# Issue: Student Debt – Open Educational Resources

Through 2023, students in the United States have accumulated $1.76 trillion in student loan debt. In Wisconsin, students have accumulated $23.2 billion and the median debt for a technical college student graduate is $10,130. Student debt not only creates a hardship for Wisconsin families, it also creates a strain on the economy because debt lowers credit scores and limits purchasing power. This ultimately means individuals with debt are less able to participate and help grow the economy.

The 2023-25 biennial budget provided the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) with one-time funding for Open Education Resources (OER). The one-time funding allows WTCS colleges to develop initial resources for students in a limited number of program areas. The WTCS projects the one-time funding will save over 50,000 students an estimated $7.6 million annually. However, without the ability to update and maintain the materials with on-going funding, these materials may not be available in the future due to the content of the instructional materials becoming outdated and no longer relevant to the courses. These savings will cover the initial investment and accumulate year after year, amplifying the financial savings for students over time. Continuing investments into OER will provide cost-saving benefits to more students, particularly in high demand program areas where these free resources and materials have not been developed. This budget initiative is in alignment with Wisconsin Student Government’s legislative priorities.

# Background

OER are teaching, learning and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use and
re-purposing by others. OER may include full course materials, modules, textbooks, streaming videos, tests, software and any other tools, materials or techniques used to support access to knowledge. The average postsecondary student spends between $600 and $1,200 annually for books and supplies as of the most recent academic year (2021-22) the data was available. The price of textbooks increased an average of 6% each year and are rising roughly three times the rate of inflation. Providing students with access to OER materials has been a major step in saving money and reducing debt.

Beyond affordability for students, these investments enable more individuals to pursue higher education, leading to a more skilled and knowledgeable workforce. This enhances productivity and innovation across various industries. Additionally, the widespread availability of OER supports upskilling, allowing workers to adapt to changing job requirements and technological advancements. As a result, businesses can thrive with a more prepared workforce, which will support overall economic growth in Wisconsin.

In the first year of grant funding for OER, System staff worked with the colleges in identifying the high demand and high enrollment programs that would provide savings and impact the most students. Some of the high demand program areas of focus are Nursing, Business Management, Accounting, Information Technology, Environmental Engineering Technology, Mechanical Design Technology, Surgical Technology, HVAC, Diesel, Automotive and Manufacturing. Within these programs, technical colleges have initiated the creation of 128 instructional materials for courses within 27 program offerings. With the funding received from the previous legislative session, over the current biennium, WTCS projects that more than 100,000 students will collectively save over $15.2 million, equating to a $4.06 return for each dollar the state invests, which will continue to grow in future years. While this investment is benefitting thousands of students within these 27 programs, technical colleges offer over 500 programs and thousands of course offerings where additional students could benefit from the further development of additional materials and resources with the investment of ongoing funding from the state.

Additional funding will support not only the creation of new OER materials in various program areas but also the essential upkeep and modernization of existing resources. Like traditional textbooks that undergo periodic revisions and updates, OER materials require similar attention to remain current. This ongoing process demands considerable time and effort from faculty and staff to produce and maintain high-quality, relevant content. Continuing to provide students with these materials at no cost for high-demand programs, technical colleges can effectively align with the evolving needs of pivotal sectors such as health care, trades and business.

OER materials have benefits beyond the dollars and cents they save students and employers’ college reimbursement programs. According to the Midwest Higher Education Compact, research indicates students in degree programs with OER materials persist and complete at higher rates in the same degree program using traditional materials. The studies also show that students who benefit most from the use of OER in their classes are those who are low income, first-generation and/or from a group that is traditionally underserved in higher education. With the growing economy, it is imperative the state continue to invest in OER to assist students in accessing and completing credentials so they may enter the workforce.

# Request

**An increase of $1 million GPR in 2025-26 and $2 million in 2026-27 and thereafter in
s. 20.292(1)(f) to provide grants to technical colleges to create OER textbooks and other materials that can be utilized by all students within the Wisconsin Technical College System and beyond.**