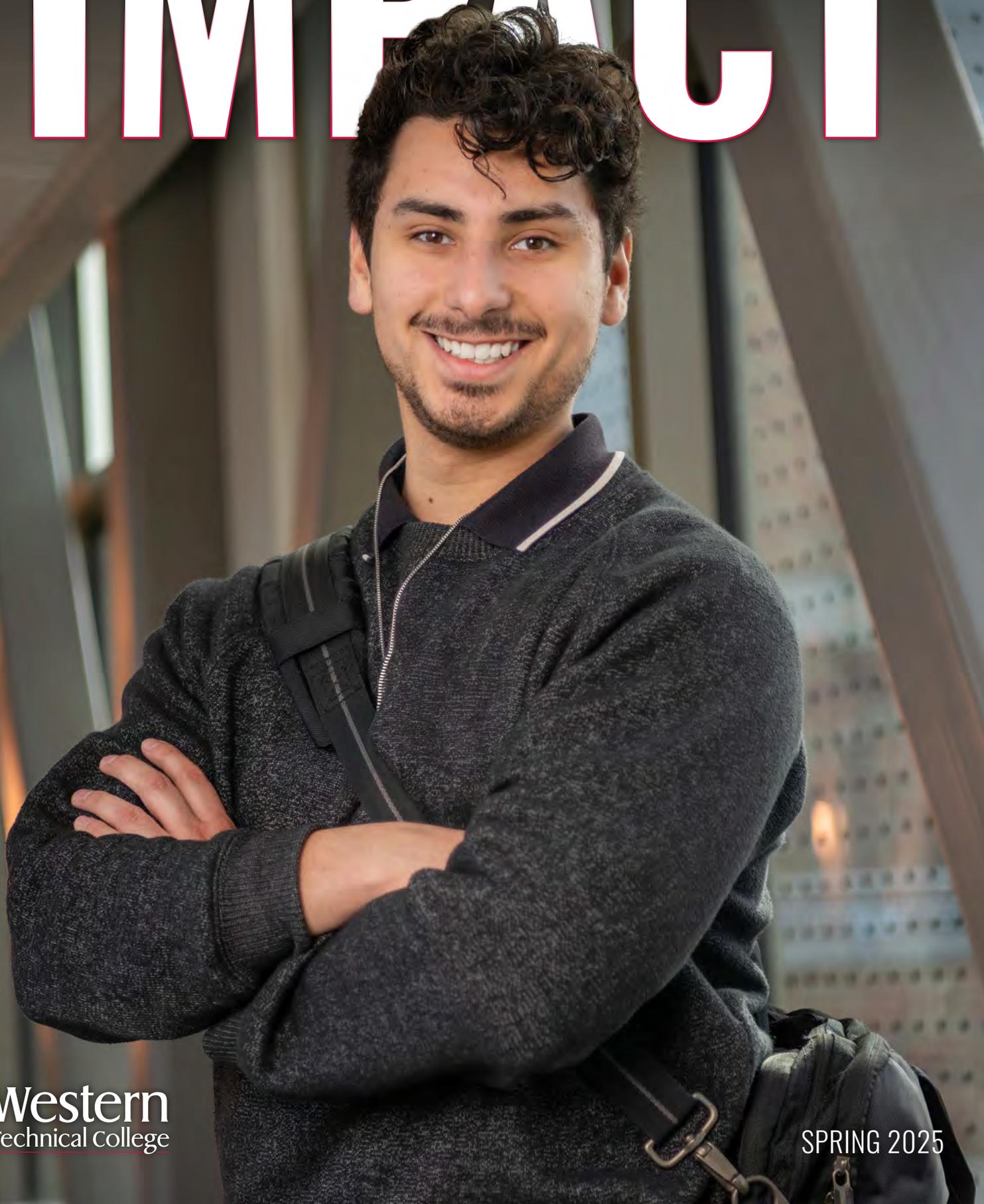


A magazine for community members, friends, and alumni of Western Technical College.

# IMPACT



Western  
Technical College

SPRING 2025

# WELCOME to Impact



Friends and Neighbors,

As we approach the midpoint of another innovative year at Western, I am thrilled to share with you the strides we are making toward transforming our region's educational landscape and economic future. We are proud to spotlight the highly anticipated Wanek Center of Innovation, a groundbreaking initiative made possible by the generous support of the Ronald and Joyce Wanek Foundation.

The Wanek Center of Innovation, set to open in August 2025, embodies our proactive approach to education. By transforming our existing Business Education building into this state-of-the-art facility, we are ensuring our students have access to the most advanced training in fields like Cyber Security, Data Analytics, and Robotics, among others. This initiative is designed to educate over 1,000 students annually, strengthening our region's capacity to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving job market.

In this edition, you'll also find highlights from our regional high school academies, insights into our Business & Industry Services area, and stories of remarkable students, alumni, and faculty who contribute daily to our vibrant community. Each feature illustrates our college's integral role in both education and the local economy.

Our dedication to enhancing educational facilities and programming is a reflection of our commitment to our community's long-term prosperity. Every project and program at Western is thoughtfully planned to ensure that we continue to be a vital resource for economic development and a hub for professional growth.

As we celebrate these developments, we are reminded of the importance of community support in sustaining and advancing our mission. The strides we are making are not just for today but for the generations to come. We are setting the stage for ongoing innovation and success, ensuring that our students and community thrive together.

Thank you for your continued engagement and support.

Warmest regards,

**Roger Stanford**  
President, Western Technical College

## IMPACT | Spring 2025

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](http://westerntc.edu)

### DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, COMMUNICATIONS & LEGISLATIVE ADVOCACY

Julie Lemon

### CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Julie Lemon, Lauri Hoff, Eric Jacobson

### GRAPHIC DESIGN

Steph Schuldt

### PHOTOGRAPHY

Jayme Hansen

### VIDEOGRAPHY

Peter Simon

### OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

Roger Stanford

2025 Western Technical College. All rights reserved. Western is part of the Wisconsin Technical College System, with locations in Black River Falls, Independence, La Crosse, Mauston, Sparta, Tomah, and Viroqua.

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



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

IMPACT | Spring 2025

<b>Western Ambassador</b> Shane Landrath has been selected as the 2025–26 Western Technical College Student Ambassador.	<b>4</b>
<b>High School Academies</b> Western's high school academies are transforming how high school students prepare for college and careers.	<b>4–5</b>
<b>Building a Career with Smarts, Strategy, and Heart</b> For Alyssa, a career in human resources is about creating connections and solving problems.	<b>6–7</b>
<b>Adversity to Advocacy</b> Western student Manny Chavez is determined to fulfill his dream of becoming a police officer.	<b>8–9</b>
<b>Finding Purpose in the Unplanned</b> Chelsey Willms's journey to teaching was anything but conventional.	<b>12–13</b>
<b>Wanek Center of Innovation</b> The Wanek Center of Innovation is more than just a facility.	<b>14–15</b>
<b>Western News</b> Highlights of Western achievements throughout the past year.	<b>16–17</b>
<b>Innovative Approaches to Workforce Training</b> As industries continue to face labor shortages, the demand for skilled workers intensifies.	<b>18</b>
<b>Alumni Spotlight</b> McKenly Moua, a Western graduate turned his curiosity about technology into a thriving career.	<b>19</b>



## MEET WESTERN'S STUDENT AMBASSADOR

Shane Landrath, of Richland Center, has been selected as the 2025–26 Western Technical College Student Ambassador, an official spokesperson for Western for the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS).

As Student Ambassador, Landrath will have opportunities to speak to potential students, community leaders, community groups, and others, and will spotlight the important role of technical and occupational education to the economy and society. In addition, he will represent Western at the state level by working with other student ambassadors throughout the WTCS.

Landrath is a Criminal Justice student, who is in his second year at Western. He chose Western because of its strong focus on workforce development and its ability to meet the needs of both individuals and communities in the region. He also utilizes several student support systems, which he credits as helping him remain in classes.

"There is support at every corner at Western. Whether you need financial assistance, emergency help, or guidance navigating life's challenges, Western has the resources in place to ensure you are not alone," says Landrath. "Asking for help or relying on the support of others is not a sign of weakness—it's part of what makes success meaningful. Western fosters an environment where it's okay to lean on others, and that's what makes

it such a special place to learn and grow."

Landrath is highly involved in public safety in the region. Since 2023, Landrath has served as a Senior Campus Community Safety Officer at Western. He also has been a member of the La Crosse Police Department Reserves since 2024, as well as a Police Reserve Sergeant with the La Crescent Police Department. Following graduation, he hopes to continue his education in becoming a police officer in the community.

"Empathy is central to who I am," says Landrath. "I've faced my share of struggles, and I understand that many people are navigating their own challenges, often quietly. That's why I aim to meet others where they are, offering kindness, understanding, and connection to resources that can make a difference."

"Shane truly embodies what it means to be a Western student, finding every opportunity to grow, learn, and better himself," says Margy Krogman, Student Leadership and Engagement Manager at Western. "He joined our community in pursuit of the education and hands-on experience that will help him reach his career goals but has arguably taught us as much as he has learned. He is outstanding, and we're so excited to work with him as our next ambassador."

*Congratulations, Shane!*

## HIGH SCHOOL ACADEMIES:

BY JULIE LEMON  
PHOTO BY JAYME HANSEN

Western's high school academies are transforming how high school students prepare for college and careers. Developed in partnership with school districts and industry leaders, these academies allow students to earn college credits while still in high school—giving them a head start on their future.

### A Growing Initiative

Western's regional academies are a recent expansion, with the College Transfer Academy in Tomah launching in 2023–24 as the first of its kind at a regional location. Previously, Western offered online academies in Information Technology, industry-based academies in auto and Fire/Emergency Medical Responder (EMR), and healthcare-focused academies like Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) and Emergency Medical Technician (EMT).

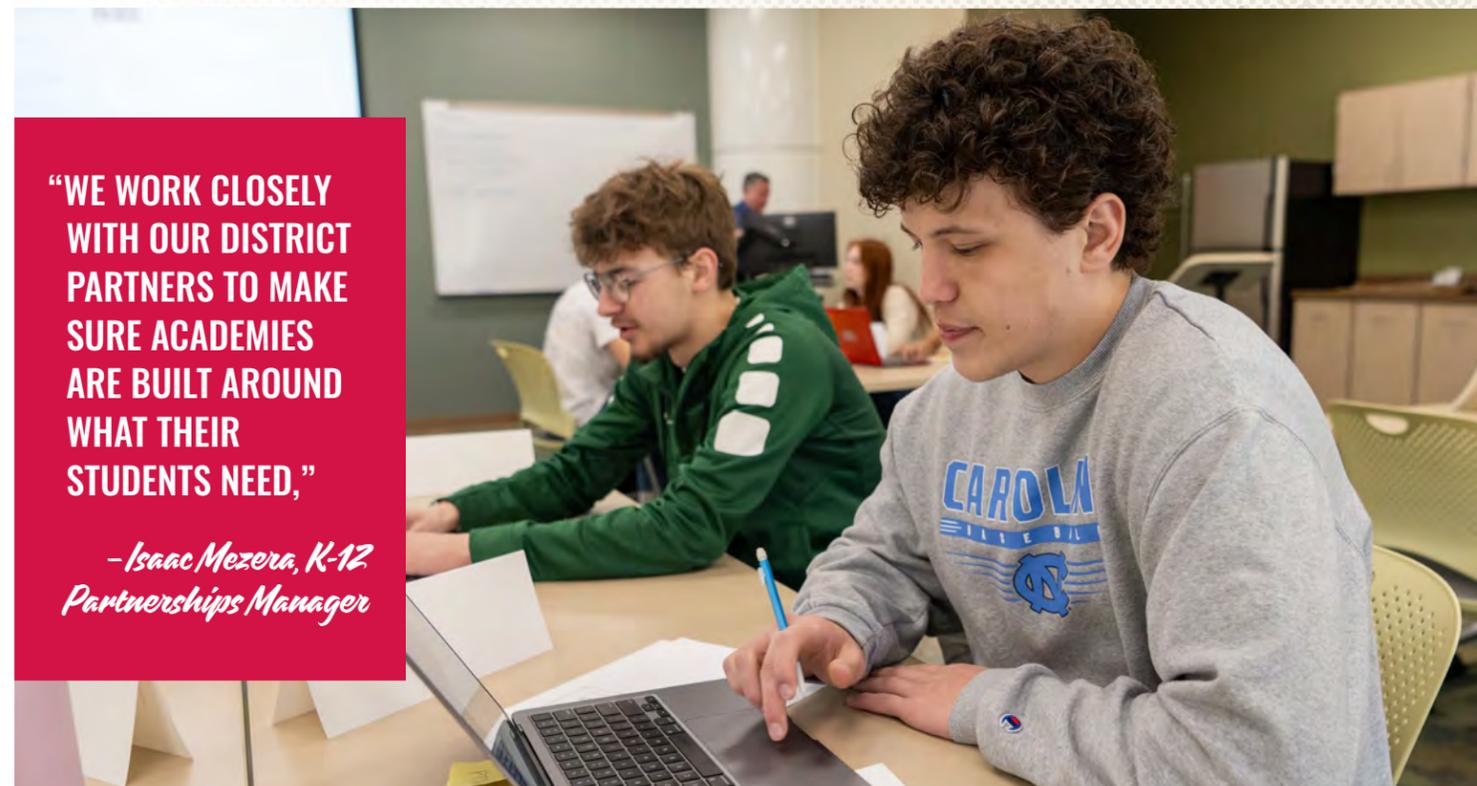
Western's Experience 2025 Strategic Plan identified the need for more structured, credit-bearing pathways for high school students. After consulting district leaders in 2021, the concept of a regional College Transfer Academy took shape, sparking broader discussions on customizing academies to fit local workforce needs. "We work closely with our district partners to make sure academies are built around what their students need," says Isaac Mezera, K-12 Partnerships Manager at Western. "It's a true collaboration, and that flexibility is what makes our model so effective."

### How It Works

High school academies are district-driven and flexible, designed to fit into the high school day. Students earn both high school and college credit through dual-credit courses. Some academies also provide hands-on industry experiences—from fire academy students suiting up for live training to health science students visiting hospitals.

Each academy is tailored to local needs. For example, the Educating Tomorrow's Teachers Academy was created to

## A Pathway to College and Careers



"WE WORK CLOSELY WITH OUR DISTRICT PARTNERS TO MAKE SURE ACADEMIES ARE BUILT AROUND WHAT THEIR STUDENTS NEED,"

*— Isaac Mezera, K-12 Partnerships Manager*

Black River Falls High School students participate in small group work as part of their college-level Psychology class at Western's location in downtown Black River Falls. This course earns credits that transfer to colleges and universities to save students valuable time and money.

help address the teacher shortage, while the Advanced Manufacturing Academy aligns with regional industry demands.

### The Benefits for Students

For students, the impact is immediate:

- Exposure to college-level coursework eases the transition to higher education.
- Career exploration helps students decide their next steps.
- Earning college credits saves time and money.
- Industry connections provide valuable networking opportunities.

"One of the biggest advantages of these academies is that students get to test-drive a career," explains Mezera. "They walk away knowing if it's the right fit for them, which is incredibly valuable before investing in a full degree program."

Arcadia High School student Jonathan Battista Garcia, currently in the Health Science Academy, agrees. "My favorite part of the academy was the field trips to the hospital where we explored different fields. One of my classmates visited the E.R. and realized they wanted to become an EMT."

### Future Growth

Looking ahead, Western plans to expand academy offerings. By 2025–26, new academies in IT, Education, and Advanced Manufacturing will join existing programs in Health Science/Pre-Nursing, Agri-Business Science Technology, Fire/EMR, Automotive, and College Transfer.

"I think the next 5-10 years will see a 4K-11 + Western model, where students earn the first year of their associate degree while still in high school," says Mezera.

As Western continues to strengthen partnerships, high school academies serve as a powerful bridge between high school, higher education, and the workforce—helping students explore careers while strengthening local communities.



*Hear from administrators, teachers, and students about their high school academy experiences.*

# Building a Career with Smarts, Strategy, and Heart



**“I KNEW WESTERN WAS EXACTLY WHAT I NEEDED. IT WASN’T ABOUT BEING LOCAL OR AFFORDABLE; IT WAS ABOUT FINDING A PLACE THAT ALIGNED WITH MY GOALS AND GAVE ME THE TOOLS TO SUCCEED.”**

*—Alyssa Boardman*

BY LAURI HOFF | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN AND SUBMITTED

For Alyssa Boardman, a career in human resources is about creating connections and solving problems. Human resources is also about creating spaces where teams thrive, individuals feel valued, and meaningful collaboration drives success. As an HR coordinator at Michaels Energy, she combines strategic thinking with a people-first mindset while balancing organizational goals with the needs of employees. Her path to a fulfilling career began with a bold decision and the opportunities she found at Western Technical College.

Her confidence in choosing Western quickly proved well-founded. Early in her time at Western, Boardman discovered her interest in HR when she just happened to spot a hallway flyer. She thought, “I love working with people and solving problems, and HR brings those things together.” Once she joined the program, she wanted to get the most out of her education and immersed herself in opportunities to join, grow, and lead. Encouraged by her instructors, especially Dan Rooney, she took on leadership roles that expanded her skills and confidence.

**“IT WASN’T JUST ABOUT ACADEMICS—IT WAS ABOUT CONFIDENCE, GROWTH, AND OPPORTUNITY. IT TAUGHT ME TO TRUST MY INSTINCTS AND TAKE RISKS, AND THAT’S MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE.”**

She was nominated for and then selected as Western’s Student Ambassador. As Ambassador, she represented the college to prospective students by sharing her story and inspiring others to see the value of a technical education in general, and a Western education in particular.

As president of Phi Theta Kappa, the international honor society for two-year colleges, she spearheaded impactful projects like a Hmong New Year celebration and career exploration events for local eighth-graders. “These experiences taught me how to lead, communicate effectively, and bring people together to achieve a goal,” she reflects. “They gave me the foundation for how I approach HR today: focusing on connection, collaboration, and empowering others.”

Balancing academics, leadership roles, and part-time jobs wasn’t easy, but Boardman credits Western’s supportive environment for helping her succeed. “I worked multiple jobs, and still managed a full course load,” she recalls. “It was tough, but Western gave me the tools to balance it all; the scholarships I was awarded helped as well. The instructors brought real-world experience to the classroom and genuinely cared about preparing us for success.”

Graduating from Western in 2018, Boardman transferred to UW-Stout to complete her bachelor’s degree in management with an emphasis in human resources. Western made sure she had the proper credits to transfer; the strong foundation she built at Western carried her through challenging upper-level classes and into her career. “Western wasn’t just a steppingstone—it was a launchpad,” she says. “It gave me the skills, confidence, and focus to succeed both in school and in a career I love.”

Today, Boardman thrives in her role at Michaels Energy, a La Crosse-based consulting firm focused on energy efficiency. Her work spans recruiting, benefits administration, employee engagement, and event planning. “One day, I’m onboarding new hires; the next, I’m planning company events or supporting employees through professional challenges,” she states. “It’s all about creating an environment where people feel valued and connected.”

Boardman’s approach to HR reflects her belief that strong relationships are key to successes. “HR isn’t just about policies—it’s about strategy and empathy,” she explains. “When you align people’s needs with organizational goals, the results

are incredible. It’s about building trust, solving problems, and making sure every voice is heard.” Her time at Michaels has shown her how impactful a thoughtful, collaborative HR approach can be. By creating environments where people feel supported and connected, Boardman is shaping workplaces that thrive—not just in productivity but in culture and morale.

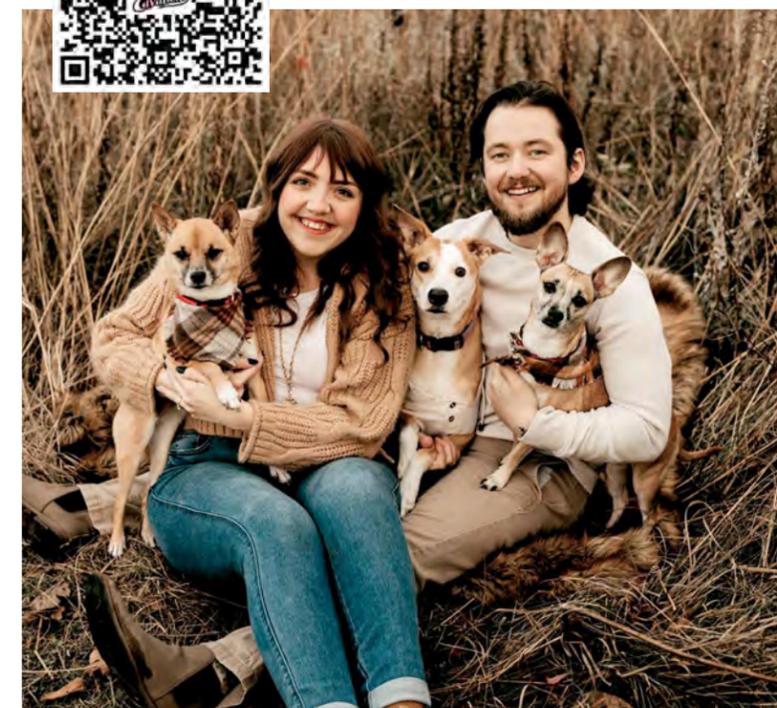
Looking back, Boardman is proud of her decision to attend Western and the path it set her on. “Western helped me discover what I was capable of,” she says. “It wasn’t just about academics—it was about confidence, growth, and opportunity. It taught me to trust my instincts and take risks, and that’s made all the difference.”

Her advice to others? “Trust yourself and the path that feels right, even if it’s not what others expect. Western gave me the confidence to grow and take on challenges I never imagined. Say yes to opportunities, even if they scare you—that’s where the momentum starts.”

From her first bold choice to attend Western to her current role shaping modern workplaces, Alyssa Boardman’s story is a testament to the power of intention, hard work, and a leadership style that puts people first. Her journey proves that success isn’t about fitting into a mold—it’s about building something better, with purpose, strategy, and heart.



Learn more about Alyssa's story here!



# ADVERSITY to Advocacy



Western Student Government President Manny Chavez standing in front of the United States Capitol in Washington, D.C.

BY ERIC JACOBSON | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN AND MARGY KROGMAN

If you have a chance to speak with Western student Manny Chavez, it is quite clear he is determined to fulfill his dream of becoming a police officer. But the Criminal Justice student in his second year in the program has a unique perspective on the motivation for his dream.

Chavez's grandparents legally immigrated to the United States from Mexico. Growing up, his father would often share stories of police brutality he and his parents had witnessed or endured. Over time, his family grew to distrust the police. Chavez also grew up alongside the George Floyd protests in Minneapolis, which made him think deeply about the role he wanted to play in society.

"I'm fascinated with criminal justice because of the Black Lives Matter movement," he says. "I saw that there was a huge decrease in people wanting to go into that field. My ultimate reason was I wanted people to know that there are good people in those roles."

## MILWAUKEE ROOTS

Chavez's childhood was spent moving often. In the sixth grade, his stepmom and father moved to Westby. Coming from Milwaukee, however, was an adjustment.

"The schools were getting more violent (for me in Milwaukee)," says Chavez. "I got into a ton of fights, and I progressively turned into a fighter because I just kept getting beat up. I went to Westby, and I ended up becoming the worst kid."

At first, he was in the principal's office often, mostly due to picking fights with other students. Over time, however, he realized that students in Westby didn't pick fights like in other schools. After spending time at the counselor's office, he realized his stubbornness and personality needed to change.



"I went from sixth grade having C's or nearly failing in some of the classes, to C's and B's in seventh and eighth grades, to freshman year when I reached high honors," he says.

## JOURNEY TO WESTERN

Chavez just happened to graduate in 2020—the year of the COVID pandemic. There was no celebration that year, no outlet to recognize his big accomplishment and turnaround. Like so many other students at Western, Chavez began his higher educational journey elsewhere. When he started college at UW-Milwaukee, masking was required in all public places, making it difficult to make new friends for the self-described eccentric personality.

"All of my classes were online, but I was still on campus," Chavez says. "I was just sitting in a dorm room by myself. I ended up withdrawing from everyone."

Manny eventually found himself back in the region. Following a stint in the workforce, he realized his calling was to help others. He enrolled in Western's Criminal Justice program, with goals of joining the Law Enforcement Academy. Eventually, he hopes to work in law enforcement, with a specific emphasis on crime analytics.

## A STUDENT ADVOCATE

Besides his passion for helping others, he has a bigger goal in mind: politics. After enrolling at Western, he became interested in getting involved with Western's Student Government team. He eventually became the Student Government President—leading general

assembly meetings, traveling to Madison, and being an advocate for all students on campus. He sees these passions for law enforcement and politics working hand in hand in his future, with goals of working in public service beyond his career in policing.

"We all want to live in a neighborhood where we can appreciate it and feel safe," says Chavez. "But are we engaging in proactive measures to help prevent crime? It's a systemic issue that we have, and there are multiple levels that we need to tackle in order to solve that problem."

As part of his student government role, Chavez also recently had the chance to visit Washington D.C. with a delegation from Western attending the National Legislative Summit put on by the Association of Community College Trustees. There, he had the chance to share his story with area legislators, helping advocate for Pell Grants, SNAP access, and more funding for career and technical education.

"It was amazing, and I think it just painted the picture for me that this is the political process," says Chavez. "You have to work with people that you might not see eye to eye with. You have to be able to negotiate."

It is very clear Manny has a bright future, full of caring for others—whether that's through policing, politics, or something else entirely. He adds that he wanted to be president of the United States growing up. Given his determination and thought-provoking mind, he just might do it.

# 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](http://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
- Farm Business Production Management
- 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
- IT-Data & Analytics Specialist
- 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
- Educational Assistant
- Foundations of Teacher Education
- Human Services Associate

### HEALTH SCIENCES

- 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
- Respiratory Therapy
- Surgical Technology

### UNIVERSITY TRANSFER – LIBERAL ARTS

- Associate of Arts
- Associate of Science

### PUBLIC SAFETY

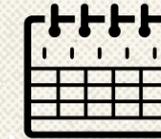
- Criminal Justice
- Criminal Justice – Law Enforcement 720 Academy
- Emergency Medical Technician – Advanced
- Emergency Medical Technician – Basic
- Emergency Medical Technician – Paramedic
- Fire Protection Technician
- Paramedic Technician

### 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 – Network Technician
- IT – Web & Software Developer
- 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 20** Summer 2025 New Student Registration Begins
- May 5** Summer Term Begins
- May 12** Fall 2025 New Student Registration Begins
- September 2** Fall Term Begins
- November 13** Spring 2026 New Student Registration Begins
- January 12** Spring Term Begins

## New Dental Credential with a Strange Name and Big Opportunities

Western's Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary (EFDA) program may have a complex name, but its purpose is simple: to give dental assistants the skills to take on more responsibilities in patient care.

Over 8–10 weeks, EFDA participants learn to place and finish restorations, take impressions, apply sealants, and more—all under a dentist's supervision. The program is designed for working professionals, with weekend and evening classes and 30 clinical experiences completed at their workplace or an approved dental office.



By adding these skills, EFDA-certified professionals help streamline dental procedures and improve patient care.

Scan the QR code to read about a recent participant's experience, or get full details at [www.westerntc.edu/EFDA](http://www.westerntc.edu/EFDA).

## 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](http://www.westerntc.edu/university-transfer).



For detailed information about programs and offerings:  
[www.westerntc.edu](http://www.westerntc.edu)



Willms brings the art of yoga and holistic wellness to Western, helping students and colleagues find balance and connection.

# FINDING PURPOSE

## in the Unplanned

BY LAURI HOFF  
PHOTO BY JAYME HANSEN AND SUBMITTED

Chelsey Willms's journey to teaching was anything but conventional. As a veteran, mother, and advocate, she never set out with a specific plan to become an educator—but life had its own way of guiding her there. Looking back, every twist and turn in her path helped shape her philosophy, resilience, and deeply held belief in the power of education. "I never purposely pursued a career path," she laughs. "It felt almost like happenstance led me to where I needed to be."

This 'happenstance' has led to a career that integrates all facets of her experiences—military service, special education, social work, and psychology—into a position where she assists students in navigating their own uncertain journeys. As an instructor at Western Technical College, Willms teaches in Project Proven, a program that supports justice-impacted individuals while guiding students through GED and HSED orientations. Her work encompasses everything from academic coaching to helping students build confidence and purpose in their education.

### FROM STUDENT TO EDUCATOR: THE POWER OF EXPERIENCE

Willms's relationship with Western began long before she became an instructor. She was once a student there herself, unsure of her future and struggling to find her place. "I always wanted to be a teacher, but I didn't think I was smart enough to go to a university," she recalls with a furrowed brow. After facing difficulties in school and receiving what she considered a low ACT score, she initially viewed Western as her only option rather than her first choice. "I just thought, 'the not-as-smart kids go to Western,'" she says, shaking her head at her younger self. "But I was very wrong. Western provided me with the hands-on experience and authentic scenarios that my university peers truly envied."

After enlisting and serving in the Army, Willms returned to Western, initially pursuing a degree in criminal justice. "A huge incentive for joining the military was the educational benefits," she explains. "When I got out, I was a single mother and believed education was my ticket to stability for my son and I." As she gained experience in the field, she realized she didn't envision herself in law enforcement. "When I had to conduct arrest scenarios, I remember saying, 'Sir, will you please put your hands behind your back?' And my instructor stared at me as if to say, 'You don't say please! That was the moment I knew this wasn't for me.'"

Her educational pathway took a new turn when she joined AmeriCorps and worked in the Green Bay Public Schools. That experience led her into K-12 education, where she served as a special education teacher across elementary, middle, and high schools. "Fast forward to my pursuit of a master's while working in the K-12 department at Western in 2016; I found myself curious to gain experience in K-12 to truly understand what was shaping students before they entered higher education," she says. "I took a position as a teacher assistant in the La Crosse School District, and midway through the year, a limited-term special education teaching position opened. I enrolled at Viterbo to obtain my post-baccalaureate teacher licensure while officially becoming a teacher. My seemingly random path of happenstance led me to a dream that once seemed impossible."

### TEACHING WITH COMPASSION AND CURIOSITY

Now, as an instructor at Western, Willms draws upon her wide experiences to guide students who may also be searching for their own paths. Her classroom is anything but traditional. "I'm a strong believer in advocacy and understanding the complexity of being human," she explains. "I want my students to feel seen and to

understand that their past does not define their future."

Her approach to teaching challenges traditional norms. She embraces difficult conversations and encourages students to explore perspectives they may not have



Willms, a Western instructor and Army veteran, during the I Am Not Invisible photo shoot. Digital Media students helped organize and photograph the event in conjunction with the La Crosse County Veteran Services Department.

previously considered. In her Introduction to Psychology class, she begins with an exercise that invites students to confront their own biases. She shows them a photo of herself with her children and asks them to guess their relationship. The responses often reveal unconscious assumptions, and rather than reprimanding them, Willms uses this as a moment for reflection and growth. "I want my classroom to be a space where students feel safe enough to be honest and challenge their own perspectives," she says. "Because real learning occurs when we allow ourselves to be uncomfortable."

For Willms, education encompasses more than merely mastering skills; it involves

learning through both successes and failures. "I believe success is about setting a goal and achieving it," she explains. "However, for some individuals, success might be derived from the lessons learned through failure. I adhere to this truism: 'If you learned a lesson, it's never a loss.'"

### A FULL-CIRCLE MOMENT

Despite the challenges of working with students facing systemic barriers, Willms finds deep fulfillment in her role. Every struggle and experience—whether in the military, in K-12 classrooms, or in her own personal life—has uniquely prepared her to serve in this capacity and this place. "When I left Western, I knew I wanted to find my way back," she shares. "I believe in Western's mission and vision to its core, especially after achieving my master's degree and understanding the history of technical colleges compared to universities. Western aligns with my values and integrity."

This knowledge of Western, along with a chance encounter with a former colleague, inspired her to apply for her current role. "I ran into a former employee and asked how everyone was doing at Western. He mentioned that a position was open and encouraged me to apply. When I looked at the openings, I found the vacancy for the Academic Intervention Instructor. The requirements included at least five years of teaching experience—I had just entered my sixth year. I felt compelled to apply, and the rest is history."

She reflects on the journey that brought her here, the unexpected opportunities that shaped her path, and the students whose lives she now has the privilege of influencing. "It's funny," she muses. "I never planned for any of this. But somehow, I ended up exactly where I was meant to be."

Hear more from Chelsey herself!





# The Future of ADVANCED MANUFACTURING

BY ERIC JACOBSON | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN AND SUBMITTED

Western and the Ronald and Joyce Wanek Foundation announced a transformative partnership to establish the Wanek Center of Innovation at a ceremony last September, a cutting-edge facility dedicated to advanced manufacturing education. Set to open this August, the center aims to position western Wisconsin as a leader in workforce training and economic growth.

The new facility will replace Western's existing Business Education building on the La Crosse campus, which will be renovated to house state-of-the-art technology in robotics, automation, and manufacturing. The center will offer associate degrees, diploma programs, and credit courses in fields such as Cyber Security, Data Analytics, Mechatronics, and Electromechanical Technology. In total, the center is expected to serve more than 1,000 students annually through academic programs, K-12 partnerships, and workforce training initiatives.

"The Wanek Center of Innovation is designed to enhance K-12 pathways, strengthen incumbent worker training, and expand automation technologies in our traditional credit programs," says Roger Stanford, President of Western Technical College. "This strategic investment ensures that more individuals are guided toward high-quality manufacturing careers, while those already in the field gain the skills needed to thrive. We are deeply grateful to the Ronald and Joyce Wanek Foundation for their generosity and shared vision."

The collaboration between Western and the Wanek Foundation has been instrumental in advancing educational opportunities and workforce development in the region. Previous initiatives include the Ashley Automation Lab, which expanded Western's robotics program, and dual-credit agreements through the Mobile Skills Laboratory. In 2022, the partnership deepened with the dedication of the Joyce Wanek Center

for Art and Design, as well as the development of Mechatronic & Robotic Engineering Technology programs.

Josh Gamer, Associate Vice President of Workforce Partnerships and Innovation, emphasized the long-term impact of the partnership. "The Wanek Center of Innovation is the culmination of years of collaboration aimed to best serve our manufacturing sector. We work closely with industry leaders and educational institutions to adapt to rapidly evolving technologies. This center allows us to enhance outreach and training, create new partnerships, and provide students with access to cutting-edge labs and equipment."

A key focus of the center is developing a strong K-12 pipeline to ensure students get early exposure to great career options they may not have otherwise considered. The Whitehall Regional Emerging Technology Laboratory, an existing partnership between Western and the Wanek Foundation, already provides students

**"THE WANEK CENTER OF INNOVATION WILL ENHANCE K-12 PATHWAYS, STRENGTHEN INCUMBENT WORKER TRAINING, AND EXPAND AUTOMATION TECHNOLOGIES IN OUR TRADITIONAL CREDIT PROGRAMS."**

*Roger Stanford,  
President of Western  
Technical College.*

with hands-on experience in advanced technology, with credits transferable to technical colleges. Additionally, education centers at institutions like Luther High School offer competency-based learning experiences that prepare students for the modern workforce.

Ron Wanek, Founder and Chairman of Ashley Furniture Industries, underscored the significance of the new center. "We are incredibly proud to partner with Western Technical College to advance our shared mission of fostering educational excellence through K-20 partnerships and industry collaboration. The Wanek Center of Innovation represents a landmark achievement in preparing students for future careers."

As Western and the Wanek Foundation continue their commitment to education and workforce development, the Wanek Center of Innovation will be the future of advanced manufacturing in western Wisconsin.

## HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

The Wanek Center of Innovation is more than just a facility—it's a launchpad for the next generation of skilled professionals in advanced manufacturing. Western is developing opportunities to partner with local businesses to support students with scholarships, provide cutting-edge technology, and create opportunities for students to gain hands-on experience in high-demand fields.

To be a part of shaping the future workforce, contact Western Foundation Executive Director Jacquelyn Schreiner at [schreinerj@westerntc.edu](mailto:schreinerj@westerntc.edu) to learn more.



## Western receives glowing report on reaccreditation

Western received full reaccreditation from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) last fall, extending its official status through 2034–35.

The HLC conducted an Assurance Review of Western last fall to determine whether the college continued to meet the criteria for accreditation. This work included creating an assurance argument and evidence file. The assurance argument is a written report where Western explains and confirms how it meets HLC accreditation over five criteria, such as teaching and learning. Following a review of the report, the HLC conducted a site visit last October, where the HLC team met with students, faculty, and leadership.

The final report from the HLC was a clean review, meaning no notations, sanctions, or monitoring requirements moving forward.

“Western’s reaccreditation reaffirms the exceptional quality of education and support we provide for every student, every day,” says Western President Roger Stanford. “This is a proud moment for all of us and a reminder of the difference we make in the lives of those we serve.”



## NEW XR LAB PROVIDES REALISTIC HEALTHCARE TRAINING

Western hosted a ribbon cutting for its new Extended Reality (XR) Lab space at a virtual ribbon cutting event last fall.

The lab features high-fidelity, mixed reality, virtual reality, and Standardized Patient Simulations through the use of advanced Extended Reality technology. These tools allow students to experience real-world scenarios in a safe, controlled environment, preparing them for the demands of healthcare practice. The programs utilizing this lab space include Nursing, EMS, Respiratory Therapy, Dental Assistant, and Surgical Technology.

“The opening of Western’s Health and Public Safety Extended Reality lab marks a transformative step in how we prepare students for real-world healthcare and public safety challenges,” says Jamie Howell, Simulation Specialist at Western. “This lab allows us to place students in high-pressure environments that would be difficult—or impossible—to replicate in a traditional clinical or field setting. By utilizing this form of technology, we’re able to simulate complex scenarios, from emergency response to critical care, giving our students the chance to practice essential skills in a safe and immersive way.”

In lieu of a traditional ribbon cutting, Western’s Health and Public Safety Dean Kevin Dean used the XR equipment to host a virtual ribbon cutting on the monitors inside the lab space.



## New Western AVP to focus on AI and Workforce

Western announced earlier this year the promotion of Josh Gamer, Ed D., to Associate Vice President of Workforce Partnerships and Innovation.

The new role will focus on advancing Western’s Artificial Intelligence (AI) enterprise strategy and fostering strong workforce partnerships to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving economy. This position will lead efforts to integrate AI strategies across the college, enhance classroom and student

experiences, and develop innovative workforce solutions through collaborative partnerships.

“These updates position Western to better respond to regional and industry workforce needs while continuing to deliver an exceptional student experience,” says Western President Roger Stanford. “By setting our own enterprise strategy, this not only helps Western, it allows us to grow and lead in the adoption of artificial intelligence and that will help us serve the entire district as we explore and advance this technology.”

Gamer has extensive leadership experience at Western. Prior to this role, he served as a Supervisory Management Instructor, Associate Dean of Business, interim Vice President of Academics, and most recently, Dean of the Integrated Technology Division. He earned an associate degree in Supervisory Management from Minnesota State College Southeast, a bachelor’s in Business from St. Mary’s University, an MBA from Viterbo University, and a Doctor of Education from UW-Stout.

“I am excited to serve as a bridge between industry and academics; helping to increase agility, responsiveness, and innovation as we continue to serve our communities,” he says.

## Transcripted Credit saved local high school students roughly \$3.1 million

A report from Western’s K-12 Relations department showed Transcripted Credit saved local students roughly \$3.1 million in 2023–24, helping students earn college credit at no cost.

The latest report showed the number of students served from Transcripted Credit rose from 5,001, to 5,027 in 2022–23. This has doubled from 2017–18. In total, area students and school districts saved \$3,092,809 through Transcripted Credit at Western last year. And 19,905 credits were awarded to area students from 58 Western courses, with 32 school districts participating. Area high schools cover this cost.

“As questions about college affordability continue to increase, Transcripted Credit continues to grow as a cost-saving option for students,” says Isaac Mezera, K-12 Partnerships Manager at Western.



“By partnering with schools in our district, we provide a seamless transition from high school to post-secondary opportunities, equipping students with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in their future endeavors.”

Transcripted Credit is a program where high school teachers in area districts

are certified to teach courses based on educational credentials, professional experiences, and yearly training with Western faculty. Once a student passes a qualifying course, the grade is placed on the student’s Western transcript, earning college credit for free.



# Innovative Approaches to Workforce Training

BY JULIE LEMON | PHOTOS BY JAYME HANSEN

## Emerging Leaders

In today's tight labor market, the importance of developing internal talent is more pronounced than ever. "We see a common theme," says Martin. "Organizations often promote their best employees—individuals who have proven themselves in their job. But what organizations don't consider is that often the best workers have had little to no experience leading a team, managing a production schedule, or communicating with upper management and customers." The BIS Emerging Leaders program addresses this gap and ensures when employees step up to lead, they're ready to inspire and drive success.

As industries continue to face labor shortages, the demand for skilled workers intensifies. Recognizing this critical need, Western's Business and Industry Services (BIS) is stepping up, providing training that transforms new recruits into skilled professionals and seasoned veterans into future leaders.

## Tailored Solutions

Western's BIS staff understand that each company has unique challenges, which is why the college offers customized training solutions from soft skill development to technical training. "By closely analyzing the needs within different industries, we create targeted programs that not only fill skills gaps but align with companies' long-term goals," explains Angie Martin, Director of BIS.

The results of these training programs speak volumes. BIS's collaboration with Gundersen Health System (transitioning to Emplify Health by Gundersen) Emergency Services has significantly enhanced the skills of EMTs and paramedics, leading to improved emergency response times. "Our staff are now equipped to provide immediate life-saving care as Paramedics," says Clinical Supervisor Miranda Schmidt. "This program has inspired many of our current staff to advance their skill set, and it's an excellent recruitment tool for EMTs who are excited to get experience while furthering their education."

Above photo: Employees from several regional companies participate in a PLC class on Western's La Crosse campus.

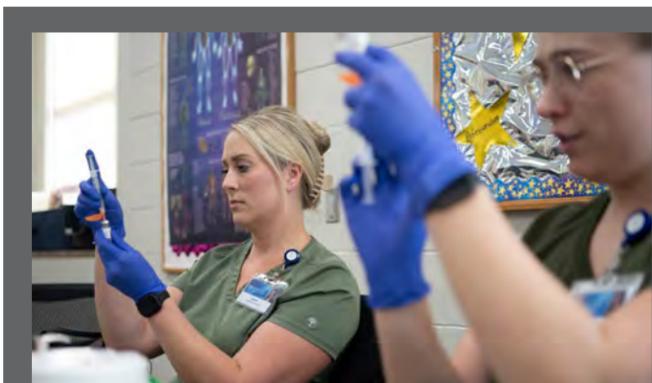
## Looking to the Future

With the upcoming Wanek Center of Innovation (highlighted in this magazine), BIS is set to expand its training capabilities, particularly in Artificial Intelligence and automation. This new initiative will prepare the workforce for future technological advancements, keeping local industries competitive and cutting-edge.

Additionally, BIS is expanding the apprenticeship model beyond traditional careers like plumbing and electrician. The earn-while-you-learn model has

become increasingly popular among employers and is extending into sectors like IT, healthcare, and teacher education, reflecting the changing needs of the workforce. "Within our region, hospitals and care facilities are giving opportunities for those in entry-level and non-patient care jobs to attend credit programs in fields like nursing assistant, medical assistant, or other advanced function certificates," explains Martin.

Find out more about the offerings described here as well as other available options at [www.westerntc.edu/BIS](http://www.westerntc.edu/BIS) or by contacting the BIS staff at 608-785-9232 or [bis@westerntc.edu](mailto:bis@westerntc.edu).



Western is partnering with Mayo Clinic Health System to provide specialized training for Patient Care Technicians aspiring to advance as Medical Assistants. This unique healthcare apprenticeship model offers professional development opportunities for employees, fills crucial healthcare positions, and ultimately enhances patient care.

In the above photo, participants are learning to draw up medications, a vital skill in their journey to becoming Medical Assistants.



Scan the QR code for testimonials from Mayo Clinic Health System leaders and participants sharing their experiences and the impact.



# ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

McKenly Moua, a Western graduate and now an IT Network & Security Specialist at Citizens State Bank in La Crosse, turned his curiosity about technology into a thriving career. Just across the street from his alma mater in La Crosse, he's using the hands-on skills he gained at Western to navigate the ever-evolving world of IT. We caught up with Moua to learn more about his journey, his advice for future IT students, and the tech gadget he'd love to invent.

## What do you enjoy most about working in IT?

What I enjoy most is that every day is different—no two days look the same. The variety of tickets and the level of complexity keep things interesting. I also love learning about new technological advancements and seeing how they impact the industry.

## How did Western prepare you for the real-world challenges of working in IT?

Western gave me hands-on experience, which helped me truly understand what it's like to work in different IT environments. While reading and theory were part of the curriculum, most of our time was spent applying what we learned—working with critical computer components and diverse programming languages. Western also introduced us to online tools for job and internship opportunities, making the transition to the workforce much smoother.

## ADVICE & LOOKING AHEAD

### What advice would you give to students considering an IT degree at Western?

I'd encourage students to go for it! Western offers more tools, hands-on experience, and support than anyone could ask for. The learning environment is comfortable and enjoyable, and the instructors and staff are always willing to help with any questions.

### Where do you envision yourself in five years?

In five years, I aspire to take on a leadership role in my IT department. I want to mentor new IT professionals and give them the tools they need to succeed professionally and personally.

### If you could create your ideal tech gadget or software, what would it be and why?

My dream tech gadget would be a line of baby products that monitor temperatures in real time—bath water, food, body temperature, and more. The data would be instantly available on an app, providing immediate temperature readings rather than relying on thermal tape. This would help parents ensure their baby's comfort and safety with just a quick glance at their phone.

## BACKGROUND & EDUCATION

### What initially sparked your interest in IT, and how did you choose to pursue it at Western?

My interest in IT began when I wanted to learn more about how computers and the internet function. We use them every day without fully understanding how data is transmitted worldwide. I chose to pursue my education at Western because it was affordable, close to home, and provided valuable hands-on learning experiences. Here, I earned my IT-Network Technician degree.

### Were there any instructors, courses, or experiences at Western that had a big impact on you?

Cindy Prindle made a huge impact on my experience at Western. She was incredibly supportive and always took the time to answer any questions or concerns we had. She responded quickly to emails and made me feel heard, which was important during my time as a student.

## TRANSITION TO WORK

### How did you land your job at the bank?

I landed my job at the bank simply by applying. Western helped by giving me the tools and experience I needed to feel confident in my application. The foundational knowledge I gained, especially in areas like Windows Server Administration, transferred smoothly to my job. At first, working with those tools was intimidating, but the coursework at Western gave me the knowledge and experience to handle them effectively.

### What does a typical day look like for you in your IT role at Citizens?

My day starts with reviewing the morning logs to check for any anomalies. Then, I go through our ticketing system to see if there are any urgent requests from that morning. After that, I check my email and read daily tech news to stay informed about industry trends and security updates. The rest of my day is spent managing various projects that require timely attention while also handling helpdesk tickets as they come in.

# 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](http://westerntc.edu/university-transfer)

