

A magazine for community members, friends, and alumni of Western Technical College.

IMPACT



Western
Technical College
SPRING 2026

WELCOME to Impact



Dear Friends and Neighbors,

As I write this, I find myself reflecting on what an incredible honor it has been to serve as President of Western Technical College. At the end of 2025, I shared that I plan to retire in August 2026. While that day is still in the future, I'm already filled with gratitude for the people I've worked alongside, the students who have inspired me, and the communities that continue to shape and support our mission.

This edition of our college magazine is a celebration of that mission in action. You'll read stories of students and graduates who are building futures for themselves and giving back in meaningful ways. Their journeys are as diverse as the programs we offer, but each one reflects the power of education to change lives.

We're also proud to feature our Military Connected Services, a growing area of support for veterans, active-duty military members, and their families. These services ensure that those who serve our country have access to the resources and care they need to succeed in their academic and career goals.

And don't miss our latest "Western News" highlights, which showcase the innovation, impact, and regional leadership that have become synonymous with our college. From new program launches to community partnerships, we remain focused on meeting the needs of our students and the evolving demands of the workforce.

As I look toward the future, I am confident in the path ahead. Western will continue to deliver on its promise of high-quality, affordable education while remaining a vital part of our local economy. I am proud of what we have built together and excited for what is still to come.

Thank you for your ongoing support of Western Technical College. It has meant more to me than I can fully express.

Warm regards,

Roger Stanford
President, Western Technical College

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IMPACT is published once per year for community members, alumni, and friends of Western Technical College.

Direct correspondence:

Julie Lemon, Western Technical College,
400 7th St. N, La Crosse, WI 54601-3368
or lemonj@westerntc.edu.

Visit our website: westerntc.edu

**DIRECTOR OF MARKETING,
COMMUNICATIONS &
LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY**
Julie Lemon

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS
Julie Lemon, Sarah Ellingson, Lauri Hoff

DESIGN
Steph Schuldt

PHOTOGRAPHY
Jayme Hansen

VIDEOGRAPHY
Peter Simon

OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
Roger Stanford

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Western Technical College is one of 16 technical colleges that make up the Wisconsin Technical College System. Western is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. Western is also a member of the American Association of Community Colleges, the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), and the Wisconsin Association for Career and Technical Education (WACTE). Several of Western's programs are also accredited through national professional organizations.

Western is an Equal Opportunity/Access/Employer and Educator.

MISSION STATEMENT: Western Technical College provides relevant, high quality education in a collaborative and sustainable environment that changes the lives of students and grows our communities.

**Western
Technical College**



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STUDENT AMBASSADOR 2026 DAWSON OLSON

Dawson Olson of Independence, Wisconsin, has been selected as the 2026–27 Western Technical College Student Ambassador, serving as an official spokesperson for Western and representing the College in the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) State Ambassador Program.

As Student Ambassador, Dawson will speak to prospective students, community leaders, and campus partners, highlighting the value of technical education and the role it plays in strengthening communities and the workforce. He will also collaborate with fellow ambassadors across the state, representing Western at the WTCS level and promoting the impact of hands-on, career-focused learning.

Dawson is pursuing degrees in IT Cybersecurity and Network Administration and Business Management, with plans to graduate in April 2027. He chose Western for its strong emphasis on hands-on learning, smaller class sizes, and direct pathways into the workforce. “Western is a place where you can truly feel supported and get involved right away,” Olson says. “The instructors know you, the class sizes help you succeed, and there are so many communities to join that you can quickly find where you belong.”

Dawson is deeply involved in campus life. He serves as a Community Assistant in Western’s residence halls, supporting fellow students and helping build a positive living environment. He is also President of the Vocal Cavaliers and Treasurer of the Snowmobile Club, and

has participated in intramural volleyball. One instructor describes him as “well spoken, friendly, and already involved in several clubs and organizations on campus,” while noting his ability to break down complex topics into terms others can easily understand.

Integrity is a personal value that guides Dawson’s leadership. “Integrity means doing the right thing even when no one is watching,” he said. “It challenges me to be honest, reliable, and consistent in the way I treat others.” Whether serving as a Community Assistant or representing Western, he aims to be someone others can trust and depend on.

“Dawson embodies Western and how we would like all of our students to be out in the world,” says Tage Bushman, IT instructor at Western. “He is kind, generous, quick to learn, and a natural people person.”

“Dawson is always prepared and positive in the classroom, and he works exceptionally well with his peers. Whether tackling hands-on labs or building a secure network for his final project, he shows strong teamwork, problem-solving, and professionalism,” says Brandon Frank, Cybersecurity & Network Administration instructor.

Following graduation, Dawson plans to continue building a career in cybersecurity and business, applying both his technical expertise and leadership skills in a field that requires precision, accountability, and collaboration.

A LEGACY *That Lights the Way*

BY JULIE LEMON
PHOTO BY JAYME HANSEN

When William “Bill” Joseph Kish passed away in May 2024, he left behind more than a successful business and a lifetime of relationships. He left a legacy of mentorship, hard work, and belief in the next generation of electricians. Today, that legacy will continue at Western through a newly established endowed scholarship created in his memory by his wife, Mary, and their four daughters.

The Bill Kish Endowed Scholarship will support students enrolled in Western’s Electrician Apprenticeship program who are in their first or second year and demonstrate financial need. It is intentionally designed to reach apprentices at one of the most difficult points in their training.

“FOR MANY, THIS SCHOLARSHIP IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BARELY GETTING BY AND BEING ABLE TO SUCCEED.”

*— Carl Newman,
Construction Electrician
Apprenticeship Instructor*

“Many electrician apprentices find the first and second years to be the hardest financially,” says Carl Newman, Construction Electrician Apprenticeship Instructor at Western. “Apprentices don’t qualify for most traditional scholarships or financial aid, yet they’re juggling the cost of tuition, tools, work clothes, transportation, rent, and food. Bill



Two apprentices from Kish & Sons Electric receive training on the job site.

Kish understood those challenges. He spent his career employing and training countless apprentices, always believing in their potential. His scholarship reaches apprentices when they need the support most. It doesn’t just ease financial strain, it reminds the apprentices that someone believes in their future. For many, this scholarship is the difference between barely getting by and being able to succeed.”

That belief in people defined Bill’s life. Throughout his career, Bill not only built electrical systems; he built confidence in young tradespeople. He understood the realities of apprenticeship because he had lived them. The early years require sacrifice and determination, often without the safety net available to traditional college students.

By creating this scholarship, the Kish family is honoring Bill’s lifelong commitment to opening doors for others.

In many ways, the scholarship reflects the man himself: practical, generous, and forward-looking. It will help apprentices stay focused on mastering their craft instead of worrying about how to cover the next expense. It will reinforce the value of the skilled trades in our region. And it will ensure that Bill Kish’s influence continues to power the careers of future electricians.

Through this endowment, his family has created something lasting: a source of opportunity that will light the way for generations to come.



Bill in the early years of his profession. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Torchbearer:

HOW ONE VETERAN FOUND HER SPARK AT WESTERN

BY LAURI HOFF
PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN

AFTER THE MILITARY, RECOVERY, AND AN EVICTION, MAUREEN HOWELL DISCOVERED THAT SOME THINGS—LIKE HER—ARE WORTH THE WORK

Howell doesn't do anything halfway. Not the military—she served as a combat medic in the Army and Air Force, shipped out to the Philippines, and learned to keep her head down in an era when women in service had to. Not recovery—she's now 26 years clean and sober, a milestone she credits to her faith and a Bible her young son mailed her from Milwaukee when she was living in Florida. Not motherhood—she raised two children and now has five grandchildren, including twins who just started college and call her Granny, and she also has four godchildren who affectionately call her Gee-G. And certainly not welding. "I'm going to be a welder," Howell says, her voice carrying the certainty of someone who has learned to bend without breaking.



Maureen with Welding Instructor Jon Mason.

A HOUSE BECOMES A HOME

Howell's path to Western's welding program began with an eviction notice. In 2023, she was living at a La Crosse apartment complex when a letter arrived in her mailbox: her month-to-month lease would not be renewed. She had six weeks to move. "They wouldn't tell me why," Howell recalls. "Come to find out, the complex was being sold and the new owners were choosing who could stay. At the time, all I knew was that I had to be out."

The stress was overwhelming. She dropped out of school. She leaned on her sister, her church, and eventually the PRRC—a Peer Resource Connection group for veterans with mental



disabilities at the Tomah VA. And she leaned on God. The very next day, her sister showed her a house on the South Side. Howell put in a bid. She got it. "God turned that around," she says. "But in the midst of it, I had to work through the hurt. That feeling of not knowing where you're going to stay—that stays with you. This time, I'm making sure I have a place that's mine."

WHY WELDING?

The answer goes back further than 2023. In 2019, Howell completed 90 days of workforce training, hoping to join the pipefitters union. On the 90th day, she was pulled aside and told they had to let her go.

"Because of technology," she explains. "They needed people who could use computers."

Right then and there, she made a decision. "I said, I'm going to go to school and I'm going to learn how to weld. No one can tell me I can't do it."

So here she is. At 65—though she'll laugh and tell you she's "35 with 30 years of experience"—Howell is learning to weld. She's also learning computers, asking a million questions, chasing down counselors, and showing up whenever they'll let her so she can practice. "I have a learning disability and ADHD," she shares openly. "Sometimes someone can say a sentence, and I hear one thing but they're saying another. I have to ask questions several different times, several different ways, until I understand. And I'm not ashamed of that at all anymore. Not here."

THE KIND OF TEACHER WHO SEES YOU

Howell credits Jon, her welding instructor, with creating a space where she feels seen.

"He lets me speak, even if I say the same thing three or four times," she says. "And then he'll stop and say, 'Maureen, you just need to do this.' He sees what I can't see. I don't feel ashamed. I feel like somebody."

Jon sees it too. "Maureen is exactly the kind of student we need more of," he says. "The welding industry is changing. It's historically been male-dominated, and I've been pushing hard to bring in more underrepresented students. The women we get—they're historically better in quality, better in attention to detail, better in the soft skills employers want. I never worry about a female student being late or not putting in extra time. Maureen is an example of that from day one."

For Howell, it's simpler: "I can do a job as well as any man. It's not a man's job—it's just a job. And I look for quality, just like they do."

THE ART IN THE ARC

What Howell loves most is TIG welding—gas tungsten arc welding, a precise method that requires a torch in one hand, filler metal in the other, and a foot pedal controlling the amperage.

"You're using three parts of your body for one specific outcome," she says, eyes lighting up. "And you can do such beautiful

things with it. The welds are just—they're art." Art has always been part of her. She's won national awards for ceramics, though she'll tell you she doesn't know what she's doing. "I'll start with one idea, and by the time it's done, it's something else entirely. But it turns out beautiful."

Her heart's desire is to combine welding with that artistic vision. She envisions a business making mixed-media art—welding with ceramics—creating pieces that come from somewhere deep. Her house has a third floor, a beautiful, finished attic with a porch, and that's going to be her studio. "From God's heart to mine," she says of the name she's carried for 15 years. "He's been pulling it all together."

PURPOSE, NOT RETIREMENT

For Howell, Western is more than a place to learn a trade. It's a place to belong and she feels it.

"I could sit in my house and watch TV. But this—this gives me a lift and a purpose, it's something I enjoy, and a place to be. The women at financial aid; I love them. I go just to check on them. The Veterans group at the VA—they're helping me get through college too. I tell them, 'We're going to college.' Because nobody does anything alone."

Her message to other adults considering Western is simple: "Pray about it, because it's hard. But it's not about how quick you finish. Make sure you're understanding. And just—do something. Don't let age stop you. I was afraid I couldn't learn at a college level. I was wrong. If I can do this, you can too."

Howell will be back next year to finish the welding program. After that, she plans to work part-time as a welder, enough to pay the mortgage on that South Side house,

Learn more about Maureen's story here!



and spend the rest of her time upstairs in her studio, making art. And maybe, a 3D-printed bust of herself in full welding gear. "Granny in her helmet," she says with a laugh.

But for now, she's exactly where she needs to be: torch in hand, foot on the pedal, creating something beautiful and unexpected out of metal and fire and years of hard-won wisdom.

"I'm just thankful to be here," Howell says. "Really thankful."

WHEN LIGHTENING *Strikes Twice*



*“I used to think the scars were the story,
turns out, they’re just the map.”*

A SECOND STRIKE LED TO A YEAR OF RECOVERY, SERVICE, AND STUDENT LEADERSHIP, RESHAPING HOW ONE WESTERN STUDENT ENGAGES WITH HIS COMMUNITY.

BY SARAH ELLINGSON | PHOTO BY JAYME HANSEN

Student Chad Nelson rolls back his left sleeve, revealing a series of thin white lines that snake up his arm, branching and tapering like lightning frozen in mid-strike. With a smile, he says, “Voldemort just missed.” These are scars from two surgeries to remove abscesses caused by intravenous drug use, tangible reminders that, for Nelson, lightning did strike twice, and the second time changed everything.

In January 2025, while Nelson was recovering from a second surgery and right after he and his fiancée lost their home, they faced a pivotal moment together in the hospital. “We’re going to be unhoused once we leave here. That was going to happen. We decided...let’s just stop,” he recalls. Together, they chose recovery, and embraced the uncertainty ahead.

JOURNEY TO WESTERN

Nelson and his fiancée spent the winter of 2025 at the warming shelter. During that time, Western Technical College became a lifeline. It was then that Nelson first encountered Project Proven, a grant-supported re-entry program at Western designed to help those with criminal records transition from incarceration to the community. The program provided him with mentors, inspiring free courses, and crucial support, including a student ID that doubled as a bus pass. “This is one of the places where I truly feel the most welcome, probably ever in my life,” Nelson remarks.

By summer, building on the support from Project Proven, Nelson had enrolled in two Western classes and surprised himself by earning an A on his first written exam in a decade. These successes helped set the stage for the next chapter in his journey. By midsummer, he had secured housing and transportation and had even welcomed two new kittens.

FINDING HIS VOICE

As Nelson’s confidence grew, so did something unexpected: a genuine talent for public speaking and an interest in social justice. It started quietly, in a summer speech class at Western where he delivered a persuasive talk on voting that left classmates reconsidering their civic engagement. The impact deepened further when he stepped up to introduce the mayor at Western’s Leadership Night. Nervous but prepared, Nelson delivered an introduction so powerful that the mayor joked about

taking him along to future speaking engagements. From that moment, he started to understand the power of his voice—not just to share his story, but to move people. Whether presenting at student government events, speaking with local leaders, or participating in statewide legislative sessions, he’s learning how to use his lived experience to inform, connect, and inspire.

Now an Associate of Arts student, Nelson plans to transfer to UW-La Crosse to pursue a degree in Public Communication and Advocacy with a minor in Social Justice. He still bears his scars, but today they serve as reminders of how far he’s come.



Chad Nelson with La Crosse Mayor Shaundel Spivey.
SUBMITTED PHOTO

WESTERN *Programs*



AREAS OF INTEREST

Western categorizes its programs into Areas of Interest to better show how they are connected to career areas. Below are the 10 Areas of Interest and the associate degree and technical diploma programs within each area. Visit www.westerntc.edu to see the full list, including certificates and apprenticeships.

ADVANCED MANUFACTURING

- Welding and Fabrication
- Welding Technician

AGRICULTURE & NATURAL RESOURCES

- Agribusiness Science Technology
- Landscape Horticulture

BUSINESS & PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

- Accounting
- Accounting Assistant
- Business Management
- Business Specialist
- Digital Marketing
- Digital Marketing Specialist
- Digital Media Production
- Foundations of Leadership
- Graphic Design
- Health Office Professional
- Human Resource Management
- Leadership Development
- Leadership & Supervision Professional
- Legal Studies/Paralegal
- Legal Studies/Paralegal Post Baccalaureate
- Medical Administrative Professional
- Sales Management
- Sales Representative

DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION TECHNOLOGY

- Air Conditioning, Heating, & Refrigeration
- Architectural Technology
- Building Construction & Cabinetmaking
- Building Science and Energy Management
- Interior Design
- Refrigeration, Air Conditioning, & Heating Service Technician

EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES

- Early Childhood Education
- Early Childhood Professional
- Educational Assistant
- Foundations of Teacher Education
- Funeral Service
- Human Services Associate
- Special Education Teacher Assistant

HEALTH SCIENCES

- Clinical Medical Assistant
- Dental Assistant
- Expanded Functions Dental Auxiliary
- Health Information Technology
- Medical Assistant
- Medical Coding Specialist
- Medical Lab Technician
- Nursing - Associate Degree
- Nursing Assistant
- Occupational Therapy Assistant
- Phlebotomist/Specimen Processor
- Physical Therapist Assistant
- Radiography
- Surgical Technology

UNIVERSITY TRANSFER – LIBERAL ARTS

- Associate of Arts
- Associate of Science

PUBLIC SAFETY

- Advanced EMT
- Criminal Justice
- Criminal Justice – Law Enforcement 720 Academy
- Emergency Medical Technician
- Emergency Medical Technician – Paramedic
- Fire Protection Technician
- Paramedic Technician

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, ENGINEERING, AND MATHEMATICS (STEM)

- Computer Aided Design (CAD) Technician
- Electromechanical Maintenance Technician
- Electromechanical Technology
- Electronic & Computer Engineering Technology – CET
- Industrial Machine Controls
- Internet of Things (IoT) Integration Specialist
- IT – Computer Support Specialist
- IT – Computer Support Technician
- IT – Cybersecurity & Network Administration
- IT – Data & Analytics Specialist
- IT – Network Technician
- IT – Software Development w/Applied AI
- IT – Web Programmer
- Mechanical Design Technology
- Mechatronic and Robotic Engineering Technology

TRANSPORTATION

- Automotive Maintenance & Light Repair Technician – Level 1
- Automotive Service Technician – Level 2
- Automotive Technician
- Diesel & Heavy Equipment Technician
- Diesel & Heavy Equipment Technician Assistant



IMPORTANT REGISTRATION DATES:

March 17	Summer 2026 New Student Registration Begins
May 11	Summer Term Begins
April 14	Fall 2026 New Student Registration Begins
September 8	Fall Term Begins
November 9	Spring 2027 New Student Registration Begins
January 11	Spring Term Begins

GRANT PROVIDES UNIQUE APPRENTICESHIPS

Western is expanding opportunity across our rural communities through the ARRIVE grant—Apprenticeships for Rural Regions Innovating Vocational Education. Designed to create clear and attainable pathways into high-demand careers, ARRIVE leverages Registered Apprenticeships, Certified Pre-Apprenticeships (CPA), and micro-credentials to connect students with affordable education and meaningful, paid, work-based learning.

Thanks to this federal investment, Western has launched new apprenticeship pathways in Early Childhood Education and Mechatronics Technician, with IT Service Help Desk, Surgical Technician, and Educational Assistant apprenticeships coming soon. These programs are the latest in the apprenticeship lineup, which already includes Construction Electrician, Industrial Electrician, Plumbing, Maintenance Technician, and Machinist/Tool & Die Maker.

“Apprenticeships are especially vital for employers in our rural communities,” says Angie Martin, Director of Business and Industry Services at Western. “They provide a practical, hands-on approach to developing skilled talent locally while creating accessible, affordable career pathways for students.”

Rural student participation across all seven of Western’s apprenticeship programs is on the rise, growing from 124 to 137 students, with an additional 17 rural students completing an Early Childhood Education CPA. This growth reflects meaningful progress toward economic mobility for students and a stronger workforce for rural West-Central Wisconsin.

University Transfer



With a variety of transfer options, you can start at Western and earn credits toward a bachelor’s degree from many four-year universities... and save thousands!

ASSOCIATE OF ARTS (AA) AND ASSOCIATE OF SCIENCE (AS) PROGRAMS

The AA program is designed for those interested in humanities, business, and social sciences, while the AS program serves students interested in natural, physical, material, or medical sciences. Take your general studies courses at Western for a fraction of the cost.

TRANSFER AGREEMENTS BY PROGRAM

Several of Western’s associate degree programs transfer directly into specific bachelor’s degree programs. Programs across the spectrum including Accounting, Early Childhood Education, Information Technology, Nursing, and Mechatronic & Robotic Engineering—all have transfer agreements.

TRANSFER ANY ASSOCIATE DEGREE

Western has agreements with many universities that provide graduates from any of our associate degree programs with junior status. Some of our most popular include Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE), Viterbo University, and Franklin University.

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT ALL OF OUR TRANSFER OPTIONS AT:
www.westerntc.edu/university-transfer



For detailed information about programs and offerings:
www.westerntc.edu



At the Heart of Student Success:

TWO PROFESSIONALS ON BELONGING, ADVOCACY, AND FINDING PURPOSE AT WESTERN

Bobby Lith and Rachel Iaquinta share how their work—and each other—shaped their commitment to supporting students

BY LAURI HOFF | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN

When Lith moved from Long Beach, California, to Oxford, Ohio, in 2019 for graduate school, it was the biggest move away from home he'd ever made. A non-traditional student who started college later in life, Lith had already built a foundation in student affairs through community college, a bachelor's degree, and advocacy work with the Long Beach Unified School District. But Miami University in Ohio offered something new: a chance to deepen his understanding of student support in a formal academic setting. "I was still learning what that would look like for me long term," Lith says. "And then COVID disrupted a lot of what higher education understood as best practices—inclusivity, mattering, belonging.

"After graduate school, Lith held various roles in student affairs, from research assisting to orientation work. But a hall director position at UW-Eau Claire truly expanded his experience. He arrived in July 2023, drawn by the chance to build his supervision and management skills—and by Wisconsin itself. "I had visited my

brother years before, and we'd go up north to Minocqua, Rhinelander, Eagle River. I fell in love with the outdoors," Lith recalls. "Coming from urban sprawl, that solitude felt restorative. I thought if I ever lived somewhere outside California, Wisconsin would be that place."

TWO ROLES, ONE MISSION

That position also brought Lith to Eau Claire—and into the orbit of Iaquinta, a seasoned hall director who had been there for several years. Their paths crossed through committee work and shared responsibilities. Today they're life partners, and both work at Western in roles focused on supporting students outside the classroom.

Lith serves as the Student Parent Resource Navigator, a first-of-its-kind grant-funded position. Iaquinta is the Residence Life Director, continuing her work building community and helping residents harness independence, connect with neighbors, and develop their values. Though their roles differ, their mission is the same:

helping students thrive by meeting them where they are.

"Basic needs and belonging aren't just academic interventions—they are academic support," Lith explains. "When a parent knows their child is in secure, reliable care, their cognitive bandwidth expands. They can focus." Iaquinta echoes the sentiment. "The residence hall is where students let their hair down. I'm privy to their most vulnerable moments—and their most transformative ones. When students feel they can be their authentic selves, they build confidence and start living out their values."

STUDENT-CENTERED BY DESIGN

Both define student-centered work as partnership. Lith describes himself as a "co-author" in students' lived experiences. "Some students benefit from more challenge than support. Others need the opposite. I'm a learning partner in their educational journey."



Iaquinta draws on her social work background, emphasizing self-determination and motivational interviewing. "Students aren't going to feel motivated to accomplish a goal if it's someone else's idea. It's about understanding what they want and helping them get there." For Lith, it might mean helping a student-parent secure drop-in childcare—like he did this week, connecting a student with clinicals to a flexible childcare option through the YWCA. "We completed the paperwork in one day. She can start Monday. That's traction, and that's a good day." For Iaquinta, a good day means connection. "When a student who had a conduct meeting stops by later just to say hi or tell me about their day—that's when I know I've made a difference."

BELONGING MATTERS

Iaquinta knows the power of belonging firsthand. As a first-year student at UW-Eau Claire, she almost dropped out. "I called my mom every day to come pick me up," she admits. "But my RA lived next door and pulled me into the community. She made me feel like I mattered." That

experience shaped her philosophy: belonging isn't a buzzword—it's retention. "If you don't feel a sense of place on campus, if you don't see people who look like you, you're not going to stay."

Lith sees a parallel in his work with student-parents, who carry responsibilities many people don't see. "I wish more people understood that their commitment looks different. Asking for asynchronous participation isn't disengagement—it's adaptability. Their resilience as caregivers is remarkable."

"I've personally witnessed faculty and staff living out the mission of every student, every day," Iaquinta says. "I'm surrounded by extraordinary people I can learn from." Lith agrees, "Many of our colleagues stand on values like compassion, accessibility, and accountability. That's where I want to focus my energy. Seeing those values in action motivates me."



LIFE BEYOND WORK

When they're not supporting students, Lith and Iaquinta recharge together. They cook—Lith's Thai-Lao-Cambodian grilled

beef salad, and Iaquinta's chana masala. They bike and skate, take their dog, Louie, to the park, and play cards. They plan and dream for the future, and they bring their own brand of fun to the mix. Iaquinta is a roller derby skater under the moniker Lord Scarquaad. Lith enjoys a good bad movie—like Troll 2, which has nothing to do with trolls and everything to do with plant-eating goblins. "It's not very good, but it made for a great first date," Lith jokes.

ADVICE FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES FEELING OVERWHELMED

Iaquinta's message is simple, but hard: ask for help. "It's a skill that grows with practice. At Western, we're lucky to have plentiful resources for basic needs, identity exploration, and connection. Our Western faculty and staff are eager to support you in your journey, whatever it looks like for you." Lith adds, "You belong here, especially on the tough days. Let's start with one conversation and create a plan together. Progress is more important than perfection. Remember, you don't have to do this alone."

Hear more from Bobby & Rachel Here!

Western

WESTERN'S MILITARY CONNECTED SERVICES —

A PLACE TO BELONG AFTER SERVICE

BY SARAH ELLINGSON | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN

At Western Technical College, supporting military-connected students means more than just handling benefits or transcripts. It's about helping people move confidently from service to success. Western's Military Connected Services (MCS) is a welcoming, student-focused center for veterans, active-duty service members, and their families as they adjust to civilian life.

While every student's path is unique, MCS's consistent goal is to remove obstacles before they affect learning and to help students gain momentum in their education and careers. Building on over 80 years of combined experience, the MCS staff understands military life and college challenges. For many, this center is a steady place to begin their next chapter.

A CLEAR PATH FORWARD

One of MCS's main strengths is offering proactive support. Staff help students understand their benefits, complete VA requirements, and feel confident about their next steps. Veterans Advocacy & Outreach Lead Dustin Schultz ensures students receive academic credit for what they've already achieved. "Credit for Prior Learning is our way of showing that Western genuinely understands and values what military members have already done," says Schultz. This helps many move faster into high-demand fields like law enforcement, fire and EMS, healthcare, cybersecurity, trades, and more. A dedicated Benefits Coordinator

helps students choose and maintain benefits that align with their goals, which is key to keeping them focused and moving forward.

First-year student Samantha Lexa says the service is life-changing: "Without them, I wouldn't be here. There's no way I'd be able to afford schooling without this support." Criminal Justice student Ezekiel Rodriguez agrees: "The benefits are complicated. Having help here matters."

Beyond supporting students on campus, MCS also actively partners with the VA, Vet Center, VFW, county Veteran Service Officers, and state and federal organizations. These connections help Western keep up with policy changes and ensure students always receive reliable guidance, even as larger systems change. Working together in this way helps students transition smoothly into the workforce and find stable, meaningful careers, thereby strengthening the local community.

A SPACE FOR CONNECTION AND BELONGING

Academic and financial guidance are just part of what makes this space special. The MCS lounge, open to all Western students, exists to support transitions with comfort and a sense of community. Inspired by United Services Organization lounges, it offers coffee, quiet study spots, and opportunities to connect. It provides a sense of belonging not only for veterans,



military-connected students, and staff, but also for those without a military background, making it a place to learn, share, and build understanding.

"Every person on this team understands the unique challenges military connected students and their families face. We're proactive. We get benefits in place, award credit for what students already know, and help them navigate the transition from military to college," says Western's director of Veteran Services, Jackie Leon. "Ultimately, our goal is to remove barriers before they become obstacles, so every student who walks through our doors feels welcome, supported, and set up for success."

- >> **The Wisconsin GI Bill** is a tuition waiver, not a reimbursement. Western absorbs most of the cost, allowing veterans and their dependents to attend tuition-free.
- >> **700+** military connected students served each year
- >> **80+** years of combined MCS staff experience
- >> **Credit for Prior Learning** shortens the path to graduation
- >> **The MCS lounge** is open to all Western students and staff

Listening to Our Communities: WESTERN HOSTS REGIONAL FORUMS



BY JULIE LEMON | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN

Last October, Western Technical College welcomed community members to a series of forums held at its regional locations, creating space for meaningful dialogue about the future of the college and the communities it serves. The events brought together local employers, school representatives, community organizations, and other partners to share updates and discuss emerging workforce needs across western Wisconsin.

Hosted at Western's regional locations in Black River Falls, Independence, Mauston, Tomah, and Viroqua, each forum offered participants the opportunity to hear directly from President Roger Stanford and members of Western's senior leadership team while also engaging in conversation about local priorities.

President Stanford provided an overview of the college's current initiatives and long-term direction. His presentation highlighted Western's strategic planning work, the impact of the college's transition to seven-week terms, and early outcomes related to student retention and success. While the discussion focused on institutional progress and future opportunities, it also offered context about the challenges and investments required to continue serving students and employers effectively in the years ahead.

Workforce development was a central theme throughout the forums. Western has long worked closely with local businesses and community partners to ensure that programs align with regional labor needs. During the discussions, participants shared insights about industry trends, workforce shortages, and opportunities for collaboration that could strengthen career pathways for students.

The forums also reinforced Western's role as a community partner. From customized training and apprenticeships to K-12 partnerships and transfer pathways, Western's programs are designed to support both individual opportunity and regional economic growth.

Equally important, the events provided Western leaders with valuable feedback from the communities they serve. Attendees were encouraged to ask questions, share perspectives, and discuss how the college can continue to meet evolving workforce and educational needs.

These conversations reflect Western's ongoing commitment to collaboration and transparency. By bringing community voices into the discussion, the college continues to strengthen the partnerships that help shape programs, expand opportunities for students, and support the long-term vitality of the region.

WESTERN NEWS



WESTERN LAUNCHES PRESIDENTIAL SEARCH

The Western Technical College District Board has launched the search for its next president after gathering input from staff, students, and community partners across the district.

Earlier this year, Western asked stakeholders for input on important qualities and priorities for the next leader. Listening sessions and surveys shaped the presidential profile for the national search.

“The input we received from across our district was thoughtful and valuable,” says Kevin Hennessey, chair of the Western Technical College District Board. “Our communities care deeply about Western and its future. That feedback helped us identify the leadership qualities that will position the college for continued success.”

The District Board has hired AGB Search to lead the process. The consultant and board developed a presidential profile based on Western’s mission, strategic priorities, and district stakeholder expectations. The next president will build on Western’s reputation as a trusted partner and advance Experience 2027, the college’s strategic plan for student success, workforce engagement, and co-worker development.

Updates about the search process, including the presidential profile and timeline, are available at www.westernnc.edu/presidential-search.

Transcribed Credit saved local students roughly \$3.7 million in 2024–25

A new report from Western’s K12 Partnerships department shows area high school students and families saved more than \$3.7 million in tuition costs through Western’s Transcribed Credit program during the 2024–2025 academic year.

The report highlights steady growth from last year. In 2023–24, 5,027 students earned 19,905 credits, saving about \$3.1 million. This year, participation increased to 5,928 students earning 23,606 credits, for a total savings of \$3,765,631. Participation has more than doubled since 2017–2018, when only 2,357 students participated.

“Transcribed Credit is helping thousands of local students get a head start on college while keeping costs

down,” says Haley Bahr, K12 Partnership Specialist at Western. “By working directly with high schools in our district, we’re making higher education more accessible and giving students the confidence to continue their education after graduation.”

Transcribed Credit allows high school teachers, who meet certain certification and training requirements, to teach Western courses in their classrooms. When students successfully complete these courses, the grade is placed directly on a Western transcript, giving them college credit at no cost.

To learn more information on Western’s Transcribed Credit program, call 608.785.9200 or visit www.westernnc.edu/earn-college-credit-high-school.

Western Named LEADER COLLEGE OF DISTINCTION

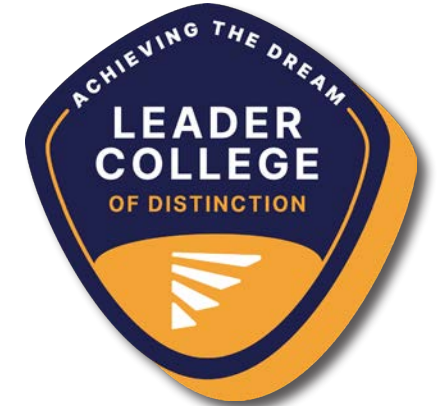
Achieving the Dream, a national nonprofit that supports community colleges as centers for learning and opportunity, has named Western Technical College a 2026 Leader College of Distinction.

“We are extremely honored to be recognized as a 2026 Leader College of Distinction,” says Western President, Roger Stanford. “This recognition reflects our ongoing commitment by our faculty and staff that every student belongs and has the opportunity to be successful here at Western.”

Colleges that earn this award are recognized for making real progress

in expanding access, improving early student success measures like retention, putting effective strategies into practice, and building a strong campus culture.

“The 2026 Leader Colleges demonstrate sustained commitment and measurable progress in advancing student success,” says Dr. Karen A. Stout, president and CEO of Achieving the Dream. “By using data to guide decisions and continuously strengthen their practices, these institutions are producing real gains in student outcomes, strengthening their practices, and deepening their impact in the communities they serve. Their leadership sets a powerful example for



colleges across the ATD Network, reflecting the focus, discipline, and follow-through required to achieve lasting institutional change.”



WESTERN TECHNICAL COLLEGE PRESENTED COMMUNITY PARTNER AWARD BY GREAT RIVERS UNITED WAY

Western Technical College has received the Community Partner Award from Great Rivers United Way. It was awarded at Great Rivers United Way’s 76th Annual Celebration, where it was among several businesses and individuals recognized for their commitment to United Way’s mission.

“This award is a true honor. As a college, we strive to be responsive to our community’s needs, and our partnership with Great Rivers United Way helps make that possible,” says Roger Stanford, President of Western Technical College.

The Community Partner Award celebrates organizations, businesses, and volunteers demonstrating exceptional commitment to improving local lives through volunteerism, fundraising, and strategic support. “United Way has helped us think differently about what it means to show up for our community,” says

Kari Reyburn, director of student life, equity and community engagement. “We’re part of the same community, working toward the same goal of creating conditions where people can learn, meet their basic needs, build stability, and move forward.”

Western has partnered with Great Rivers United Way for the past 13 years. This collaboration extends beyond fundraising to include new initiatives and shared leadership, such as the Community Health Worker Training program offered jointly by United Way and Western Technical College.

This recognition highlights Western’s ongoing commitment to collaborative, community-driven solutions that improve lives throughout the region.





ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

From Curiosity to Creation

A Q&A with Western Graduate and Visorix Founder Thomas Nichols

BY LAURI HOFF | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN

A graduate of Western Technical College's Business Management program, Thomas Nichols has always been curious about turning ideas into something real. A photographer with a knack for technical problem-solving, Nichols combines creativity with relentless persistence. Today, as the founder of Visorix, he is developing Virtara—an accessible virtual reality camera designed to help creators tell immersive stories without the high cost and complexity that often comes with new technology. His journey reflects the practical, hands-on learning that defines a Western education and how it ripples far beyond the classroom, which is very much the point.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO STUDY BUSINESS AT WESTERN TECHNICAL COLLEGE?

My first passion was photography, but at the time, a two-year photography degree wasn't an option. Before coming to Western, I had been exploring creative ideas through pitch competitions, which are common in entrepreneurship. Those experiences were encouraging, but they also showed me something important—I didn't yet understand how businesses actually work.

I chose Business Management at Western because I wanted a strong, practical foundation. Once I started, everything clicked. The instructors made the material approachable and real-world focused. I gained the tools I needed to understand how ideas move from concept to reality.

HOW HAS YOUR BUSINESS EDUCATION SHAPED THE WAY YOU THINK ABOUT BUILDING PRODUCTS TODAY?

I tend to look at a product from the ground up—thinking through costs, who it's for, how it will be marketed, and what legal considerations might come into play. In many ways, it's similar to how I approach photography. When you take a photo, you're considering lighting, exposure, aperture, and your subject all at once. Business works the same way for me. You have to consider all the elements together to understand whether an idea is truly viable.

ARE THERE LESSONS FROM WESTERN THAT SHOW UP MORE OFTEN THAN YOU EXPECTED?

I regularly draw on what I learned about funding. Western helped me understand that if you don't have personal resources to rely on, you need to know how

venture capital or crowdfunding work. Even the human resources classes stuck with me. I still use tools from those courses when thinking through hiring and writing job descriptions.

HOW DID YOUR MILITARY SERVICE CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE?

The discipline I gained through the military has a major impact on how I approach life and work. It taught me not to give up on the things I care about and to keep moving forward, even when challenges arise. The military instills a strong sense of mission accomplishment—the idea that you find a way to get the job done, regardless of the circumstances. That mindset has carried over directly into running a startup.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR ROOTS AS A PHOTOGRAPHER? WHAT ORIGINALLY DREW YOU TO THIS ART FORM?

When I was growing up, my family went to Disney World. My mom wanted to get a picture taken, and later she had it printed as an 8 x 10. I remember looking at that photo and suddenly being able to recall the entire day—from when we woke up, to the food we ate, to the moment we went to bed. That experience stuck with me. I realized I wanted to be able to create moments like that for other people—to capture not just an image, but a full memory. That's why I chose photography, and it's why I keep coming back to it. It's always been my first love.

VIRTARA BEGAN WITH A REALIZATION THAT VR CREATION WAS TOO EXPENSIVE. HOW DID THAT TURN INTO ACTION?

I was trying to create a VR video myself and quickly realized how difficult the process was—you almost needed

a degree just to make a simple clip. I started looking for ways to do it without spending a huge amount of money and discovered that, with some experimentation, it was possible. That experience showed me that immersive video didn't have to cost thousands of dollars. Around the same time, I came across industry research that pointed out a major challenge: there simply wasn't enough VR content available. That was my eureka moment. I realized I had the skills to help solve a problem that even the largest tech companies were still trying to figure out.

YOU'VE ATTRACTED INTEREST FROM MAJOR TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES RECENTLY. WHAT DOES THAT MEAN TO YOU?

It's definitely validating! It tells me that the data-driven approach I've taken is on the right track and that I've identified a real need in the market. That kind of interest confirms that what we're building is resonating and moving in the right direction.

WHEN YOU IMAGINE THE FUTURE OF VIRTARA, WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?

Success, to me, looks like people using this device as a tool to create content they can build a living from—much like creators do on YouTube today. Back in 2005, no one could have predicted what that platform would become. It started simply and grew because people were given the tools and freedom to create.

I want that same kind of opportunity for Virtara users—starting on a level playing field and using the technology in creative, unexpected ways to make immersive videos you can truly feel. That's what success looks like to me.

Hot off the press!

Since this interview, Nichols' work has continued to gain momentum. Visorix is moving into the next phase of development, with a formal launch and product debut scheduled at the La Crosse Center. The company will also be featured on Project Pitch It, bringing additional visibility. As the project grows, it reflects more than one person's idea—it's a real-time example of how Western's hands-on learning and connections help students turn ideas into something tangible.



BACHELOR'S DEGREES *(and Careers)* **START AT WESTERN**

Is your goal to attend a university? Or maybe you're undecided about a career path?

Western's University Transfer options can help! Take your general studies courses with us to earn the same credits for a fraction of the cost.



OUR TOP FOUR TRANSFER COLLEGES

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse
Viterbo University
Winona State University
University of Wisconsin-Madison



westerntc.edu/university-transfer