

Appointed and Elected College Boards

The Value and Importance of Wisconsin's Appointed Technical College District Boards

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Summary

Technical College District Boards: Excellence in Representation and Governance – *A proud legacy since 1911; A copied and proven national model (page 1).*

Technical College Boards are as Representative as Elected Boards – *Geographically, by profession, background, gender, and minority status; As non-political/non-partisan volunteers; Because vacancies can be filled without special elections (page 2).*

Locally Appointed Boards - Part of Balanced and Accountable State-Local Governance Structure – *Local boards are part of effective shared state and local governance; Local boards are only one part of colleges' community input (page 3).*

Boards Operate as Openly, Publicly, and With as Much Opportunity for Public Input as Any Form of Local Government – *Board appointment is a democratic process; Boards operate openly and publicly under the same laws as all local governments; Board members follow the same ethics laws as elected officials (pages 3-4).*

Wisconsin Technical Colleges are a Key Economic Engine and Return More to the Economy than Any Other Publicly Funded Activity – *Technical colleges' return on investment and responsiveness is related to local board governance (page 5).*

Wisconsin's Appointed Technical College District Boards are Recognized as National Leaders and Role Models – *Volunteer board members are well-known nationally for commitment and leadership; Are leaders in quality improvement and in promoting partnership and collaboration (page 6).*

A Comprehensive Legislative Taskforce Review Recommended Maintaining the Current Appointed Boards Model (page 7).

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Wisconsin's Technical College Board Model is Designed for Excellence in Local Representation and College Governance

A Proud Legacy -- Wisconsin's district board governance and locally-appointed board model was crafted by the 1911 Progressive-Era legislature that created both the nation's first vocational, technical, and adult education system, and the nation's first unemployment compensation program.

"Local boards are an integral part of the 1911 legislation. The rationale for them was to ensure that the course of vocational education would be guided by lay people who were knowledgeable about the world of work. The boards were to be appointed by existing governing bodies to ensure equal representation of management and labor and to ensure that the board positions would be filled with people genuinely interested in nurturing quality vocational educational programs."¹

In 1956, then Governor Walter Kohler, Jr. wrote:

"We in Wisconsin feel that certain aspects of our vocational education program are unique. We are proud of its development because it is a product of the people. It was initiated through a series of studies made by lay people, legislators and educators. It has continued to function with leadership from the same groups of people. The result is that it reflects the character of our state."¹

A Copied and Proven National Model -- The heart of community and technical colleges nationally is that they are community-governed by non-political boards. The majority of states with community and technical college boards appoint their board members. Fifty-three percent of states (19 of 36) appoint all board members.² Four states appoint a portion of board members.² Only thirteen states elect all board members,² and three of these are state-level only boards. States with elected college boards tend to organize college districts by county or municipality and not by regional district across multiple communities and counties.

Wisconsin Technical College Boards are as Representative as Elected Boards

Geographically -- Appointment assures that the entire district, including smaller communities and rural areas, is well-represented. With district-wide elections, a large community or county will dominate voting and likely be over-represented at the expense of outlying areas. For example, Madison Area Technical College includes all or parts of twelve counties, each of which participates in appointing board members consistent with a statutorily required plan of representation assuring the entire district has a voice in governing the college. This is the case despite the fact that the majority of the population resides in Madison and Dane County.

By Profession, Experience and Background -- Appointment assures that each board has representatives including employers, employees, an elected local official and a school district administrator. Appointment rules also assure that no such group dominates board membership. Local official and school administrator positions on each board have helped the technical colleges become leaders in inter-governmental cooperation/efficiency.

By Gender and Minority Group Status -- Appointment following locally-tailored plans of representation assures there is broad representation by gender and racial/ethnic background. These statutorily required plans are reviewed and approved at the state level, and specific appointments are reviewed to assure appointments are consistent with local plans.

A higher proportion of women serve as public officials on technical college boards than in any other form of elected public service in Wisconsin. As of 2009, 13% of district board members are minority individuals, a proportion reflective of Wisconsin's overall population and rarely matched in elective office.³

Because They are Volunteers Insulated from Partisan Politics and Its Funding -- Appointed boards are comprised of volunteers. Board members are not compensated, unlike most other local officials serving town, village, municipal and county government. The board appointment model was designed to (and helps assure that) board members are not representing individual political agendas or the agendas of those who fund political races or campaigns. Anecdotal information from states with elected college boards suggests that elected board members are more likely to pursue board seats to fulfill a specific personal or political agenda, and are less likely to represent the diverse universe of top business and industry leadership, educators, and local officials.

Because Vacancies Can Be Filled More Quickly and Inexpensively than with Elected Boards -- Vacancies can be filled quickly and inexpensively by public hearing rather than by a multi-county special election. Quickly filling vacancies helps assure full community representation rather than waiting for the next regular election cycle or incurring the cost of a special election.

Locally Appointed Boards Are Part of a Balanced and Accountable State-Local Governance Structure

The Best of Combined State and Local Governance -- The Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) is governed through a balance of locally-controlled and accountable boards working under the WTCS Board, which provides state-level strategic direction, accountability, and leadership, across the system. The result is a locally responsive system of colleges that meet overall statewide needs and priorities as efficiently as possible.

The WTCS Board monitors and approves key local decisions, such as program offerings and building projects, to provide statewide coordination and oversight. The WTCS Board assures local district appointments meet the local appointing authority's own rules through plans of representation.

Local Boards Are Only a Part of Community Input in College Governance -- Appointed college boards represent only a portion of community involvement and representation in technical colleges. Every program at every college has a community-based advisory committee making recommendations to the board. Every college has a community advisory committee to monitor public-private competition. Each college has active faculty, staff, student, and profession-specific groups that add to the value of services provided in the community.

Wisconsin Technical College Boards Operate as Openly, Publicly, and With as Much Opportunity for Public Input as Any Form of Local Government

Board Appointment is a Democratic Process -- Appointment processes take place in public hearings with broad, public, community notice and opportunity for community participation. The appointment process includes review and public access to written candidate background materials including résumés and letters of recommendation, access to in-person candidate interviews, public comment ability at appointment hearings, and access to the candidates themselves. No person may be considered for board service unless he/she was announced in pre-appointment public notices and participates in person in public appointment activities.

Appointment is based on locally-controlled "plans of representation" that are created locally and that are reviewed each year in public hearings, prior to appointments being made, to assure each district's local needs are best met in the appointment process.

Appointment Does Not Create Professional Politicians -- Even though no college appointment authority has a "term limit" for board service, appointed boards have regular turnover and a healthy mix of veteran and new members. As of 2009, the median appointment date for Wisconsin Technical College board members is 2005.³ That is, one-half of all district board members were first appointed in 2005 or later. By law, no

person may serve as the chairperson of a board for more than two consecutive one-year terms. The average length of board service as of July, 2009, is 5.5 years.³

Appointed Board Members Follow the Same Ethics Laws as Elected Officials --

Appointed college board members already follow the same ethics and financial reporting requirements as elected public officials. Appointed board members file economic interest statements available to the public through the Government Accountability Board. Appointed board members follow all ethics and conflict of interest rules that apply to other public officials.

Appointed Boards Operate Openly and Publicly -- Technical college boards operate in the light of open and accessible government and follow all of the Wisconsin open meetings and records rules applicable to other forms of local government. College boards provide broad opportunity for public comment and input and assure that public input is sought on budgeting, programming, and other issues.

Appointment Brings a Wide Cross Section of Community Leadership to Boards --

Wisconsin's appointed college boards include top business, labor, and government leaders. Current board members include CEO's and top executives of businesses ranging from some large corporations, to small high-tech businesses. Members represent the wide variety of trades and professions that represent technical college programs such as nurses, manufacturers, dairy farmers, hospital administrators, contractors, engineers, and economic development professionals. Local appointment under plans of representation brings a unique mix of these professionals to boards in a variety and at a level that matches community needs and college programming.

Board Leaders Include Elected Officials -- By statute, each technical college board includes an elected official such as town, county, village, municipal, or school board member, former and/or current state legislator, or a mayor or county sheriff. Also by statute, every board includes a K-12 school district administrator. Both of these board positions promote collaboration and efficiencies between the colleges and local schools and governments.

Wisconsin Technical College Boards Are the State's Key Economic Engine and Return More to the Economy than Any Other Publicly Funded Activity

Technical Colleges Create a Huge Economic Return on the Public Investment Made -- Technical colleges return \$2 in tax revenue for every \$1 of total public investment.⁴ This 2-to-1 payback is fully realized in just 2.2 years.⁴ This impact does not include pre-existing economic activity, only new economic activity and tax revenues created by technical college training itself. Socio-economic research also demonstrates that technical colleges help reduce public outlays for taxpayer-funded social services, healthcare, and corrections costs.⁴ These economic returns are greater than the known benefits demonstrated by any other form of public service or government in Wisconsin.

Technical Colleges Meet the Ever-Changing Variety of Training Needs for All Wisconsin Residents -- Wisconsin technical colleges enroll more than 400,000 adults in at least one credit-based course each year; year-in and year-out.⁵ This is approximately one in every nine adults each year. Graduates overwhelmingly stay and work in the state - a brain "gain," not "drain," - for the state. Services and programs cover everything from basic literacy and English as a Second Language training, to the very latest in emerging technology.

Custom Business Support -- Colleges also meet specific local community needs through thousands of customized training programs with business and industry, programming offered at district-wide sites in hundreds of locations statewide, and offered flexibly at the time, place, and pace learners require, including by electronic delivery.

Cutting Edge Technology and Offerings -- Wisconsin technical colleges are national and world leaders in providing excellent, accessible, affordable education. Programs are regularly and rapidly tailored to meet changing technology and equipment needs, changing skills, and changing local and regional economies and industry mixes. Colleges have started, ended, or modified more than 500 programs in the past decade or so; an unprecedented rate of change. Every program is created, modified, or ended with ongoing direct involvement of community advisory boards that make recommendations to the college board.

Where Would Wisconsin be Without its Technical College Graduates? -- Technical colleges produce the workers who make and grow Wisconsin's quality of life. No Wisconsinite likely goes through a single day without interacting with or counting on WTCS graduates for their quality of life and for their personal and community safety. We train Wisconsin's firefighters, EMT's, police officers, nurses, utility operators and repair professionals, computer and information technology professionals, aviation mechanics, and dozens of other key professionals meeting today's and tomorrow's needs.

Wisconsin's Appointed Technical College District Boards are Recognized as National Leaders and Role Models

Volunteer Board Members Offer Thousands of Hours of Service Beyond Official Duties - Volunteer technical college board members dedicate thousands of hours to trustee development and education each year. Annually, Wisconsin's 144 college board members complete an estimated 5,000 hours of professional growth and development activities; an average of more than 30 hours per board member annually statewide.⁶ This service is in addition to official board duties and participation in college and community events (estimated at 18,000 – 20,000 volunteer hours annually). Many past and current board members have reported using personal vacation/leave time from their regular jobs to participate in board development activities.

This is a greater collective volunteer commitment than any known cohort of elected local or state officials, and is believed to be as great as the commitment made by any group of technical or community college boards in North America.

Wisconsin's Technical Colleges and Governance Model are Positive National Role Models -- Other states have modeled their college governance model on Wisconsin; the nation's oldest technical education system. For example, North Carolina sent officials to study Wisconsin's technical college system and intentionally modeled its own highly regarded system - including appointed local boards - on Wisconsin. South Carolina education officials sought out Wisconsin trustees for advice when creating an association of college trustees in 2004. Wisconsin trustees are regularly sought to present at professional growth and education sessions to national and regional colleagues. In each recent year, the number of presentations made by Wisconsin board members at the Association of Community College Trustees annual national conference was four-to-six times greater than Wisconsin's attendance compared to total national attendance.

Wisconsin Technical Colleges are Recognized and Honored as Leaders in Quality Improvement and in Promoting Partnership and Collaboration

Recognizing Quality in Public Service -- Wisconsin technical colleges, under appointed board leadership, have been awarded more top "quality" awards than any other form of Wisconsin government. The Wisconsin Forward Award is the competitive process paralleling the prestigious national Malcolm Baldrige Awards. Since public entities became eligible for Wisconsin Forward Awards in 1998 and through 2005, Wisconsin Technical Colleges received 10 of 98 total awards (to private and public entities) at all award levels and 7 of 36 top-level "Excellence" and "Mastery" level awards. Technical colleges account for more public sector awards in this period than any other form of public entity.⁷

Leaders in Partnership and Collaboration -- Wisconsin's appointed boards are widely regarded as national leaders in promoting partnership and cooperation across local and

regional governments, between school and college and university systems, and with business and industry. Partnership, shared services, and collaboration are emerging as the new measurements of excellence in public stewardship. Wisconsin technical colleges already lead the efforts that are emerging as a measure of good government and that will be promoted as a method of making local governments better.

A Thorough Legislative Review Recommended Maintaining Appointed Boards

The Assembly Speaker’s Taskforce to Review the WTCS, comprised of legislators and citizens from around the state, completed a thorough year-long review of the WTCS including college governance, funding, mission, service, and accountability to taxpayers. The Taskforce’s final recommendations included: “Maintain the current method of appointing members of technical college district boards.”⁸

This paper was written by Paul Gabriel, Executive Director, Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association, who is responsible for its content.

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End Notes:

1. Kathleen A. Paris, *A Political History of Vocational, Technical and Adult Education in Wisconsin*, WVTAE, Madison, WI, 1985, p.181, 184.
2. Association of Community College Trustees.
3. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association data.
4. Kjell Christopherson and M. Henry Robison, *The Socioeconomic Benefits Generated by the Wisconsin Technical College System* (executive summary), December 20, 2001.

5. Wisconsin Technical College System Board.
6. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association data.
7. Wisconsin Forward Award data, www.forwardaward.org.
8. Final Recommendations to the Assembly Speaker, Taskforce to Review the WTCS, Wisconsin State Assembly, November, 2003.