

WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE

STUDENT LEADER FOCUS GROUP

NOVEMBER 2005

Presented by:

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First and foremost, I would like to offer a heartfelt “thank you” to the students who participated in this focus research. They came voluntarily on a Friday night while in town for an all-day Saturday meeting to share their thoughts with us. Without exception, the group was candid. Informed. Passionate. Realistic.

As an educator myself, I am committed to students being at the center of learning. In my role as executive director of eTech College of Wisconsin, I am proud to say that we do our best to support that every day. Observing this focus group reinforced many of the initiatives we are currently undertaking while revealing new and innovative ways for us to advance goals and surmount challenges expressed by our customers--technical college students. And I was reminded that, as a collaborative of 16 districts, eTech College is uniquely positioned to meet those challenges. It's through working together that we best position ourselves to provide for the types of flexible educational experiences our learners are asking for. And we do so in more efficient and fiscally responsible ways.

Students were frank and forthright in discussing issues that concerned them. At the heart of discussions:

Transferability proved to be a major concern. Students repeatedly expressed a need for greater portability of credit between WTCS districts and to four-year campuses. Part of eTech's very mission is to support improved transferability of credit, and we are working hard in the various initiatives outlined in our strategic plan to support educational experiences that are more seamless for learners.

Keeping tuition costs affordable was another concern. As a collaborative that pools resources and that manages common tasks collectively, eTech plays a central role in helping keep costs down and keeping a technical college education accessible to all. Through working together, eTech has become a hub for the sound fiscal stewardship students and taxpayers are demanding.

Program availability and flexibility was also high on student radar screens. As a “one-stop shop” that makes programs and courses from 16 districts available to learners statewide, eTech College is providing for just that. Perhaps a course you need is unavailable at your home district? No problem. Offerings from several other districts are available to you at the click of a mouse through eTech. By pointing students to WTCS partners rather than turning them away, we help address waiting lists, help students graduate on time, generate positive public relations, and minimize the risk of losing out to competitors, all while expanding the numbers of students we collectively serve.

Interaction with and meaningful feedback from faculty was another common need voiced by our student group. At eTech, we firmly believe that the quickest way to even higher quality courses is to provide faculty the support and development they need to be the most effective online teachers possible. We are hence continually exploring new and innovative ways to help provide faculty the support they need to be most successful.

This focus group is just one of the many ways in which we reach out and solicit student input. We are genuinely interested in what students have to say and committed to responding the best that we can. Student need guides our path and has become our compass, and together we would appear to be moving in the right direction.

Respectfully,



Brent Nelson
Executive Director, eTech College of Wisconsin

BACKGROUND

eTech College of Wisconsin (eTechCollege.org) provides learners with online options and greater access to education among the Wisconsin Technical Colleges. Collaborative development of online programming creates efficiencies and cost effectiveness for all Wisconsin technical colleges through the sharing of common course competencies, curriculum, programs and marketing. Because technical college students are not only the drivers of online learning, but a key beneficiary, eTech College seeks out opportunities to solicit their input.

Wisconsin Student Government (WSG) is a student-run organization that represents over 460,000 technical college students (one in nine Wisconsin adults) across the state of Wisconsin.

WSG is a coalition of students and student governments that aims to provide a collective voice for all students through advocacy and direct action. WSG participates in the shared governance of the Wisconsin Technical College System, and seeks to advance higher education by empowering current and future students to advocate on their own behalf for the accessibility, affordability, and quality of the Wisconsin Technical College System.

The Wisconsin Student Government Association (wsgtec.com) invited eTech College to facilitate a focus group among its statewide student leadership group on November 4, 2005. The meeting was held at Madison Area Technical College. The WSG association graciously provided eTech College time with the 29 student government leaders in attendance.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the listening session were to gain students' input on:

1. The major issues facing Wisconsin's technical colleges, including ways the issues are being addressed and obstacles challenging their resolution.
2. Online learning in general and eTech College in particular.

At the end of the listening session, students were invited to participate in an ongoing advisory role to eTech College.

METHODOLOGY

eTech College of Wisconsin retained Voltege, Inc., an independent marketing and research firm, to facilitate, record, and report on the session. Due to the uncertain size of the audience (this session was entirely voluntary on the students' part), Voltege devised an approach that was part individual input and part group discussion.

The discussion guide for the session consisted of the following:

- Introduction. Ground rules, sponsor, how the information will be used.
- Key Student Issues.
 - Written evaluation form, completed independently and anonymously, before any discussion.
 - Group discussion.
- Online Learning/eTech College of Wisconsin.
 - Written evaluation form, completed independently and anonymously, before any discussion.
 - Group discussion.
- Wrap-Up and Thank You.

PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

A total of 29 students participated in the listening session. The group consisted of 14 men and 15 women; about half indicated they were working 30 hours per week or more. Students represented nine districts from multiple campuses throughout the state and a wide cross section of areas of study. Among the group, about half (14) had taken, were currently taking, or were about to take an online course through Wisconsin's technical colleges. Many of the participants were actively involved in other technical college-related committees and organizations.

SUMMARY OF STUDENT PARTICIPANTS IN ETECH COLLEGE/WISCONSIN STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION - NOVEMBER 4, 2005 STUDENT INPUT SESSION

DISTRICT	MAJOR	TAKEN ONLINE COURSES?	TECHNICAL COLLEGE COMMITTEE INVOLVEMENT
Chippewa Valley	Accounting	No Never	Academic Appeals & Business Professionals of America
	AODA Counseling	Yes	Committee for National Society of Leadership & Success
	Education	Yes Now	Veterans Club; College Student Government
	Marketing	Yes Now	SGA Budget Committee; WMMA; Book Store; Library
	Nursing	Yes Now	
	Welding	Yes	College Board
Fox Valley	Horticulture	No Never	
	IT	Yes	AITP Officer
Indianhead	Architectural Commercial Design	No Never	Student Senate; AIA; Student Life Center Committee; Financial Committee
	Architectural Commercial Design	Yes	AIA; Safety Committee; Treasury Committee
	Architectural Commercial Design	Yes	AIA
	Automated Packaging Technology	No Never	
	IT – Web	Yes Now	Business Professionals of America
	Marketing	No Never	WMMA
	Marketing	No Never	BPA
	Welding	No Never	Welding Club
Lakeshore	Marketing	No Not Now	Marketing Club Member
	Marketing	No	Marketing Club Member
Madison Area	Communication Arts/ Linguistics	No Never	Intercultural Club
	Mechanical Engineering	No Never	
	Recreation Management	No Never	
Moraine Park	Criminal Justice	No Never	WSG; WDG; Student Senate; WTC DBA
	Graphic Communications	Yes – Next Semester	Graphics Club; WSB Secretary
Northeast	Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement	No Not Now	Criminal Justice Association
	Microcomputers	Yes	Computer Club
	Microcomputers	Yes	IT Club
Southwest	Network Communications	Yes Now	
	Nursing	No Not Now	
Western	History/Political Science	Yes Now and Past	Executive Board Committee; Safety Committee

TOP ISSUES FACING WISCONSIN'S TECHNICAL COLLEGES AND STUDENTS

Student leaders identified two issues of critical concern to them (1) costs and (2) transferability of credit. These two concerns were followed by two additional major concerns: (3) the perception of tech schools versus UW and other learning options and (4) scheduling flexibility/course availability.

Issues of Greatest Concern to Students

Costs include those for tuition, fees and books. Students believe that more of the burden of school costs are shifting to them. The current high costs for gas, energy and transportation also factored in to overall costs from a student's perspective. Other key issues are availability of grants and loans as well as increasing interest rates.

Students shared information on how to track down and compare how fees are calculated by each district, as well as innovative ways to try to minimize students' costs for books. The most common suggestion for making positive change centered on educating legislators and other students via lobbying.

Transferability of credits to UW and other two- and four-year colleges as well as to other tech schools was also very important to students. Said one student: "You know, you don't want to spend two years at tech school, and then spend one year at the university catching up."

Transferability is not just an issue between the tech schools and two- and four-year colleges, however.

- Paraphrasing one student: "I am a paramedic. Do you think that if you were having a heart attack outside of my district, you would care what district I was from? You just want a paramedic!"
- Another student said, "A lot of my classes through LTC did not transfer to my department. There's not enough transferability between even the technical colleges."

The lack of cooperation both within Wisconsin's technical colleges and between the tech schools and UW was identified as the major obstacle to resolution of this issue.

Issues of Very High Concern to Students

Perception of tech schools, especially relative to the UW but also increasingly relative to private educators such as Phoenix Online. Students chided some high school guidance counselors for making judgments that four-year colleges are better for high school graduates. Said one: "If you look at Ivy League schools, they look down their noses at the state universities. The state universities then turn down their noses at the community colleges or technical colleges."

This discussion, although rooted in the negative perception of technical colleges, led to a robust discussion of the strengths of technical colleges, such as:

- Students cited a study that shows that tech college graduates provide a faster payback to the state due to getting into the workforce more quickly and in having lower debts than four-year students.
- Students also stated that tech college graduates are much more likely to stay in Wisconsin ("brain gain") rather than relocate out of state ("brain drain").
- Students also called out the hands-on focus that technical colleges are known for. "I think that technical colleges go right to the point. They're teaching more about what you really need to know, and you're having to take a lot less credits that you don't really need."

Scheduling flexibility and course availability were both very important to students. Most of the students in the focus group worked 30 hours or more per week. However, they were very attuned to this issue not just because of their own situations; the group noted they represent all learners, including nontraditional ones.

- Said one: "One reason why I'd like to go to the UW is that they offer more classes that I'll be majoring in."

Online courses, which about half the group had personally taken, were one solution identified for easing scheduling flexibility and course availability.

- "It's great for fitting in classes that aren't necessarily your core program classes, fitting them in with the rest of your schedule, especially in your second year, your last semester, when you really need to fit it in."

ATTITUDES TOWARD ONLINE COURSES, NEW COMPETITION, AND ETECH COLLEGE

All of the students were aware of online courses, and about half had taken an online course from a Wisconsin technical college. The following statements summed up the group's attitudes toward online courses:

- "You're going to have instructors that are better at it, and students who are better at it. There are obviously going to be people who love online classes, and they're going to do all their schooling online. And there's obviously going to be those people that just work better with that one-on-one interaction in the classroom."
- From a student who had taken an online course and would take another one: "A lot of people look at online classes as highly flexible, but don't look at their own accountability. Because [with an online class] you're accountable to yourself, and you can do it however you want, which is great, but for some people, that doesn't work."

During the discussion on online courses, it came up that other competitive institutions – namely, Phoenix Online – were aggressively pursuing technical college students, even in technical college buildings or events. In fact, more than half of the students in the focus group (17 out of 29) stated that they had been contacted by University of Phoenix.

- Said one student: "The University of Phoenix online--everybody knows that one's recognized because it's in your face everywhere."
- "They're at our school promoting the different colleges that are there... such as the University of Fond du Lac, and Phoenix is there quite a bit. And they check what program you're in and, if they find out, they call you constantly. Finally I just said, 'I've made up my mind, I'm going to a different one. Leave me alone.' And then they left me alone for about two months, and then they just started calling back again."

A handout with the following description of eTech College of Wisconsin was distributed.

eTECH COLLEGE OF WISCONSIN

eTech College of Wisconsin is the result of a work group consisting of district Presidents and initiated in 1999. It was officially launched in July 2001. eTechCollege.org website lists all online courses meeting curricular criteria.

• Mission Statement:

eTech College of Wisconsin provides learners with online options and greater access to education among the Wisconsin Technical Colleges. Collaborative development of online programming creates efficiencies and cost effectiveness for all Wisconsin technical colleges through the sharing of common course competencies, curriculum, programs, and marketing.

WTCS eTech College of Wisconsin Plan, Revised: April 13, 2004

• Goals:

1. Facilitate greater collaboration between WTCS-districts in relation to distance-education.
2. Provide fiscal efficiencies and avenues that support stronger fiscal stewardship and that maximize return on investment for district participants.
3. Enhance the quality of the distance-education experience for both learners and faculty.

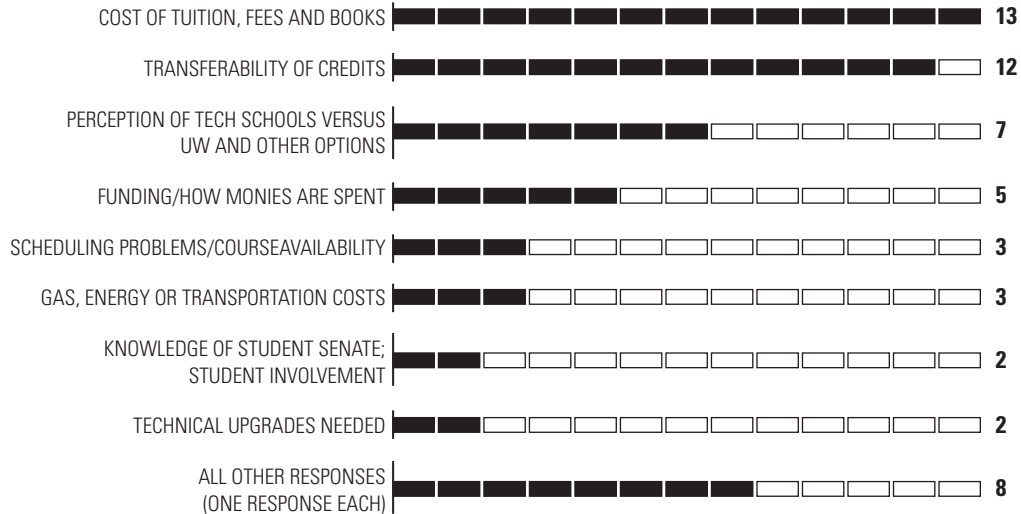
Students who were aware of eTech College expressed positive attitudes toward it, such as:

- "I see a lot more choices in eTech than at my district... They have a lot more options in what you can take. It's not only in the spring semester or in the fall, so you have that flexibility."
- "What I like about eTech is that it's got a lot of one credit classes, because I have to have 12 credits to get insurance and be full-time. And so if I was at 11 credits [I could take a one-credit course through eTech]."
- "One thing I can say about eTech is that if you do go on their website, if you do have a question, you type it in, and believe me, they do get back to you. I've had no problem when I've had questions and I've e-mailed things."

DETAILED FINDINGS

Key issues facing Wisconsin's technical colleges as identified by students are highlighted below.

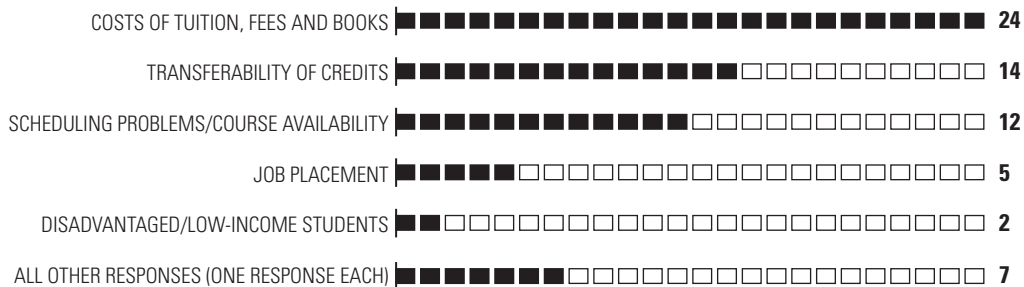
“WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING WISCONSIN’S TECHNICAL COLLEGES?”



Sample size = 28. Multiple responses allowed.
Source: eTech College of Wisconsin Student Leader Focus Group, November 4, 2005.

“WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING WISCONSIN TECHNICAL COLLEGE STUDENTS? WHAT IS THE SINGLE ISSUE THAT YOU THINK IS MOST IMPORTANT TO ADDRESS?”

ONE OF MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING STUDENTS



THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES FACING STUDENTS



Sample size = 29 for first question, multiple responses allowed; and 20 for second question.
Source: eTech College of Wisconsin Student Leader Focus Group, November 4, 2005.

Students' perceptions of each issue and obstacles preventing its resolution are summarized below.

ISSUE: COST OF TUITION, FEES AND BOOKS

"How is this issue being addressed and with what success?"

- Lobbying for budgets, increasing grants.
- Textbook tax cut?
- More loans available.
- Tuition being kept affordable; grants.
- Trying to increase funding by tying tech into 4-year money accounts.
- Student government is discussing this issues and proposing solutions.
- SWTC is looking at going to a 4-day school week (to reduce travel costs); however, trouble is with timetable of implementing it.
- Budgets get discussed with not only advisors/teachers/staff, but also with the student senate. Student senate brings up issues like classes with our administration's staff.
- Addressing textbook costs, needs and address no taxes on textbooks, and for those who are included in the disadvantage of possible limitation to school loans/grants and have a felony: we are concerned for student rights and we are very interested in lobbying against a law being made to take this right/opportunity away from students.

"What are the obstacles, if any, that prevent this issue from being resolved?"

- Education. Legislators just don't understand.
- Potentially address and lobby to cut taxes from textbook costs.
- (No answer)
- Less grants or scholarships.
- Constant budget cuts at the state level.
- Tech colleges want the same level funding but government won't allow it.
- Budget problems.
- (No answer)
- Policy and procedure.

Scope of This Issue, In Students' Words

- Raising tuition costs
- Fees
- Keeping costs low while providing equal or greater services than UW campus
- Company responses about cost of tuition, trained labor
- Budget cuts
- Interest rates
- Textbook costs
- Parking
- No loan forgiveness
- A lack of tuition scholarships and grants
- Affordability, available FAFSA
- Lack of access to computers away from campus, lack of funds to purchase computer for home use

Source: eTech College of Wisconsin Student Leader Focus Group, November 4, 2005.

ISSUE: TRANSFERABILITY OF CREDIT

“How is this issue being addressed and with what success?”

- WSG has/will continue to address this issue. I am unaware of the success or lack thereof at this point!
- Our school has signed a new transfer agreement this year adding to its extensive list, but I believe more can be done.
- Held up by UW Board of Regents, held up in committee.
- Discussion between UW and tech system ongoing. Rob Kriebach working on proposal/bill; Tabor tabled e-line.
- Madison ATC has a liberal arts transfer program; all should. Unsure of any other steps being taken.
- WSG bringing it to legislators. Some schools make contracts with each other (university versus technical).
- Brought to senators/ reps, about 80-90 credits are able to be transferred.
- WSG lobbies every February on matters that affect the students of the technical college system.
- COBE slow but in the works.

“What are the obstacles, if any, that prevent this issue from being resolved?”

- Cooperation from all tech colleges and UW System.
- Communication/agreement between colleges.
- Can't get out of committee.
- Familiarity; understanding of all parties; compromise.
- (No answer)
- Not the same requirements of classes within similar classes. If similar classes have different requirements, then they don't transfer because they're different.
- Separation of UW and tech system.
- The UW System is very persnickety towards accepting credits from the technical college system.
- UW not thinking tech schools are up to the same standards.

Scope of This Issue, In Students' Words

- Transfer of credits, including to 4-year programs/colleges
- Making credits more easily transferable to state, 4-year colleges
- Two-year degree at non-UW 2-year districts

ISSUE: PERCEPTION OF TECH SCHOOLS VERSUS UW AND OTHER OPTIONS

“How is this issue being addressed and with what success?”

- No suggestions

“What are the obstacles, if any, that prevent this issue from being resolved?”

- No suggestions

Scope of This Issue, In Students' Words

- Not being viewed as the place to go from high school – high schools are pushing 4-year schools, not tech colleges
- Competing with local 4-year and UW colleges
- Competition of area schools: what's being offered compared to the next closest school for that student; programs as well as enrollment, tuition costs, hours of scheduled classes, meeting time
- Reputation, transferability of credits, separation from UW system
- Keep students in the tech schools
- Separation from UW system
- High schools not promoting technical colleges

Source: eTech College of Wisconsin Student Leader Focus Group, November 4, 2005.

ISSUE: SCHEDULING PROBLEMS/COURSE AVAILABILITY

“How is this issue being addressed and with what success?”

- I don't think there are enough counselors advising students on which classes to take at what time as they don't have enough knowledge of this themselves.

“What are the obstacles, if any, that prevent this issue from being resolved?”

- Lack of communication between administration and students (and making teachers deal with these issues on top of already overloaded teaching schedules).

Scope of This Issue, In Students' Words

- Working around employment (working full time), daycare
- Scheduling problems
- Hours of classes with relation to work schedules
- Class availability
- Variety of courses
- Finishing degree within two years
- Class dropouts where more than ¾ of class drops – is there any reimbursement if class is not successful?
- Availability of classes
- Family to take care of, working adult

ISSUE: ALL OTHER ISSUES

	“How is this issue being addressed and with what success?”	“What are the obstacles, if any, that prevent this issue from being resolved?”
JOB PLACEMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lobbying for budgets, increasing grants • Perhaps with the name recognition the school is trying to be on a positive side, that an awarded associate degree is a very good education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of positions that are filled in a particular location and job title.
DISADVANTAGED/ LOW-INCOME STUDENTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are starting a housing project at WITC Rice Lake. Have been talking about it for three years and we are finally getting to the application process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The issue of money that is available for the school to use to fund this project. We are working with WestCAP, a non-profit organization, and they are helping us find funding.
UNFILLED CLASSES BEING DROPPED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Just started thinking about it. Also, noticed some classes are being split from prior years to alleviate this problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nothing so far; just started researching problem.
ONLINE CLASSES NOT WORKING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking to teacher to get back to students as soon as they can. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not being told what you need for these classes; not being able to download items.
TOBACCO SMOKERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We are going to try to start a tobacco-free policy...by committee then up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smokers who don't care about who they are affecting with their habits.
LACK OF ACCESS TO COMPUTERS AWAY FROM CAMPUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not very good unless more time is spent at campus to use computers. This affects the amount of work that can be done at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where will the funds come from?

Source: eTech College of Wisconsin Student Leader Focus Group, November 4, 2005.

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