

Western  
Technical College

# IMPACT

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



*Chalondra, Western Nursing student*



# Welcome to IMPACT



Greetings, and welcome to Western Technical College's first edition of *IMPACT*. It has been nearly a decade since we last produced a district-wide piece highlighting our college, but we feel now is the perfect time to share the stories of Western co-workers and students.

We chose the title of this publication to reflect the impact Western has on its surrounding communities. Throughout its 100+ year history, Western has been providing technical and career education to the region. Today, we offer over 100 programs, with nearly 94 percent of graduates employed after graduation. Programs like the Internet of Things Integration Specialist or Mechatronic & Robotic Engineering Technology

work with some of the most cutting-edge technology available. Our health care students—from nursing, surgical technology, phlebotomy, or respiratory therapist—are in high demand at our local hospitals. Our new IT-Cybersecurity and Network Administration program is providing local businesses the ability to better protect their data and software. These are just a sample of the many industries we cover.

Western continues to play a vital role in the economy of our region. We serve an average of 200 businesses and organizations annually, while receiving over \$2.8 million as part of Workforce Grants. In total, over 9,000 individuals are served by Western in a year. Western is also connected to our local high schools through dual credit opportunities, saving our local students nearly \$2 million last year alone. With workforce shortages continuing, we are at the forefront of training the next generation of workers.

We are excited for this edition of *IMPACT*. In this issue, you will read about Western's own Garrett Denning, who is using his position at Western to advocate for LGBTQ and neurodivergent communities. You will also hear from Western's past president Lee Rasch, and the work he has done since leaving Western in 2017. There are also features from Western students both past and current, and the great work they are doing in our community. I'm excited to share these stories with you.

Sincerely,

**Roger Stanford**  
President, Western Technical College

## IMPACT | Spring 2023

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

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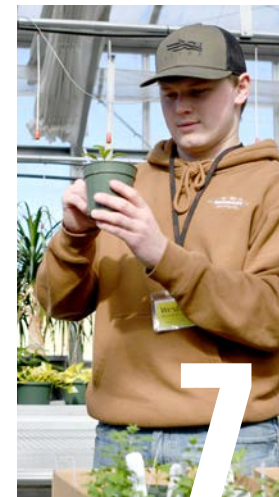
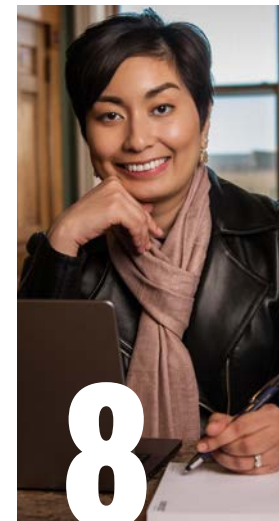
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Western Technical College is one of 16 technical colleges that make up the Wisconsin Technical College System. Western is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association. Western is also a member of the American Association 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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# Western NEWS

## Western, UWL sign transfer agreements

Officials with Western and UW-La Crosse formally signed a number of transfer agreements for students to move seamlessly from an associate degree to a bachelor's.

Psychology, Exercise and Sport Science (ESS): Exercise Science Pre-Professional Track, and Exercise and Sport Science (ESS): Exercise Science Fitness Track bachelor's degree programs, as well as several programs in UWL's College of Business Administration.

**“These agreements open doors for more people by making bachelor's degrees more attainable. This is a big win for the community.”**

*Western President, Roger Stanford*

“UWL has an outstanding relationship with Western, and we are always collaborating on ways to offer students in our state and region more flexible options for completing college degrees,” said UWL Chancellor Joe Gow. “These two programs do just that, and they address future state workforce needs as well. We're very grateful to our colleagues at Western for partnering with us on these agreements.”

“This is a tremendous day for education in the region,” said Western President Roger Stanford. “Providing more transfer opportunities for our students is critical, and UWL is a terrific partner. These agreements open doors for more people by making bachelor's degrees more attainable. This is a big win for the community.”

The agreements stem from Western's new Associate of Arts program, which launched in 2022 after approval by the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents. Signed agreements include admission to UWL's



## Western's Juan Jimenez recognized

Western's Juan Jimenez is one of Wisconsin's 46 most influential Latino leaders, according to Madison 365, a nonprofit online news source based in Madison.

Juan serves as the associate dean of Health and Public Safety, a position he took on earlier this year. Prior to his current role, Juan held the same position in the General Studies division since 2017. He also volunteers in his community by serving as President of the District of La Crosse School Board. He spent several years as a math educator in rural Wisconsin, and continues to serve on several educational, philanthropic, and volunteer organizations.

“It is hard to put into words the feelings I had when I was notified of this recognition. It is a humbling experience, especially noticing the other individuals who were recognized in our state,” said Juan. “My goal has always been to support my community in any way possible, and I look forward to continuing that work in the La Crosse area.”

## Western achieves goal for Community-Based Learning

Western implemented Community-Based Learning (CBL) in 100 percent of its associate degree and technical degree programs, a key component of its strategic plan, Experience 2025.

CBL is an approach designed to infuse community-based projects into academic programs. Examples include Western's computer training classes, Suits for Success, and community welding workshops.

“At the core of our mission, Western is about changing lives and growing our communities,” said President Roger Stanford. “Not only is CBL helping our community by giving back, but it also instills civic responsibility in our students while they learn technical skills.”



**Learn more about Community-Based Learning here!**



**“At the core of our mission, Western is about changing lives and growing our communities.”**

*Western President, Roger Stanford*



## Transcribed Credit saved local students roughly \$2.5 million in 2021-22

A report from Western's K-12 Relations department showed Transcribed Credit saved local students roughly \$2.5 million in 2021-22, a jump of approximately \$700,000 from the year prior.

The report shows the number of students served through Transcribed Credit rose from 3,608 in 2020-21, to 4,322 in 2021-22. This total has nearly doubled since 2017-18, when 2,357 area students were served. In total, area students and school districts saved \$2,511,584.10 through Transcribed Credit at Western last year, a sharp increase from \$1,877,182.90 the year prior. In total, 29 schools in and around

Western's district participated in the program, with over 16,743 credits awarded.

“As the cost of education continues to increase, we see more people taking advantage of these opportunities in high school,” said Tyler Ludeking, K-12 partnerships specialist at Western. “This program continues to be about building strong relationships with our K-12 partners, and it only continues to grow.”

Transcribed Credit is a growing program where high school teachers are certified to teach courses based on educational credentials, professional experiences, and yearly training

with Western faculty. Once the student passes a qualifying course, the grade is placed on the student's Western transcript, earning college credit for free.

**“This program continues to be about building strong relationships with our K-12 partners, and it only continues to grow.”**

*Tyler Ludeking, K-12 partnerships specialist*





# Meet Western's Student Ambassador Zander Barr

By Eric Jacobson



Zander Barr, of Mauston, has been selected as the 2023–24 Western Technical College Student Ambassador, an official spokesperson for Western and the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS).

As Student Ambassador, Zander will have opportunities to speak to potential students, community leaders, and community groups, 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.

Zander is a Digital Media Production student in his second year of the program. He chose Western because of the program selection, affordability, and proximity to home. He also believes the compassionate and understanding instructors help lead to successful outcomes for all students.

"Western has amazing staff and students," said Zander. "I wanted to surround myself with that positivity to help me push forward in my endeavors. They always want to see you grow and push yourself to success."

Zander is close and active with his family, who serves foster children in the Mauston region. He's open with his struggle balancing family and college coursework, but says Western's instructors have gone above and beyond helping him stay on track.

"I did not think I deserved good grades because I missed class because of personal and family issues," said Zander. "My instructor said he understood and helped me catch up. It was a huge weight off my shoulders. I felt like I could breathe again. I felt like I had someone who I could talk to when things were going wrong."

"Zander really shines when he works with his peers. He naturally lifts them up and encourages them to do their best work," said James Bushman, Digital Media Production instructor who nominated Zander for this honor. "He's a joy to have in class. His positive attitude, infectious personality and contagious smile make the learning environment a better space for everyone."

Zander plans to use this opportunity to further develop his leadership and speaking skills while expressing the importance of career and technical education with key stakeholders. He hopes to use this position to highlight the affordability and accessibility of technical college education throughout the state. Zander will be honored with all 16 student ambassadors of the WTCS at a ceremony in Wisconsin Dells in April.

Zander plans to enter the workforce as a photographer, with hopes of eventually becoming a video producer. He enjoys powerlifting, nature photography, and helping his community.

**"We look forward to a lasting partnership with Compeer. Their support will keep us on the cutting edge of agriculture for years to come."**

*Josh Gamer, Western's dean of Integrated Technology*



## Partnership

By Julie Lemon

It's not uncommon for Western to form partnerships with local businesses to ensure our students get the best learning experience on the latest technology. But it is uncommon for a financial institution to support both students and technology for a particular industry.

Compeer Financial is a member-owned, Farm Credit cooperative that serves and supports agriculture and rural communities in Illinois, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. The company regularly collaborates with organizations that are also dedicated to agriculture and rural America. And, recently, that collaboration included support for Western by way of a \$50,000 grant through Compeer's Agriculture and Rural Initiative.

The funding helps Western's agriculture and horticulture programs purchase simulator equipment for the plant science and agronomy classes as well as expanding hydroponic systems to give the students more opportunities to learn about growing plants without soil. "Compeer's support of technical colleges through these grants comes at just the right time, especially here at Western," said Dona Goede, instructor for the Agri-Business Science Technology program at Western. "All of our agricultural programs are evolving as the industry changes. This grant not only helps us acquire the technology we need in the classroom to teach, but it also helps us get the word out about the first-rate educational opportunities we have right here in the region."

## helps Agriculture program and students

In addition to the grant, Compeer provided a total of \$12,500 in scholarship funds, which creates two \$1,250 scholarships for agriculture students each year for five years. This financial support, administered through Western's Foundation, encourages students to pursue this important career and exposes them to experiences that can take a family farm to the next level.

"Receiving this scholarship has helped by letting me continue my education in the agricultural field to better my understanding," said Dustin Heitkamp, Agri-business Science Technology student and recent scholarship recipient.

"The future of agriculture and our client's farms rely on a strong, vibrant, and robust agricultural workforce, and our partners in higher education provide opportunities for young adults to explore and gain hands-on experience in these careers," said Karen Schieler, with Compeer's Agriculture and Rural Initiative. "Our clients list workforce development among their highest concerns, and these grants and scholarships are the first step to improving this challenge for the industry."

While their financial support earned them a place on our donor wall, it's Compeer's passion for promoting and serving rural America that earned Western's respect and partnership. They go beyond providing funding by participating in conversations that extend outside their service area, offering formal and informal insight on topics pertinent to many industries, including dairy, swine, grain, and renewable energy.



Mai Kamolchanok Yingneuk is a 2010 graduate of Western's Graphic Design program, and in 2023, she's still a key member of Western's Graphic Design Academic Advisory Committee. Sandwiched between those two facts is a wonderful story about finding your true self and following your dreams, even if it's not the easiest path.



Lucky  
with

Purpose

By Lauri Hoff

Mai is from Bangkok, Thailand, one of the largest cities in the world. Bangkok is a highly populated, competitive, bustling, fast-paced, and chaotic place; it's also brightly beautiful with elegant architecture and sublime religious shrines. Mai first came to the United States in 2006 as an exchange student and spent her senior year of high school in Whitehall, Wisconsin—a place more strikingly different from home is hard to find. A true clash of cultures followed, and surprisingly, or maybe not, Wisconsin was the one that captured Mai's imagination and heart. She loved Whitehall and became an essential part of an extended and loving host family with many close friends. Mai didn't know it yet, but she would end up marrying a charming boy from Whitehall; she is currently in her 12th year of a wonderful marriage.

After Whitehall's high school graduation, Mai went home to Thailand to explore her interests and start college. She has always loved art, beauty, and creativity. Relatively early in life, the peace and outside-of-time flow she experiences while working creatively proved addictive. From painting, design, photography, and website creation, she could see the exciting career possibilities.

The academic peer pressure in Thailand is intense and laser-focused on math and science, and neither was appealing to her. According to Mai, college in Thailand is too

## "If we are not learning, we are going backward."

Mai Kamolchanok Yingneuk

focused on STEM while holding art and creativity as a hobby. Art and design certainly weren't a respected nor viable course of study. Mai saw this as wrong-headed and approached her life accordingly. She couldn't study art the way she wanted to at home; at 18, she packed her bags and came to America again. Her parents are both retired teachers and are serious about academics. They weren't thrilled with the idea of Mai leaving home for foreign lands again, but they supported their daughter as she decidedly ventured off. Mai notes that since her college years, Thai attitudes toward art and design are enjoying a major upswing in levels of popularity and importance.

So different from La Crosse, Mai was happy to leave the unhealthy climate of competition behind. She did not miss getting up at 5 a.m. and eating breakfast in the car to beat the traffic. She knew she wanted to be back in this uniquely beautiful area! Of course, there is the vast and tedious issue of visas, green cards, voluminous paperwork, sponsorships, and host families. We have no idea just how much work there is to do before the academics

even begin. She explored school options and chose Western for its Graphic Design program. Western's international specialist Max Vang was supportive, organized, necessary, and helpful.

Mai's time at Western was warm and wonderful; she describes it as a "caring family." As an international student learning English, she was self-conscious about her speaking, but she never needed to be. She effortlessly formed collaborative friendships as they learned together.

To Mai's surprise and pleasure, folks noticed and celebrated her creativity here. She took solace in the inspirational instruction. The creative director from a local agency saw Mai's work at Western's Portfolio Review and was impressed. Portfolio Review is a capstone project for graphic designers; the soon-to-be graduating students display and discuss their entire body of work! At the same time, Mai was sadly packing her bags for home when she got a call—"would she like to interview for a creative position at Interact?" She sure did, and she got the job! Mai thought, "now what do I

do?" It's tricky with the work visa. She talked to Max, Interact offered to sponsor her, and her parents said, "go for it!" She didn't want to leave her future husband! After five years in the U.S. with a green card, you are legally a citizen.

Since graduating from Western in 2010, she's been working at Interact, just a few blocks from the Western campus. Interact, headquartered in La Crosse, is a marketing agency specifically for two-year and technical colleges across the nation. She started as a graphic designer, and her role has grown from there—she's been the creative director for eight years already. Mai explains that Interact's founder, Dr. Pam Cox Otto, is a key contributing factor to her career success. Otto's belief in Mai combined with smart support and guidance enabled her growth, "She believed in me before I did, and she changed my life," Mai states.

As an exchange student struggling to learn English under pressure, she's accustomed to working twice as hard to communicate and understand, but it has become one of her strengths. She can convey complex messages using as few words as possible; it's a honed talent. A picture is worth a thousand words while using exactly zero! Mai's goal at Interact is to show the many success stories typical of technical and community colleges. She has lived the ultimate success story and wants to encourage others to do the same.

Mai thinks "If we are not learning, we are going backward." Focusing on leadership skills, she's acquired a business management degree from UW-Stout, which she describes as "the other side of art in a complementary way." Mai graduated *summa cum laude* while working full time, a fact of which she should be proud. Mai is guiding co-workers and leading teams while communicating strategies and project particulars: she discovered she loves teaching, just like her parents. Mai plans to keep growing, learning, and getting better at what she does. Communication skills are useful always and everywhere. Connecting



with her team is uplifting. Even though they're working from home permanently, her Interact connections are still a draw—like-minded folks creating together as part of something bigger.

Mai loves La Crosse's outdoor-focused community since she shares the same enthusiasm for using the bluffs, forests, rivers, and miles of hiking trails. Canoeing in the Driftless Region is a favorite hobby. She enjoys canoeing even though she can't swim. She's comfortable relying on the security of a quality life preserver! She looks forward to her yearly recharging trip with her husband on a technology-free Boundary Waters excursion. Physical exertion, solitude, and mental peace are nature's gift readily available for the taking in the Midwest.

Mai visits her family as often as possible. Her younger sister, Pim, lives in Bangkok and runs her own business—Japanese kitchenware. Her parents are retired and live outside of Bangkok; she misses her two dogs: old lady Kola and Otis the golden retriever.

Mai talks about her parents as role models because they encouraged her to explore the world her way. They still say, "We trust you to make good choices." Her parents worked very hard as teachers and are thoughtfully intentional with their words. Perennially the educators, they are always pushing books to read! Mai adores that about them and cherishes that love and respect, "I trust you will do good with it." Often, that's all it takes.



**“I didn’t know  
Western  
offered that!”**

# Western PROGRAMS



### 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 and Science Programs

The AA program is designed for those interested in humanities, business, and social sciences, while the AS program serves students who are interested in natural, physical, material, or medical sciences.

### Transfer Agreements by Program

Several of Western’s associate degree programs transfer directly into specific bachelor’s degree programs.

### Transfer Any Associate Degree

Western has agreements with the following universities that provide graduates from any of our associate degree programs with junior status: Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE), Viterbo University, and Bellevue University.

**For detailed information  
about programs and offerings:**

[www.westerntc.edu](http://www.westerntc.edu)



## Associate Degree and Technical Diploma Programs

### Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources

Agri-Business Science Technology  
Farm Business & Production Management  
Landscape Horticulture Technician

### Architecture and Construction

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

### Arts, Audiovisual Technology, and Communications

Digital Media Production  
Graphic Design

### Business, Management, and Administration

Administrative Professional  
Business Management  
Business Specialist  
Foundations of Leadership  
Health Office Professional  
Human Resource Management  
Leadership & Supervision Professional  
Leadership Development  
Medical Administrative Professional  
Office Support Specialist

### Education and Training

Early Childhood Education  
Early Childhood Professional  
Educational Assistant  
Foundations of Teacher Education

### Finance

Accounting  
Accounting Assistant

### Health Sciences

Dental Assistant  
Health Information Technology  
Medical Assistant  
Medical Coding Specialist  
Medical Lab Technician

### Nursing

Nursing Assistant  
Occupational Therapy Assistant  
Physical Therapist Assistant  
Radiography  
Respiratory Therapy  
Surgical Technology

### Hospitality and Tourism

Hospitality Management

### Human Services

Human Services Associate

### Information Technology

IT-Computer Support Specialist  
IT-Computer Support Technician  
IT-Cybersecurity and Network Administration  
IT-Network Technician  
IT-Web & Software Developer

### Law, Public Safety, Corrections, and Security Criminal Justice

Criminal Justice-Law Enforcement 720 Academy  
Emergency Medical Technician - Advanced  
Emergency Medical Technician - Basic  
Emergency Medical Technician - Paramedic  
Fire Protection Technician  
Legal Studies/Paralegal  
Paramedic Technician

### Manufacturing

Basic Welding  
Electromechanical Maintenance Technician  
Electromechanical Technology  
Industrial Machine Controls  
IoT Integration Specialist  
Mechatronic & Robotic Engineering Technology  
Welding & Fabrication

### Marketing

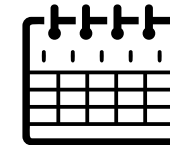
Digital Marketing  
Digital Marketing Specialist  
Sales Management  
Sales Representative

### Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

Computer Aided Design (CAD) Technician  
Electronic & Computer Engineering Technology - CET  
Healthcare Electronics Technician  
Healthcare Technology Management  
Mechanical Design Technology

### Transportation, Distribution and Logistics

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:

**April 4** Open Enrollment Begins for Summer 2023  
**May 8** Summer Term Begins  
**June 6** Open Enrollment Begins for Fall 2023  
**September 5** Fall Term Begins



### BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY SERVICES

Whether your training needs are technical skills, soft skills, leadership development, or continuous improvement, Western’s BIS area has the expertise to help your company develop a top-quality workforce. You can come to us, or we can come to you.

Contact us at 608-785-9232 to discuss training options.

- Customized Training
- Technical Skills Training
- Workplace Assessments
- Professional Development







# Queen of perseverance



By Lauri Hoff

Chalondra and her four-year-old son, Dakarai, found themselves in La Crosse one year ago. Looking to give their lives structure, stability, and self-reliance, they decided to put down roots. This was the first step towards change—a transitional move—with a career for Chalondra and school for both as the objectives.

Originally from Chicago, the cost of living, lack of traffic, quality education system, and the abundant open spaces and bluffs particular to La Crosse provided the push she needed to stay. Since the move, she has been providing healthcare at an area live-in care facility. A natural nurturer with a way with words, Chalondra loves her work and says, "When you care, it doesn't seem so much like work. I've cared for many family members, and it feels much the same." Comfortable in her job, Chalondra enrolled in Western's Nursing program as the next step. She noticed other single parents attending and felt an instant

kinship. She's looking forward to connecting with her single-parent peers and is ready to come out of her comfort zone and try something new. "As a single mom, I sometimes forget about myself," Chalondra muses.

As a 27-year-old doing this on her own, this new life project feels like a worrisome, huge, and uncertain undertaking. However,

take notice and ask if you need help! This is what happened with Chalondra.

Over the holidays, Chalondra lost her live-in care job, which left her not only jobless but also homeless. School was no longer the priority—simply existing and caring for her son were the only things guiding her choices. Overwhelmed with life and navigating it with

## **"Queen of Perseverance"** is a moniker given to Chalondra by her instructor, Laurie Ellefson.

Chalondra is up for the challenge, and even as unexpected snags appear, she's determined to make this work for her and her son. "School is closed, and I have to be in class shortly," is a challenging reality. Self-sufficiency is the goal, but the journey of growing pains is hard, and everyone needs help. All you need to do is ask. Or, at Western, an engaged instructor may

no support network is not a healthy place to be. She states, "When you must do everything on your own, you see how insurmountable it is. The slightest thing can send the whole thing tumbling down." Naturally, classes dropped way down the list of importance, which is unfortunate since she was on her way to completing the Nursing Assistant program.

This was a big part of the plan: to work as a nursing assistant to fund her education.

Chalondra's nursing instructor, Laurie Ellefson, noticed her absence and acted. Ellefson contacted Western counselor Lauren Jankowski to see how they could help. Chalondra was always a serious and results-oriented student, but she found herself in a situation where she needed academic and financial assistance. She needed a place to call home for herself and her small family, and she needed to catch up in her classes. Ellefson met with her to figure out a plan that included time management, preparing

for the Nurse Aide Registry exam, and a realistic schedule that Chalondra could stick to, all while factoring in her living situation. Jankowski secured emergency funding and grants to help Chalondra find a good home for her son—a safe place to live and study. Then, the internet didn't work and a whole host of troublesome details tried to derail it. It was a rough period; tears were shed. Chalondra was moments away from giving up, but help was a real option! Ellefson and Jankowski won't be forgotten.

What mattered most was their belief in Chalondra. The trusted and caring people

around her knew she had what it takes to succeed and made sure she knew it, too. Meeting high expectations set by these caring professionals is incredibly effective. Chalondra had never experienced anything like it before and said, "Laurie took time out of her day to help me, and her belief in me is more meaningful than she will ever know."

Chalondra is officially a Certified Nursing Assistant and a new employee at Gundersen Health System. She's making progress in her nursing program and even taking classes over the summer. She and Dakarai now have a warm, safe place of their own to call home.





# How Garrett Denning

# found his path

By Eric Jacobson

Western Technical College grant writer Garrett Denning is excited to tell you about his work. At this particular moment, he's organizing a symposium on how to best serve and empower neurodivergent students. It's clear he's passionate about helping people, and it's changed him all for the better.

"I see this leadership confidence come out of me to a level I have never seen before," he said.

But it hasn't always been easy.

Garrett grew up in Appleton, Wisconsin. From a small age, those surrounding him noticed subtle signs of difference. He was considerably shy, or, as a teacher described it, "selectively mute when under pressure" and would often cry. He read at an early age and often enjoyed reciting lines from books and movies. Determined to find some sort of diagnosis, professionals initially couldn't agree on a label. It left him feeling they saw him more like an experiment rather than a child.

"My mom had to place a picture on the table, reminding them I was a person," he adds.

He was eventually diagnosed on the autism spectrum. His mother, a special education elementary school teacher herself, worked to make sure Garrett was treated like any other student. Still, middle school was made more difficult by others not understanding.

Fast forward to college. Garrett attended Ripon College for English but left before completing his degree.

He describes it as "three years of misery" with lots of incompletes and withdraws. "In retrospect, I was way too depressed."

Part of that depression stemmed from questioning his own sexuality and fears of rejection. He didn't seek out help because he had no idea where to go. His senior year of college, however, he transferred to UW-Oshkosh, in part because of a LGBTQ resource center being created at the time.



Later, Garrett attended a panel of transgender individuals at the Center. In listening to their personal stories, he recognized something in himself that up to that point he had been unable to name. Assigned female at birth, Garrett did not like puberty, but had trouble identifying why.

"It was hard to conceptualize it for some time," he said. "You just assume the answer is you're autistic. You're weird."

With more introspection, Garrett's true self became clearer.

## "You need to be connected to your why."

Garrett Denning

"I turned to my friend and said 'I don't know my name, but I need to go by he/him pronouns from here on out.'"

Coming out to everyone was difficult at first, especially to family. Telling his mother, already knowing he was bisexual, was the hardest.

"I thought if I came out to her as a bi trans man, it would kill her."

The pressure Garrett faced coming out in what should have been his final semester, combined with fears of the future (especially in entering the workforce as an autistic trans man) led him to leave college six credits short of a bachelor's degree.

"I had heard the stories growing up. Those trans sob stories; I couldn't get them out of my head. None of them showed a future," he explained. "I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. But more than that, I didn't think that if I did, I would have any kind of future. That gets to you. It gets to your head."

After leaving UW-Oshkosh, Garrett returned to the workforce. After a few years of transitioning, he returned to college to complete his bachelor's degrees in English and Human Services Leadership.

There, he fell in love with school once again.

"I was given this chance to become not just another drop out student," he said. "I started to think about who didn't have this same chance. Who fell through the cracks."

He enrolled in UW-La Crosse, pursuing a graduate degree in Student Affairs Administration. Graduating in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020, there were few jobs available due to the shutdown, and Garrett found himself worried about his future once again.

He took a chance on a grant writing position at Western, where he is today. While hesitant at first, he's more confident than ever, helping students at the Student Place of Action, Culture, and Empowerment (the SPACE), and serving on several committees and groups designed to help marginalized students, particularly those who are LGBTQ and/or neurodivergent, succeed in college. He also plays a crucial role in the grants department, helping secure funding for a number of key projects at Western.

It's been a long journey, but with all those twists and turns, it comes down to one single rule: "You need to be connected to your why."



Hear more about Garrett's story here!



# Arcadia student finds life-changing

# Support



By Julie Lemon

Evelyn Limon Vasquez had overcome the challenges of moving from Cancun, Mexico to the United States at the age of 14 and was wrapping up her final year at Arcadia High School when the pandemic hit. She was looking forward to the graduation party she had seen in Hollywood movies – banners, balloons, cake, and dozens of friends and family gathered to celebrate her accomplishment.

But the graduation ceremony and party she imagined were not to be.

In the last three months of her senior year, Evelyn was instead forced to develop technology skills very quickly to even finish her classes. Everything went virtual. For a social person who preferred face-to-face learning and interactions, this disruption turned her world upside down and made her unsure of the next step.

Then, after a non-traditional graduation without much pomp and circumstance, family issues caused Evelyn to move out and live on her own.

“I had no money to pay for college, no money to pay for internet, and no money to get a bed,” recalled Evelyn. “I was starting from zero.”

But she knew she wanted to continue her education. As the first person in her family to pursue college, she was already at a disadvantage in navigating the admissions and financial aid processes. Throw in the unprecedented virtual component for all college communication, and the task seemed overwhelming.

“I chose Western because it was the most affordable option, but I didn’t know what career to choose or what classes to take,” said Evelyn. “There were many times I wanted to drop out because I couldn’t find something I liked.”

Evelyn found direction through the Learner Support and Transition area, and with instructors Dillon Mader and Betsy Breckenridge specifically.

“My advisor gave me a test to find the program that fit my personality and skills. Dillon helped me complete it and discover more about myself,” said Evelyn. “He has always seen something in me that I couldn’t see at

first. He encouraged me to try the Leadership Development program because he saw a leadership spirit in me.”

At first, virtual college courses were a strain on Evelyn and she wasn’t doing well. Layer on depression from life circumstances and a pandemic, and there were days when she struggled to even participate in online classes. But Evelyn is not one to give up. Instead, she asked Dillon and Betsy for help.

“They helped me with my English and encouraged me to keep going,” said Evelyn. “They showed how to get financial assistance and helped me get in touch with a counselor.”

It was at that point she was able to overcome her obstacles.

Now, the online format works well for Evelyn, allowing her to work more and save money. If she notices herself struggling to understand concepts, she continues to work with her instructors and take advantage of the opportunities that Western offers, like the Learning Commons, written and communication support, and peer tutors.

Western also offered another solution for her situation—a job. Evelyn works at the Independence Regional Location as a part-time administrative assistant covering the front desk.

“I answer phone calls, help visitors, and answer all types of questions,” said Evelyn. “I use my bilingual skills to help others find a place here at Western. The Independence campus is very beautiful, and I’m excited to see more people come to the campus and benefit.”

The lessons Evelyn learned at Western went beyond the classroom and career training. Finding people who believed in her built up her confidence to not only earn her associate’s degree this spring, but to pursue a bachelor’s degree in Business Leadership at Viterbo University.

“In simple words, the support that Western offers—those teachers who offer their help in various ways—is something that I will always be grateful for,” she explained. “They have helped me academically but more than that, they have changed my life in a good way.”



**Hear more about Evelyn's story here!**

# Bringing MA training to Tomah

By Julie Lemon

The demand for healthcare workers continues to grow, particularly in rural areas. A specific need for medical assistants has been voiced by healthcare organizations across the board. These indispensable members of the healthcare team perform a wide range of duties, including taking patient vital signs, preparing exam rooms, assisting physicians during procedures, and managing patient records.

To help fill this need in our district, Western is meeting potential students where they are by expanding the training from our La Crosse campus out to our regional locations.



The college recently hosted a ribbon cutting ceremony for a new Medical Assistant (MA) classroom at Western’s Tomah location, 120 East Milwaukee St. The \$65,000 remodeling project created classroom and lab space for a new cohort of students who will study exclusively at the Tomah campus starting this summer. The space replicates patient rooms in a healthcare setting, including exam tables, blood pressure monitors, and EKG machines.

“Our new Medical Assistant lab and classroom gives students the opportunity to work with the latest equipment and technology and gain experience that is invaluable in the healthcare industry,” said Kimberly Burkhalter, Western MA instructor. “By providing students with this specialized training, we are not only preparing them for successful careers, but also helping address the critical need for qualified healthcare workers in rural areas.”

Western’s MA program focuses on clinical and laboratory procedures, insurance and finance, medical terminology, and skills to keep a medical office running smoothly. Students also get valuable on-the-job experience through clinical rotations at healthcare facilities around the region. In addition to giving the students real-world experience, it provides the healthcare industry with potential candidates for many option positions.

Graduates from Western have become certified medical assistants, laboratory assistants, phlebotomists, insurance clerks, and electrocardiogram technicians in a variety of settings, including rural clinics, hospitals, and long-term care facilities.



# CAVALIER ARENA



## Esports surging in

# Popularity

By Eric Jacobson

Back in 2021, Western's athletics department expanded for the first time since 1976 with the addition of the Esports team.

The team plays in the National Junior College Athletic Association Esports (NJCCAE) league, comprised of two-year colleges from across the country, and competes in games such as Rocket League, Super Smash Bros., FIFA 21, and Overwatch – all on a variety of platforms, including Xbox and online. Competition includes nine weeks of queue-based Swiss-style play where participants play one match per week, per title. The top performers are invited to a single-elimination bracket at the end of each term.

According to Western Athletic Manager Ryan Monroe, the Esports world is surging in popularity. The NJCAA itself has grown from 60 members just a short time ago, to now over 227 members competing this spring.

"A large majority of teenagers are playing video games," said Ryan. "There's been an increasing interest for quite some time. This is just taking it to a whole new level. This allows them to have it as an aspect of athletics, and compete as a team and as an individual."

Student-athletes on the team are treated like all other athletes at Western. This includes eligibility and compliance requirements. Cody Murphy, the team's head coach since the program launched, says the program has grown exponentially.

"We are ahead of the curve at Western," he said. "But others are catching on." In its first year, the team achieved its first individual national championship, as Avery Strangstalien won playing Hearthstone, an online collectible card game. Last fall, Western also announced a partnership with Rockstar Energy Drink, allowing for upgrades to the Esports Arena and an increase in overall awareness on campus.

The team and club are quickly outgrowing their space in the lower level of the Kumm

Center, located in the heart of the La Crosse campus. The space dons gaming computers, as well as Nintendo, PlayStation, and Xbox. Cody and his assistant coach, Dustin Schultz, say the physical space, as well as the team itself, are frequently used as a recruiting tool for prospective students.

Above all, Ryan says it's important to recognize the competitive aspect of gaming, and the impact it has on students.

"It's a great opportunity for everybody to have a competitive spirit to your life. You can learn a lot about competition from being on teams, as well as the social impact from it," he said. "At the end of the day, they are going to have the opportunity to compete for a national championship."



Learn  
more about  
Esports here!



# After

## Western: Lee Rasch

Former Western Technical College President Lee Rasch retired in 2017. Since then, he remains active in the community, serving on numerous boards and committees designed to foster better civic engagement in the region. We had the opportunity to catch up with Lee, learning more about the work he's done since leaving office.

**Q. Tell us about any pet projects you have been working on.**

Since retiring from my position at Western, I have been busy; I call it "good busy." In addition to LeaderEthics, I have been working through Rotary in support of revitalization efforts in Cameroon, particularly in Kumbo, La Crosse's sister city. We are reconstructing three dilapidated primary schools in Kumbo's rural areas, and 1,300 students will benefit from these reconstructed schools.

I still play bass guitar in the 60s rock band, The Executives. In 2022, we celebrated 25 years of performing with a benefit concert for the La Crosse Community Foundation. We raised more than \$25,000 for underfunded areas—environmental issues, racial justice, the arts and humanities, homelessness and addiction, and animal welfare. I enjoy and need the creative outlet, apparently, I am still a kid at heart!

**Q. What role do technical colleges have in supporting and empowering communities?**

Technical colleges have always focused on meeting the needs of employers and students in the community. I believe their role in community engagement has greatly expanded in the last decade. Technical colleges are now viewed as major drivers in economic development, healthcare, and public safety. It is encouraging to see the role technical colleges have in advancing local sustainability efforts. Western is a key collaborative partner with numerous community organizations and agencies. When it comes to the relationship between the technical college and the community, I call it curriculum plus. To be clear, the role of providing a skilled workforce will always remain a top priority, however, the plus refers to the myriad of additional ways they serve as a vital community resource.

**Q. How do you think higher education can address issues of inequality and inclusion in a politically charged environment? What steps can be taken to bridge the political divide to foster greater understanding and cooperation between people?**

The growing political divide in an environment of misinformation contributes to a reduction in public trust of many institutions, such as the national media, congress, banks, healthcare, and education, to name a few. In this environment, many issues that should not be considered political have been caught up in these dynamics, including efforts to support equity and inclusion.

There is no simple answer to the questions posed. However, the data indicate that trust in local institutions remains strong. Furthermore, education efforts are an important step in countering misinformation—start with a local effort. It is important to involve other respected organizations in a community education effort.

I do not want to oversimplify. Community education efforts will not cause people to dramatically change their mind, but they can increase public awareness that there is more to the story. Reducing misinformation is an essential first step. Yet, it must be followed with action steps to achieve positive results. It is important to remember that it takes time to change and even more time to rebuild trust. However, in the current climate, skipping the first step and moving directly to action steps will result in a lot of pushback and very little progress.

Given this environment, higher education institutions can take the lead in convening these collaborative community education efforts. Indeed, they may be the best organizations in the community to assume this convening role. And that is a step in the right direction.



# Western Technical College

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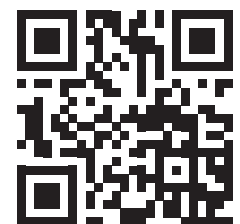
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