



General Aid to Expand Wisconsin's Workforce

2023-25 Biennial Budget Initiative

Issue

Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) is a generator of Wisconsin's essential workforce. Additional investment in Wisconsin's technical colleges is needed to sustain the colleges' current outcomes and expand the talent pool for Wisconsin employers.

Background

Wisconsin's Critical Demand for Skilled Talent

Across the U.S., labor shortages are impacting a wide variety of industries with estimates that in Wisconsin alone, the number of available workers is less than half the number of job openings.¹ The need for workers is comprehensive and touches almost every industry. Growth projections in construction, healthcare, IT, professional business services and leisure and hospitality will require corresponding increases in essential services such as childcare, early education, agriculture and public safety. As the state's population continues to age and leave the workforce, it becomes increasingly important to ensure that the working age population that remain are equipped with the rapidly changing skill needs of Wisconsin employers. As employers across the state face challenges recruiting and retaining talent, Wisconsin's technical colleges are well-positioned to provide education and training to expand the state's talent pool to meet the needs of Wisconsin employers.

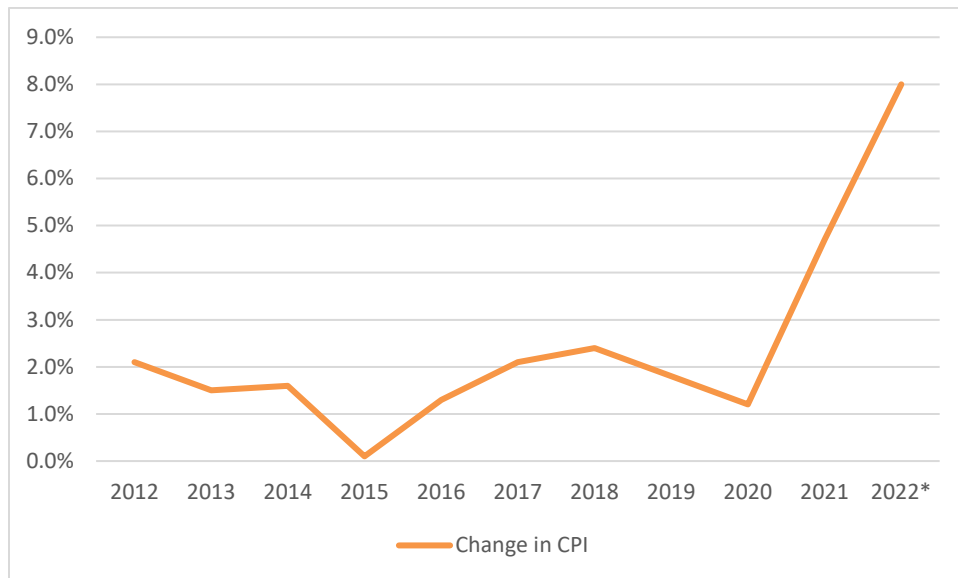
WTCS colleges work closely with industry and workforce development partners to ensure that programs are aligned directly with the needs of Wisconsin employers. Programs are developed, reviewed and adjusted based on labor market research and program advisory committees made up of employers and experts in the occupational field. This process produces far-reaching impacts, with more than 26,000 WTCS credentials, 1,200 apprenticeship certificates, 60,300 customized instruction credits and 226,500 high school dual enrollment credits awarded last year. WTCS colleges' commitment to aligning with local business needs work: 96% of employers surveyed were satisfied with technical college graduates' education and 98% responded that a local technical college is important to the overall success of their business. Because 92% of technical college graduates stay and work in Wisconsin, investment in the technical colleges has a direct impact on the skilled workforce within the state.

¹ U.S. Chamber of Commerce, America Works Data Center "Worker Shortages by State" data, retrieved <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/america-works-data-center>, May 31, 2022

WTCS Colleges Need Resources to Meet the Demand for Skilled Talent

WTCS colleges must be flexible, responsive and innovative to deliver the talent that Wisconsin employers need, yet colleges are grappling with rising costs and their own talent shortage that could hamper their ability to meet multiple employer sector demands. As shown in Figure 1, inflation rates have risen dramatically in recent years, resulting in higher costs for colleges without additional revenue.

Figure 1: Annual Change in Consumer Price Index



Early projections preview an inflation rate near 8% for 2022 and anticipate high inflation rates over the next several years, further hampering WTCS colleges' purchasing power in the face of rising needs.² Moreover, colleges are also challenged by the skilled talent shortage. As employers, WTCS colleges must compete to retain their high-quality workforce.

While WTCS college enrollments fell in recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic created an unprecedented confluence of barriers for part-time students, who make up the majority of technical college students. For example, for some student parents, the demands of overseeing their children's virtual schooling took center stage and limited parents' bandwidth to complete their own studies simultaneously. Other WTCS students contended with financial challenges resulting from sudden job losses and uncertain employment alternatives. For students that remained employed, labor shortages and supply chain disruptions may have limited employers' flexibility to provide time for employees to attend school.

² Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, Consumer Price Index 1913-, retrieved <https://www.minneapolisfed.org/about-us/monetary-policy/inflation-calculator/consumer-price-index-1913->, May 26, 2022.

As WTCS students regain their footing and build back what was lost during the pandemic, enrollments are returning. Enrollments for 2021-22 increased 10% over the previous year, an upward trend that is expected to continue into the upcoming academic year. Because each individual student needs comprehensive supports and services regardless of their courseload, the cost of educating the additional students increases.

As enrollments rebound and costs continue to rise, current WTCS funding levels will require the prioritization of specific industry or occupational programming. Unfortunately, no Wisconsin employer can afford to be at the bottom of the priority list. Additional investment is necessary if Wisconsin's technical colleges are to address workforce talent shortages across multiple sectors simultaneously.

Investments Can Move Students Through the WTCS Talent Pipeline

National surveys of students reveal that costs, including living expenses, balancing work commitments and meeting family obligations are among the greatest challenges to completing postsecondary education.³ WTCS colleges serve students contending with many of these challenges, including students that are economically disadvantaged, working and attending classes part-time and parenting or caregiving. While any one of these challenges can be a barrier to enrollment, retention and completion, many students face multiple, compounding barriers. As the number of barriers increases, the probability that a student will complete their program falls.

As open access institutions, WTCS colleges provide educational opportunities at a variety of points along everyone's education journey, including the students that are the hardest to serve. No student is turned away based on test scores, previously unsuccessful postsecondary experiences or finances. Because WTCS colleges are accessible to students of all backgrounds, students arrive with varying levels of preparedness, support and personal and professional responsibilities. WTCS colleges provide comprehensive academic and support services to meet students where they are. For some students this means providing more focused guidance and assistance. For others, it requires flexible educational models to accommodate different learning styles and life responsibilities. With many WTCS students working while attending school, a flexible education model has become increasingly important. Effectively serving these groups not only improves student experience and success, but it can also help a student to complete their credential or degree sooner and move into the workforce. With additional funding, WTCS colleges can provide data-driven, focused investments to address and help students overcome barriers by providing greater flexibility, access and support. Solutions will

³ Porter, Stephen R. and Umbach, Paul D. (2019). What challenges to success do community college students face? Raleigh, NC: Percontor, LLC. Retrieved, https://risc.college/sites/default/files/2019-01/RISC_2019_report_natl.pdf, July 20, 2022.

vary across colleges, allowing colleges to tailor programs and services to their students' most pressing needs and utilizing strategies that are known to be successful.

Flexibility

Students of all ages have become more demanding consumers who want choice, flexibility and transferability in their postsecondary options and technical colleges must be nimble in their program delivery to meet these needs. The COVID-19 pandemic normalized virtual and hybrid learning, and colleges will need to incorporate more sophisticated technology into their programming to meet student and employer expectations. A recent national survey pointed to “more flexibility for attending classes and completing coursework” as a key need for students moving forward, a need that has also been identified by WTCS colleges in their own assessments.⁴ A flexible delivery model is especially valuable for the non-traditional students served by WTCS colleges, who tend to be older, working and juggling many demands on their time. In addition, WTCS colleges are continuously adjusting curriculum to align with the rapidly changing technology in the modern workplace.

Similarly, as colleges expand their digital infrastructure, existing cybersecurity concerns grow exponentially. Rapid adjustments during the pandemic to ensure continuity of learning created new entry points for cybercriminals and could expose sensitive student data and college systems to risk if unaddressed. The technological upgrades needed for blended and flexible learning, coupled with the costs associated with unique cybersecurity requirements, will require additional investments by all the colleges in the coming years.

Access

Students must be able to access and participate effectively in their coursework in order to succeed. Many colleges have implemented creative solutions to address challenges related to access, but as needs and costs continue to increase, additional resources can continue this work and expand upon the colleges' previous successes.

- **Transportation** continues to be a barrier to students throughout the state. While many colleges offer shuttles within their campuses, students need reliable transportation to get to and from campus and, especially in rural areas, transportation options can be limited and costly. Some colleges, including Mid-State Technical College, provide gas and taxi vouchers to students in need of assistance. However, with gas prices increasing more than 20% within the last year, the impact of the resources that colleges can offer is diminishing. With additional funding, colleges could build upon successes and help more students.
- The availability of **childcare** is a significant barrier throughout the workforce and a major limitation for WTCS students, many of whom are parents. Some colleges offer financial

⁴ Barnes and Noble College, College 2030: Transforming the Student Experience, retrieved, https://www.bncollege.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/College_2030_Report.pdf, June 1, 2022.

assistance for use on childcare costs, while other colleges have improved access through childcare centers on their campuses. For example, Western Technical College leases space to a local childcare agency that in turn reserves a portion of spots for students and staff. Several colleges, including Waukesha County Technical College and Fox Valley Technical College, operate on-campus childcare centers that serve students, employees, and community members. Lakeshore Technical College is an example of a college that operates a childcare center that does not require contracts and allows drop-ins, helping to address the often inconsistent and unpredictable nature of student childcare needs. However, despite the investments made at various colleges, childcare slots are still limited, and access remains a significant barrier for many students.

- Reliable **technology and high-speed Internet access** are barriers for many students and have been heightened with the shift to virtual and hybrid coursework. Many colleges, including Nicolet Area Technical College, work with students in need to provide laptops, tablets, webcams, headphones and other technology to ensure that students have the necessary resources. The availability of reliable high-speed Internet is especially challenging for students that live in rural areas and colleges have worked to increase connectivity not just on campuses, but off-campus as well. Many colleges, including Northwood Technical College, have provided hotspots to students to supply high-speed Internet access in their homes. Given the number of students that live away from campus and have reduced contact with on-campus resources, the availability of portable technology and high-speed Internet access is essential. With additional financial support, these technological and connectivity resources could be extended to help more students.
- Given the number of part-time and non-traditional students, operating hours for lab and student services in the middle of the day can be a limitation for many students. **Expanded lab and student services hours** can help students have access to these essential resources. Many colleges offer evening access at the individual department level based on need. Some colleges offer structured afterhours access to students. For example, Moraine Park Technical College offers evening advising and counseling appointments online. At Milwaukee Area Technical College, student-facing offices are open until 6:00 pm several days each week. Extended hours require additional staffing. Additional funding would allow technical colleges to provide adequate staffing during non-standard hour operations.

Support

Like everybody, students must have their basic needs met to thrive physically, mentally and academically. Costs of living (housing, utilities, food) remain an essential component of supporting students, particularly those students with little financial flexibility to absorb additional costs, compounded by rising inflation. Existing support needs will continue to grow

as costs rise over the next several years and additional funding could expand efforts already underway as demand for these resources increases.

- With more than a 10% increase in the cost of groceries within the last year, **food scarcity** will continue to impact students.⁵ Colleges have developed several strategies to assist students with food insecurity. Some colleges, including Southwest Wisconsin Technical College, provide dining service vouchers to students. To support meals off-campus, several colleges run food pantries. At Madison Area Technical College, for example, food pantries and shelves are available at multiple campus locations. While the pantries have been an effective solution to food insecurity among students, staffing resources are limited and many pantries rely on available volunteers, putting students in a position where access to the pantry can be difficult to coordinate. Additional funding for WTCS colleges could support more consistent staffing and fill gaps in food accessibility for students.
- **Mental health** remains an essential component to the support of the whole student. Mental health conditions have increased since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, with students disproportionately impacted by these trends. To address these needs, Chippewa Valley Technical College and Northcentral Technical College are examples of colleges that have developed Memorandums of Understanding with community mental health professionals, allowing these colleges to refer students to resources within their communities. However, mental health services within many communities are scarce and as a result, some colleges including Northeast Wisconsin Technical College and Gateway Technical College have addressed their students' mental health needs by adding counselors to their staff. Given the supply of mental health professionals is currently limited, several colleges, including Blackhawk Technical College, have come together as a consortium to utilize virtual mental health providers and offer pre-paid counseling sessions for students. Additional funding is needed to enable WTCS colleges to maintain long-term, consistent financial support for mental health resources.

Recruiting, retaining and moving students to completion requires intention and investment. Additional resources would expand WTCS capacity to use proven strategies for student success and increase the number of skilled graduates.

Request

\$25.0 million GPR in 2023-24 and \$50.0 million GPR in 2024-25 for state aid for technical colleges in s. 20.292(1)(d). This funding will provide colleges with the flexibility to develop varied student supports that align with specific institutional and student population needs.

⁵ USDA Economic Research Service, Food Price Outlook 2022, retrieved <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-price-outlook/summary-findings/> June 6, 2022.