.

Eliminates the Educational Approval Board

Wisconsin Act 59 eliminates the Educational Approval Board (EAB) as a stand-alone agency. It transfers EAB's functions and positions to the Department of Safety and Professional Services. EAB will no longer be attached to WTCS for administrative purposes.

Sales Tax Exemption for WTCS

The legislation creates a sales tax exemption for the sale of personal property to a private contractor who transfers the property to WTCS, UWS, UW Colleges or UW Extension facilities. Defines a facility to mean building, shelter, parking lot, parking garage, athletic fields/parks, sewers, etc., but not a highway, street or road.

\$5 Million Set-Aside of Fast Forward Funding

The legislation sets aside \$5 million in Fast Forward program funding in 2017-18 for grants to WTCS colleges for workforce training programs. It also expands the eligible uses of Fast Forward funding.

Youth Options Preserved for WTCS

The Youth Options program is eliminated for University of Wisconsin institutions, tribal colleges, or a private, non-profit institution and replaced with a new program called the "Early College Credit" program beginning July 1, 2018. WTCS institutions are not eligible to participate in the Early College Credit Program. Instead, the Youth Options program is preserved for WTCS and the enabling language is

now incorporated in Chapter 38. The Course Options program is eliminated entirely beginning July 1, 2018.

Change in Exempt Computer Aid Payment

The legislation changes the formula for the annual exempt computer aids payments that colleges receive from the Department of Revenue (DOR).

Personal Property Tax Relief and State Aid Payments

The legislation exempts non-manufacturing machinery, tools and patterns of businesses from the property tax and creates a local aid payment in lieu of the tax on such items. WTCS colleges will receive a state aid payment from the Department of Administration (DOA) equal to the amount levied on this exempt property.

Personal Property State Aid Payments and Revenue Limits

For tax levy purposes the personal property state aid payment received from DOA are now added to the definition of the term “revenue” (i.e., revenue is now defined to include tax levy, property tax relief aids and personal property state aid payments) beginning with the October 2018 levy.

Other Significant Legislation

- **2017 Wisconsin Act 91** – Makes changes to the eligibility requirements for the Technical Excellence Higher Education Scholarship Program. Defines full time to be 6 credits; allows “satisfactory academic progress” to be certified by the district school; allows students to regain eligibility if their GPA drops below 3.0, but a student later maintains 3.0 for a year.
- **2017 Wisconsin Act 206** – Creates a pilot grant program through June of 2022 to support high school teachers in meeting the Higher Learning Commission’s requirements for eligibility to teach dual enrollment courses. Annual \$500,000 grant program to be administered by the Higher Educational Aids Board beginning 2018-19.
- **2017 Wisconsin Act 215** – Requires UW Board of Regents to establish policies for the transfer of credits earned by a high school pupil enrolled at a UWS institution or educational institution outside the UWS.

REVIEW OF PERFORMANCE AND OPERATIONS

Wisconsin’s technical colleges strive to provide graduates with the education and training that provides skills to compete in today’s competitive job market. The WTCS regularly publishes data on enrollment, costs and graduate outcomes. The data is available on the [WTCS publications and resources page](#).

Operational Costs

In order to provide the instruction, services and activities necessary to carry out their mission and achieve their goals, WTCS colleges rely on a combination of federal, state and local revenues. In 2017-18, the latest year for which complete financial information is available, WTCS colleges enrolled 314,835 individuals at an operational cost of \$1.09 billion.

Actual 2015-16 cost allocation data show that 64.4 percent of operational costs were for instruction while the next highest amounts were for general institutional (14 percent), student services (11.1 percent) and physical plant (8.2 percent). Instructional resources accounted for the remaining 2.3

percent of operational costs. Data on college costs is published annually, with the most recent year of complete data available in the [cost allocation summary report](#).

Enrollment

As shown in Table 1, the number of full-time equivalent (FTE) students enrolled annually decreased 0.5 percent from 65,890 in FY 2016-17 to 65,554 in FY 2017-18. Table 1 also shows FTE enrollment by instructional category and the percentage of all FTEs that are included in each category for the two most recent years of complete data. Data on enrollment is published annually in the Fact Book with the most recent year of complete data available. The data is available on the [WTCS publications and resources page](#).

TABLE 1: Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) Enrollments
By Instructional Category

	2016-17 Enrollments	2016-17 Percentage of Enrollments	2017-18 Enrollments	2017-18 Percentage of Enrollments
Postsecondary				
Associate Degree	44,707	67.9%	44,621	68.1%
Technical Diploma	7,524	11.4%	7,480	11.4%
Collegiate Transfer	6,765	10.2%	6,700	10.2%
Subtotal	58,996	89.5%	58,801	89.7%
Non-Postsecondary				
Basic Education, Hearing Impaired Program (HIP) and Visually Impaired Program (VIP)	4,777	7.2%	4,505	6.9%
Continuing Education				
Vocational-Adult	1,908		2,041	
Community Services	209		207	
Subtotal	2,117	3.2%	2,248	3.4%
TOTAL	65,890	100.0%	65,554	100.0%

Source: WTCS Fact Book 2019 (2017-19)

By Gender

In 2017-18, WTCS colleges reported enrolling 158,214 men and 152,936 women, while gender was not reported for 1 percent of enrollees. Of the men enrolled 56.7 percent were enrolled in degree or diploma program courses, while 15.7 percent were enrolled in non-postsecondary courses and 48 percent were in continuing education courses. Of the women enrolled, 66.4 percent were enrolled in degree or diploma program courses, 30.5 percent in non-postsecondary and 39.3 percent in continuing education courses. Because students may take courses in more than one area, percentages add to more than 100 percent.

Services for Students with Special Needs

WTCS provides specialized services for:

- students with physical or mental disabilities;
- students who are disadvantaged, including academically or economically disadvantaged individuals; and
- students with limited English proficiency.

In 2017-18, 14,015 students with disabilities received specialized services. These services were supported with funds from GPR, WTCS districts, the federal Perkins Act and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation within DWD. These services enable students with disabilities to enroll and succeed in technical education programs and courses. Services include specialized guidance and counseling, needs assessment and evaluation, support services, remedial instruction, career development, adaptive equipment and career placement.

In 2017-18, the WTCS colleges provided services to 85,917 disadvantaged students (unduplicated), of whom 44,940 were academically disadvantaged, 58,442 were economically disadvantaged and 8,770 had limited English proficiency. Services provided to disadvantaged students – including academically or economically disadvantaged individuals and those with limited English proficiency – are supported with funds from WTCS general state aid, local funds, targeted state GPR funds and federal funds provided through Perkins Act and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. Services provided include remediation services such as specialized reading and mathematics laboratories, note taking instruction and staff and peer tutors.

Graduate Outcomes

WTCS colleges annually survey the previous year's program graduates. The latest survey results for 2018 graduates were available in May 2019. Of the 25,342 graduates, 16,135 (64 percent) responded to the survey.

Among the respondents:

- 97 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with their WTCS training;
- 94 percent of those in the labor force were employed;
- 94 percent of graduates are working in Wisconsin; and
- 79 percent of employed graduates were working in a job related to their WTCS training.

The median salary six months after graduation, regardless of degree type, for 2018 WTCS graduates was \$40,245. Median salaries six months after graduation range from \$35,357 for 2018 graduates with a short-term technical diploma to \$43,678 for 2018 associate degree graduates.

The number of programs with median salaries of \$50,000 to \$60,000 six months after graduation grew from 25 in 2016 to 40 in 2018. There were 19 WTCS programs with a median salary of over \$60,000 six months after graduation. These programs range from short term technical diplomas in CNC Programming, Power Plant Mechanic and Business operations to Associate Degrees in Cardiovascular Technology, Quality Engineering and Manufacturing Management.

Grant Programs

WTCS provides a number of grants to individual technical colleges using funds received from general purpose revenue, the federal Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act and the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act.

These programs are intended to assist WTCS districts in providing educational and economic development services to individuals and high priority industry sectors. Grants also help promote innovative or successful practices related to priorities identified by the WTCS Board, such as:

- strengthening career and technical education programs through multi-college collaborative efforts to develop measures of technical skill attainment; and
- promoting and supporting high school-to-college transitions for career and technical education students through multi-college collaborative efforts to develop programs of study.

A summary of grant programs is available on the [Grants information page](#).

PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

Veteran Tuition Remissions

Beginning in 2007-08, Wisconsin G.I. Bill tuition remissions for eligible veterans increased to 100 percent. In 2018-19, approximately 3,745 veterans and their dependents benefited from \$5.4 million in WTCS tuition remissions.

STEM

WTCS collaborates with education and industry partners to increase the courses and programs offered in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). WTCS colleges offer about 300 degree and diploma programs, of which approximately one-third are classified as a STEM Career Cluster or are in one of the six STEM-related Career Clusters under the framework of the National Career Technical Education Foundation:

- Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources;
- Architecture and Construction;
- Health Sciences;
- Information Technology;
- Manufacturing; and
- Transportation, Distribution and Logistics

Engagement and Partnerships

The WTCS Board and Office are committed to working with internal and external partners to improve the quality, availability and cost-effectiveness of WTCS education and workforce training programs.

The WTCS Office and individual colleges participate in a variety of collaborative projects involving outside educational and workforce development agencies to:

- improve college transfer opportunities;
- enhance college access and affordability; and
- develop career clusters and pathways.

Partner institutions involved with these projects include the Wisconsin departments of Workforce Development and Public Instruction, the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, the University of Wisconsin System, the Wisconsin Association of Independent Colleges and Universities and Ascendium Education Group. Additional information about WTCS is available on the [WTCS website](#).

2019-21 BIENNIAL BUDGET

Major budget and policy changes in 2019 Wisconsin Act 9 are highlighted below:

Increase in WTCS General Aid

The legislation increased general aid by an additional \$25 million over the biennium, which is an increase of 14 percent over the base. The increase will be distributed based on the current general aid framework: with 70 percent distributed using the statutory formula and 30 percent distributed based on the outcomes-based funding formula.

OTHER SIGNIFICANT LEGISLATION

Act 17 Sign Language Interpreters

Replaces the current program for renewable sign language interpreter licenses granted by the Department of Safety and Professional Services with new categories of sign language interpreter licenses.

WTCS STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The WTCS Board has adopted the following strategic directions and action steps for the five-year period, 2016-2020.

Transform the delivery of postsecondary education and training

- Advance proven strategies like hands-on career exploration, dual credit, prior learning assessment, transitions for basic education students and stackable credentials.
- Closely examine the viability of evolving practices, such as on-line learning, competency-based education and emerging credentialing frameworks.
- Make effective use of data and technology to identify, measure and report outcomes.

Innovate to position students for academic and career success

- Maintain affordability for students, balanced with a lasting commitment to quality.
- Emphasize delivery of proven student support services and explore emerging practices.
- Consistently focus on strategies that support the achievement of students' goals.

Inspire learners of all ages to engage in skills-based education

- Elevate the image of Wisconsin's technical colleges as a first-choice postsecondary option.
- Create broader awareness of college offerings and their connection to valued career opportunities.
- Leverage the power of student, graduate and employer stories to transform dated perceptions of skills-based education.

Collaborate to efficiently advance customer outcomes

- Assure industry-aligned curriculum that is flexible and responsive, meeting employers' needs and providing value for learners of all ages.
- Engage key education, employer, workforce and economic development partners to assure a coordinated approach to addressing Wisconsin's education and workforce needs.
- Highlight best practices and professional development opportunities that advance the shared work of WTCS and its key partners.