*****System***

***General Program Operations***

2025-27 Biennial Budget Initiative

# Issue: General Program Operations – System Support

The Wisconsin Technical College System (System) Board, the governing body of the largest higher education system in Wisconsin, is responsible for developing Wisconsin’s essential workforce and providing career opportunities for individuals throughout their lives.

Over the last ten years, the System has implemented numerous transformative changes, streamlining operations and services to improve outcomes. The System has used multiple strategies, including leveraging technology and securing grant funding, to accomplish these changes despite significant reductions in its position authority and stagnant state and federal funding.

New GPR investment to fully fund all currently authorized full-time equivalent (FTE) positions and information technology infrastructure and security is required to maintain the System’s effective operations and enable continuous improvement in System outcomes.

# Background

The Board’s staff (System) consists of 55 full-time equivalent (FTE) state employees who are responsible for approving programs and courses at the 16 technical colleges, overseeing facility development, distributing state aid, administering state and federal grant programs, establishing System-wide policies, collaborating with education and government partners, ensuring compliance with state and federal rules and regulations and providing many other leadership and coordination services to the technical colleges.

Over the last decade, the System has initiated several transformative changes, enhancing overall operations and outcomes. These include the establishment of the WTCS Student Success Center, progress towards the 60Forward Postsecondary Attainment goal, modernization of program approval and grant evaluation processes, expansion of dual enrollment options, data-driven policy transformation, increased data security and restructuring of credential programs to fit a career pathway model.

Continuous improvement and increased responsibilities have occurred despite dwindling resources. System staff positions decreased by 33.2% between 2009-11 and 2017-19, from 82.30 to 55.00 FTE. Total authorized FTE positions has remained unchanged since 2017-19.

While the System has increased employee productivity despite these challenges, it no longer has sufficient resources to fund mission critical positions nor meet the cyber security demands for modern higher education data systems. The System's GPR general program operations for 2024-25 ($3,175,400) is less than the 2002‑03 appropriation ($3,487,100) in nominal dollars and is 52% less on an inflation-adjusted basis.

Meanwhile, federal funding has remained stagnant for the last decade. Of the System’s current 55.0 FTE, 43% are authorized as federally funded positions. Unlike GPR funding, the System’s federal funding does not increase with State-authorized general wage adjustments. As a result, federal funding has been insufficient to fund the System’s authorized FED positions since 2013-‑15.

The System has successfully used multiple strategies to minimize the impact of insufficient funding to date, including holding positions vacant, securing private grants to fund data visualization software and temporary positions, reducing travel and other operating costs and increasing employee productivity through lean process changes. However, these measures can no longer offset the System’s increased workload demands driven by the need for continuous innovation in program offering and delivery, grant management, adult education, student success and cyber security. Sustained deficits are hindering the System’s ability to provide the transformative programs and services required by students, employers and other System stakeholders.

System staff responsible for oversight of college program and course approval possess expertise in instructional design and delivery. In addition, they must have a working knowledge of the skill and competency requirements in the relevant employment sector and specific career areas. The current practice of maintaining vacant positions to save money requires current staff to take on additional responsibilities to ensure the vacant career areas are still maintained so the colleges can continue to develop and maintain their program delivery for their local businesses and other stakeholders. This increased workload can lead to inefficiencies as employees may struggle to manage their expanded duties effectively. Position vacancies at a time of rapid transformation in the economy and workforce expectations have increased the amount and complexity of the System’s instructional staff workload. The pressing need to incorporate artificial intelligence knowledge and tools across all WTCS program areas will add to that workload exponentially over the next decade.

System instructional staff are also responsible for identifying and supporting innovations in instructional delivery which often involve building collaborations with multiple partners including technical colleges, other higher education institutions, K-12 districts and state agencies. These instructional delivery innovations expand access to technical college programs and increase Wisconsin’s skilled workforce. Insufficient funding for instructional positions limits the System’s capacity to build these collaborative partnerships and drive innovation. **Providing the necessary GPR funding to fill a current instructional staff vacancy will ensure WTCS can continue to innovate its programs and services to meet Wisconsin’s workforce demands of the future.**

Each year, the System manages just under $50 million in state and federal grant programs, including Workforce Advancement Training Grants, Apprentice-Related Instruction, Career Pathways, Core Industry, Developing Markets, and federal Perkins and Adult Education and Family Literacy Act funding. System grant managers are responsible for converting the state federal policy makers’ program objectives into comprehensive grant application materials, working with colleges to design and implement initiatives to meet those program objectives and ensuring compliance with relevant grant eligible uses and expenditures.

Increasingly, System grant managers are responsible for overseeing one-time or short-term grant programs designed to address specific state needs. In the last biennium, the System assumed responsibility for just under $27 million in such short-term grant programs, including $20 million to expand oral health programs. These targeted, temporary grant programs support innovations that have immediate benefits for students, employers and the state. However, the very nature of these unique, outcome-driven and accelerated initiatives requires significant development, design, implementation and accountability responsibilities of System grant managers. Insufficient funding for grant manager positions limits the System’s capacity to develop and build these collaborative partnerships and drive innovation. **Providing the necessary GPR funding to fill a current grant manager vacancy will ensure WTCS can continue to successfully leverage ongoing and short-term grants to support innovations in career and technical education.**

For many well-documented reasons, Wisconsin will face a skilled workforce shortage for the foreseeable future. In response, WTCS is continually exploring new ways to prepare more individuals, faster, for entry into the workforce. Integrated Education & Training (IET) programs are proven to successfully expand the pool of potential workers and accelerate their acquisition of in-demand skills and knowledge. IET programs fully integrate three instructional components, adult education and/or literacy services, workforce training and workforce preparation services to help participants acquire a combination of academic, critical thinking, digital literacy, self-management, employability and other skills necessary for successful completion and transition to the workforce. Participation in IET programming is significantly and positively associated with completing college credits in the first semester, persisting in college to the second year, achieving a cumulative GPA of a 2.0 or greater, and obtaining a WTCS credential in comparison to like students who did not access IET programs. Expanding the use of IET across WTCS program areas will advance the state’s most vulnerable communities, including the 354,000+ Wisconsin adults who do not have a high school diploma and the 142,000+ Wisconsin adults who are not proficient in English. **Providing the necessary GPR funding to fill a student success vacancy with a dedicated IET specialist will increase the availability of WTCS IET programs, provide more individuals with a proven pathway to employment and help to address Wisconsin employers’ skilled labor needs.**

The System maintains large and complex data systems used to evaluate student outcomes, assess and ensure consistency and high-quality programming across the state, identify barriers to student success, and document best practices in instruction, retention, completion, student assessment, program design and delivery. Increased reliance on data analysis to identify, implement and evaluate innovative learning strategies and more effective and efficient operating practices has increased System IT staff programming workload. In addition, the on-going maintenance and cybersecurity costs for these data systems continues to increase.

At the same time, public demands for greater transparency and access to data, and the frequency and consequences of cybersecurity threats continues to grow. The comprehensive student data systems maintained by the System and other higher education entities are rich targets. In 2021, universities in Minnesota and Georgia suffered database hacks that compromised student names, contact information, Social Security numbers and more personally identifiable information. Lincoln College, a small school of about 600 in rural central Illinois recently closed after a ransomware cyberattack. Cybercriminals frequently use artificial intelligence tools to impersonate students and steal financial aid dollars. It is the responsibility of the System to maintain robust cybersecurity measures to help safeguard against data breaches, ensuring the privacy and security of all stakeholders. Additionally, a strong cybersecurity framework fosters trust among the colleges, their students, faculty and supports the state’s reputation and operational continuity. It is crucial for the System to stay aligned with the technical colleges in maintaining robust security systems, ensuring that the state government agency does not become the weak link that cybercriminals exploit to gain access. **Providing the necessary GPR funding to fill a currently vacant IT specialist position and to meet IT infrastructure needs, will ensure the System continues to both protect and leverage WTCS data systems to improve student outcomes and meet Wisconsin’s workforce demands of the future.**

# Request

Additional GPR investment is needed to keep pace with growing operational costs, leverage and secure data resources, and meet student and employer demands for innovative, cutting-edge education and training programs.

**An increase of $700,000 GPR in s.20.292(1)(a), WTCS general program operations in each year of the biennium to convert four (4.0) FED positions to GPR positions and to fund data infrastructure and cybersecurity needs. No additional position authority is requested.**