# Issue

The Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) is the largest higher education system in the state. The 16 technical colleges deliver education and training that meet employer demands across a wide variety of essential industries, reach a broad set of learners and provide packages of services to support student success. Additional investment is needed for technical colleges to support growing enrollments and expand upon WTCS innovative practices to deliver more of the education and training opportunities that connect students to in-demand careers among Wisconsin’s employers. Flexible general state aid funding provides opportunities for each WTCS college to use funds differently to meet the unique, local needs of their colleges and communities.

# Background

## Delivering Career-Ready Education and Training

A leader in demand-driven, cutting-edge education, WTCS creates a pipeline of skilled talent essential to Wisconsin’s workforce and economy through an extensive portfolio that includes adult education, dual credit for high school students, more than 500 postsecondary degree programs, classroom instruction for more than 75 state-registered apprenticeship programs and customized instruction tailored to meet specific business needs. WTCS education and training supports career advancement based on employer-identified needs and an individual’s career goals and timeline.

WTCS colleges place a high value on their meaningful relationship with Wisconsin’s industry, labor and workforce development partners to ensure education and training is aligned with the needs of Wisconsin’s employers. Together, WTCS colleges and employers closely collaborate to build the talent pipeline through the creation of industry‑aligned curriculum taught by industry-prepared faculty who are experts in their respective fields. Over the last three years, more than 70% of WTCS credentials were earned in high-demand fields. Technical colleges continuously engage in program development, revision and discontinuance to ensure education is relevant and applicable to employers’ evolving workforce needs, labor market research and industry trends and best practices. In 2023, more than 60 new programs were developed and half as many programs were discontinued, and within programs, curriculum is regularly refined, allowing colleges to meet evolving employer needs and the skillsets employers demand from their workforce. The relationships technical colleges cultivate with their local employers and the relevancy of WTCS programs have proven to be effective with 96% of employers being satisfied with technical college graduates’ education.

Wisconsin’s skilled labor needs are significant. With nearly 160,000 job openings and a comparatively low unemployment rate near 3%, there are almost twice as many job openings as unemployed workers.[[1]](#footnote-1) [[2]](#footnote-2) The number of non-farm jobs is at the highest level it has been in four years, with growth taking place across the state and across multiple industries. [[3]](#footnote-3) WTCS is a partner in talent attraction and retention and a critical component of workforce development within the state. Importantly, because 91% of technical college graduates stay and work in the state, Wisconsin’s employers benefit from industry-aligned skilled talent and WTCS graduates benefit from high employment rates and family-sustaining wages. The growth in new WTCS graduate wage rates demonstrates how highly valued WTCS credentials are within the Wisconsin labor market. The median annual salary within six months of graduation has grown nearly 30% over the last five years, to more than $52,300 across all degree types for 2023 graduates, outpacing median wage gains statewide.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Amid this period of high workforce demands, the state’s changing demographics and increased infrastructure investments, industry leaders representing the breadth of Wisconsin’s economy including manufacturing, agriculture, utilities, public safety and healthcare, continue to turn to technical colleges given their proven effectiveness in generating a skilled talent pipeline. For example*,* Emergency Medical Services (EMS) in Wisconsin is experiencing significant workforce shortages, particularly in rural areas. Because all 16 WTCS colleges offer courses in EMS and issue credentials ranging from Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) certificates to technical diplomas in Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) and Advanced EMT and associate degrees in Paramedic Technician, technical colleges are positioned to help address these workforce shortages in EMS. Many WTCS colleges must balance several factors in scheduling EMS courses, for example, rising instructional costs, the availability of instructors and creating the appropriate blend between the flexibility of virtual learning and the need for face-to-face skills-based labs. Many WTCS programs require similarly thoughtful decision-making and resource allocation to best prepare students for these essential industries that are searching for talent.

This unprecedented period of demand for WTCS programs, services and graduates exceeds technical colleges’ current capacity and additional resources are needed to keep pace. Flexible funding for technical colleges can support industry-prepared faculty and the continued collaboration between technical colleges and industry partners, ensuring the alignment of WTCS curricula and credentials to meet the evolving needs of Wisconsin’s employers across multiple sectors simultaneously.

## Expanding the Pipeline of Talent

Enrollment growth in recent years demonstrates that students recognize the value of a WTCS education; 2022-23 enrollments increased 5% over the previous year and nearly 16% compared to a temporary slump during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21. Despite this recent growth, WTCS colleges recognize that innovative strategies such as the development of seamless educational pathways and investment in proven recruitment, retention and completion strategies present opportunities to expand the talent pipeline.

### Educational Pathways

Partnerships across education sectors develop effective and efficient pathways for students, including the successful and growing dual credit programs that technical colleges sponsor with K-12 partners. Last year, nearly 285,000 technical college credits were awarded to 62,200 Wisconsin high school students, saving families $41.6 million. Wisconsin high school students have multiple options to earn WTCS credits and there are no costs to the students or their families for course tuition and fees. WTCS colleges forgo traditional tuition and fee revenue to offer dual enrollment programming, allowing students to benefit from cost savings, early entry into career pathways and strong postsecondary outcomes. Dual credit students are more likely to enroll into a WTCS postsecondary program following high school graduation and have higher grade point averages in their first year, higher program retention rates and higher program completion rates compared to students that did not enroll in dual credit programs in high school. WTCS colleges are committed to impactful dual credit programs and provide resources to support this educational pathway that is driven by students, not tuition revenue. For example, colleges dedicate staff to serve as liaisons and coaches, creating intentional connections between high schools and WTCS colleges that foster relationships and help students maximize their dual credit opportunities. The interest and demand for these programs have increased dramatically: student participation in dual credit programs has grown by 126% over the last ten years. Additionally, enrollment in dual credit courses have more than doubled in the same period and the number of dual credit courses that students participate in have increased significantly in recent years, causing dual credit not only to be more popular among students, but also increasingly complex for WTCS colleges to offer. This drastic growth in dual credit options increases the amount of time and resources colleges must allocate to operate these programs and there is limited revenue to support this work.

WTCS colleges also engage with higher education partners to create pathways at the postsecondary level. Partnerships and articulation agreements with four-year colleges and universities represent opportunities to build transfer pathways that benefit students across educational sectors, employers and communities. The changing economy and shifting workforce demands make it essential that credentials be portable and buildable throughout an individual’s career and why it is important that credit transfer in Wisconsin remains a swirl among sectors, not a one-way pipeline. More than 12,700 students transfer to a WTCS college annually and almost 20% of transferring students have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Whether students are transferring from WTCS or to WTCS, clear academic paths and collaboration among higher education sectors save students valuable time and resources by making transfer options seamless and efficient for students. The number of articulated pathways is growing considerably and this growth in transfer opportunities will contribute to growth in credit transfer in the future. Continued collaboration among technical colleges and four-year institutional partners is essential to ensure advancements in articulation are thoughtful and effective. The most successful agreements are developed program-to-program and institution-by-institution to account for nuances and find opportunities to best serve students. Because WTCS colleges must spend more time and resources identifying, building and formalizing partnerships and engaging in ongoing collaboration with partners, the workload in this area will continue to grow.

WTCS colleges provide education throughout an individual’s lifetime and at multiple points along the education and career journey and collaborate closely with educational partners to ensure pathways are evolving with the changing education landscape and the state’s economic needs; however, there is not a dedicated revenue stream to support this work. With additional flexible funding for technical colleges, ongoing resources can be dedicated to this essential collaborative work, including support of dual credit options that have proven to provide significant benefits to students and the continued development of postsecondary pathways.

### Focused Recruitment, Retention and Completion Strategies

Due to Wisconsin’s changing demographics and workforce shortages, employers need a wide pool from which to generate a skilled talent pipeline. As open access institutions with broad education portfolios, WTCS colleges are in the best position to generate this talent pool given they are accessible to students of all backgrounds, levels of preparedness, and personal and professional responsibilities. Effectively serving these groups not only improves student experience and success, it can also help a student complete their credential and move into the workforce sooner. WTCS colleges are using innovative strategies to engage all students with targeted tactics.

While WTCS colleges have consistently achieved graduation rates that are higher than the national graduation rate for two-year postsecondary students, WTCS colleges are focused on areas of growth to reach more student populations, improve student outcomes and successfully move all students through the talent pipeline. For example, graduation rates among all new program students have increased, including a notable increase among new program students with disabilities. Because students with disabilities represent approximately 7% of WTCS postsecondary students, the ability to effectively serve these students and improve graduation rates is essential to the talent pipeline. Many colleges prioritize reaching these students early in their college transition, sometimes before students enroll at the college, to provide information on disability services and support. As examples, these strategies can include events and courses focused on college transition and career exploration, dedicated transition staff to work specifically with students with disabilities, and partnerships among student specialists and success coaches to spread awareness of disability services and referrals. Targeted strategies to serve these students have contributed to the improvement in the three-year graduation rate among WTCS colleges for new program students with disabilities.

As providers of adult education, WTCS colleges serve students building academic skills, working to earn a high school credential, working to improve their employment situation and students who are learning English. There has been a significant increase in the number of students seeking English Language Acquisition (ELA) services and an increase in the proportion of English Language Learning (ELL) students who have attained a college degree. Supporting these internationally trained professionals with ELL services can remove language barriers for these skilled professionals and presents another example of an opportunity to expand the talent pipeline for Wisconsin’s workforce.

In addition to providing adult education, WTCS colleges connect adult learners to career pathways and postsecondary programs to continue their education and skill building. For example, the Integrated Education and Training (IET) approach provides adult education and literacy activities concurrently and contextually with workforce preparation activities and training. Several WTCS colleges are focused on transitioning their adult education and ELL students to postsecondary opportunities with significant results; research shows IET participation improves college credit completion, persistence and the attainment of a WTCS credential. Because a growing proportion of adult education learners are employed full-time or part-time, adult education programming presents an opportunity for upskilling and growing workforce talent within a community. Many adult education student populations are statutorily exempt from tuition and WTCS colleges rely upon non-tuition fund sources, including general state aid, to support these essential programs and services.

Educational programs for justice-involved individuals provide opportunities for high-quality educational offerings in adult education and a variety of occupational programs, including welding, cosmetology and heavy equipment operation. Upon release from incarceration, many individuals choose to continue their education at a WTCS college. The number of justice-involved individuals enrolled in postsecondary programs has almost doubled over the last ten years and, importantly, there has been steady growth in the number of graduations, representing yet another example of a successful strategy to engage all learners. Within the last three years alone, graduations among justice-involved individuals have increased more than 40%. In addition to improving graduation rates among this student population, the job placement services WTCS colleges provide all students is strategically more intensive for this student population to best connect students with employers by offering the right assistance to students to support their transition, and by helping employers best access and work with this talent pool. Moreover, educational programs for justice-involved individuals increase the likelihood of post-release employment and reduce the likelihood of recidivism, with estimates that those participating in educational programs are 43% less likely to recidivate.[[5]](#footnote-5)

WTCS colleges serve a wide variety of student populations, the breadth of which requires significant resources to support a broad spectrum of programming and services to meet individual students where they are. With additional flexible funding, WTCS colleges can build upon their successes serving their varied student populations, develop specialized learning spaces and resources for students that may learn differently, and create opportunities to expand the talent pipeline.

## Supports to Help Students Thrive

As open access institutions, technical colleges provide a gateway to higher education for students with varied backgrounds, levels of preparedness, support, and personal and professional responsibilities. WTCS colleges serve different types of learners and navigate student expectations of the college experience that are increasingly complex. For example, the average age of a WTCS student is 31, yet there are also many WTCS students that are transitioning directly from high school; the proportion of WTCS graduates under 25 has grown by more than 17% over the last ten years. As additional examples, WTCS serves a growing number of students with limited English proficiency, Veterans, students that have obligations outside of the classroom, students that prefer virtual learning, students that prefer an on-campus experience, students that attend full-time, students that are working and attending part-time, and students that are parenting or caregiving. Despite this variety among WTCS students, one commonality is that students want to direct how they learn to best fit their unique needs. WTCS colleges respond with student-driven delivery models and a wide variety of supports to cover the breadth of their student populations. All students need support to move them through the enrollment, retention and completion pipeline, but students’ individual needs differ. Not only do WTCS colleges provide high-quality and innovative education, they also recognize the importance of meeting students where they are and guiding them toward completion. To that end, WTCS colleges prioritize efforts to support students through a package of services and interventions, recognizing that the talent pipeline is most effectively built when students are thriving.

### Comprehensive Student Supports

WTCS colleges provide comprehensive support for every student’s holistic development. On campuses, WTCS colleges offer a range of resources to students, including academic advising; basic needs support; career services; technology rental; tutoring services; writing labs; academic, athletic, and social clubs and organizations; assistive and adaptive equipment; networking opportunities; job placement assistance; and leadership development. While these college-sponsored supports are essential, the needs among students are significant and WTCS colleges do not have the capacity or resources to serve as direct providers of all services and resources technical college students may need. To complement these services, WTCS colleges have also invested in partnerships with organizations within the community that are better positioned to provide the wide range of supports students need, including the following examples:

* Housing agreements with four-year colleges and universities and local apartment buildings to expand options available to students.
* Collaborations with local food pantries and Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) providers to expand access to affordable, healthy food options for students experiencing food scarcity.
* Referrals to community mental health care providers through Memorandums of Understanding and access to virtual mental health providers to supplement the available in-person services.
* Partnerships with local childcare providers.
* Sharing on-campus spaces with community service providers to improve accessibility for students.

While WTCS colleges rely upon the assistance of community organizations and resources to support students in a variety of areas of need, some services, such as childcare, have limited availability within the wider community. Childcare is a challenge for many families across the state; childcare slots are severely limited, with estimates of a three-to-one ratio of children under five in need of childcare compared to the licensed childcare slots available. In Wisconsin’s rural areas, there are significant waitlists for available childcare slots and nearly 80% of rural residents live in a childcare desert.[[6]](#footnote-6) The lack of affordable childcare presents unique and significant challenges for technical college students and WTCS colleges have engaged in several strategies to respond to this barrier. Some colleges offer financial assistance for use on childcare costs, while other colleges have improved access through childcare centers on their campuses. Importantly, full-time childcare during the traditional workday does not align with the unique needs of students, whose schedules can be inconsistent and childcare needs may be short-term or unpredictable, and affordable drop-in childcare options are essential for students to access education. Community childcare providers with highly demanded childcare slots can have limitations on the flexibility that can be offered to students. While there are efforts to collaborate with childcare providers to increase the drop-in options that are available to student parents, several colleges operate on-campus childcare centers that serve students, employees and community members, and reserve slots for drop-ins. Despite these efforts to expand affordable childcare options for WTCS students, access remains severely limited, waitlists are common, and the expense of purchasing or providing childcare is significant. Resources are needed for WTCS colleges to continue to explore alternative childcare options for students.

Available and affordable childcare is essential but represents only a portion of the needs of the student parent population within WTCS, which can be near 40% at some WTCS colleges, though this figure can vary. This student population can encounter a unique set of challenges that make it difficult to balance their personal responsibilities and education, and WTCS colleges are providing innovative solutions to support student parent success. For example, some colleges offer family-friendly events; groups and communications specific to student parents; children’s activity and toy baskets on campus; student parent study rooms that accommodate the whole family; and a baby basic needs closet. The ability to eliminate barriers can improve access and completion for these students and deliver the skilled talent employers demand. WTCS colleges need additional resources to continue to build upon successes among this student population.

Importantly, the work to support students is ongoing and requires continuous innovation and investment because student needs are ever-changing. With additional flexible funding, WTCS colleges can continue to support long-term, consistent student support resources, ensuring colleges can continue to offer and expand upon the effective strategies and evolve their services to their student populations’ needs.

## Complex Operational Needs

Technical colleges must balance their mission to deliver a talent pipeline with the necessary skills and supports to thrive in the Wisconsin economy against the rising costs of their day-to-day operational needs. Annual rates of inflation have ranged from 4.1% to 8.0% in each of the last three years, significantly impacting college operational costs. Many colleges are experiencing increases in the materials costs associated with their courses. For example, the per credit expenditures within instructional areas that rely upon steel products, such as automotive, construction and manufacturing, and those that rely upon personal protective equipment, such as health care, have increased steadily over the last four years. As employers themselves, WTCS colleges are also challenged by their own skilled talent shortage and competition with the wider regional economy for their high-quality employees. Because technical colleges rely upon industry-trained faculty who are experts in their respective fields, colleges compete against industry wages in the recruitment and retention of their faculty and as a result, competitive faculty salaries are essential to sustain programming capacity.Finally, rapidly advancing technology requires ongoing investment in hardware, software and security. For example, as WTCS colleges strive to keep pace with artificial intelligence (AI) development and integrate it in college administrative and classroom experiences, colleges must also adopt essential data protection and security measures to guard against risks to college systems and sensitive student data. These rising costs and operational complexities risk draining college resources without additional investment of flexible state aid funds.

WTCS colleges continuously deliver strong outcomes through innovative, relevant education and training. These demonstrated successes prove investments in WTCS drive positive change and deliver a sizable return on investment. Wisconsin’s demand for skilled talent is significant and multi-faceted and technical colleges need additional flexible funding to expand their capacity and continue to build upon their proven successes.

# Request

**$20 million GPR in 2025-26 and $25 million GPR in 2026-27 for state aid for technical colleges under s. 20.292(1)(d). This funding will provide colleges with the flexibility to expand their capacity to deliver a talent pipeline that is positioned to thrive.**

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2. Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, WisConomy, June 2024 statewide unemployment rate, retrieved<https://bi.wisconsin.gov/t/DWD/views/LAUSCountyMap/CountyMap?iframeSizedToWindow=true&showVizHome=no&%3Aembed=y&refresh=yes&showAppBanner=false&embed=y&display_count=no&render=false&%3Adisplay_count=n&%3AshowVizHome=n&%3Aorigin=viz_share_link&%3Arefresh=yes>. August 13, 2024 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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4. Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, WisConomy, Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) Historical Wage Report, retrieved <https://jobcenterofwisconsin.com/wisconomy/pub/oes.htm#Viz>.
 June 12, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Davis, Lois M, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N.V. Miles. “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs that Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults.” Rand Corporation, 2013, retrieved: <https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/Publications/RAND_Correctional-Education-Meta-Analysis.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wisconsin Economic Development Association, Childcare Breakdown: The Scarcity of Childcare in Wisconsin is Fueling Workforce Shortage and Economic Challenges, retrieved <https://weda.org/10075-2/>. May 2, 2024. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)