



Wisconsin Technical College District Board Governance

Representative, Accountable Boards Drive Excellent Technical Colleges

March, 2013

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A century of merit-based board member selection from the world of work

For 102 years, Wisconsin's technical college boards have been comprised of employers, employees and other local leaders selected on a merit basis by local officials. This model was part of 1911 legislation authorizing locally-created “continuation schools.” These schools became the nation’s very first vocational, technical, and adult education system. That system has evolved to become today’s Wisconsin technical colleges.

Competitive, merit-based selection of board members as local public officials has been central to this system for more than a century:

*"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.

Almost a half-century after the 1911 legislation, 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.”*².

Competitive applications and “job interviews” drive an open and public selection process

More than a century after the 1911 legislation, technical college district boards continue to be selected through a competitive and completely open and public process. This process is designed to assure boards represent, and are driven by, the “world of work.”

Each board is appointed by a special regional body of elected public officials comprised of county board presidents or school board presidents. Depending on the college district’s location and size, this public appointing authority, which operates through open public hearings, is made up of a group ranging from 3 county board chairs to more than 20 school board presidents.

Board member candidates are solicited annually from across the district by public announcements and through recruitment with key business and community groups. Candidates apply based on the submission of résumés, letters of recommendation, and an affidavit of qualification.

Every candidate's name is then published in public notices before competitive public selection interviews. In fact, no person may be appointed to a board unless he/she has appeared before the appointing authority at a public hearing and is selected based on an in-person interview at the hearing. Besides candidates, any citizen may appear and speak as part of the selection process. Incumbent board members must compete in the full selection process to be considered for reappointment at the conclusion of a 3-year term.³

Board composition: employers, employees, businesspersons, local elected officials and K-12 school leaders

To assure business and industry representation, 15 of 16 technical college districts appoint members in the same board member categories. A 2012 law changed the categories of board service in the remaining Milwaukee Area Technical College District.

For 15 colleges, each board must have at least 2 "employers" and 2 "employees" representative of key area business and industry. In Milwaukee, "businesspersons" from various size private businesses are appointed instead of employer and employee members. All 16 districts also have at least 1 member who is an elected official, and 1 member who is a K-12 school superintendent/district administrator. Each district board has 3 (2 at MATC Milwaukee) at-large members to comprise the full board of 9 public officials.⁴

As a result, we believe that no other form of public governing body in Wisconsin has the depth or breadth of business and industry leadership. Based on the competitive, merit-based selection focusing on employers, employees, and businesspersons, 2013 technical college district board members include **30 business owners, CEOs and company presidents**.⁵

These board members include the leaders of manufacturing and engineering firms, bank and credit union presidents, a hospital CEO, builder/contractors, the owner of a trucking company, and the owner of large staffing and home health care services companies, among dozens of others. Owners range from small businesses, such as a professional photography studio owner, to large businesses, including the owners of manufacturing companies each employing hundreds.⁶

These business owner/CEO/company president board members represent 1-in-5 of the colleges' 144 total board members. Not counting the elected official and school administrator positions on each board, almost 1-in-3 technical college district board members (30 of 112) are business owners, CEOs and company presidents.

Across all sixteen technical college boards, members selected competitively on a merit basis represent a great cross-section of Wisconsin's key business and industry sectors. In 2013, the number of college board members representing several of Wisconsin's major business sectors include:

- 18 members representing **manufacturing** and **engineering** companies;
 - 17 representing **medical** and **healthcare** professions;
 - 22 members representing professional services employers such as **banking, real estate, insurance, financial services/investment, professional photography, and barber/cosmetology**;
 - 5 regional **economic development** organization and **chamber of commerce** professionals;
 - 10 **county sheriffs** and others in **law enforcement, fire service, and corrections** professions;
 - 7 representing **trucking, transportation** and **logistics** professionals;
 - 6 leaders in **food processing, agriculture** and **restaurant** industries;
 - 16 **human resources** directors and leaders in **employment services** and **employment agencies**;
 - 2 **tribal government** leaders; and
 - 12 representing **builders, building materials suppliers, contractors, the skilled trades** and **facilities/maintenance** professionals;
- among others! ⁷.

Elected officials and school district administrators required on boards – At least one of the above leaders on each board is also an elected official in another local or state government role. 2013 elected official members include: two county sheriffs, a county coroner, a county executive, several county board, city council, school board and town board members, a village president, and a village clerk.⁸ Each board also includes an active local public school district administrator/school superintendent. These two positions help reinforce the technical college boards' close connections with local schools and government, and their emphasis on community partnerships and collaboration.

Diverse and highly representative boards by design

Before the local appointing authority considers candidates, an initial public hearing is held annually to adjust and re-adopt a districtwide “Plan of Representation.”⁹ These plans assure that boards are diverse geographically and demographically. Plans of representation include:

Geographic representation – The plan assures that the entire district, including smaller communities and rural areas, is well represented. With districtwide elections, a large community or county would dominate voting and likely be over-represented at the expense of outlying areas.

Demographic representation – The locally tailored plans also assure there is broad representation by gender and racial/ethnic background. As a result, a higher proportion of women serve as public officials on technical college boards than in any other form of public service in Wisconsin. In 2013, 49% of board members are female (71 of 144).¹⁰ Additionally, 12% of district board members are members of traditionally underrepresented minority groups,¹¹ a proportion reflective of Wisconsin’s overall population and unmatched statewide in most, perhaps all, other forms of elective public office.

Volunteer, non-partisan boards, with efficient procedures to fill vacancies or remove a member

The longstanding board governance model results in boards that are non-political, non-partisan and volunteer-based.

While technical college board members are accountable public officials, the boards are completely comprised of volunteers. Board members are not compensated, unlike many municipal, public school and state public offices. The merit-based selection model was designed to (and helps assure that) board members are primarily representing the world of work, jobs and economic growth, not individual or interest group political agendas.

For all of the care that goes into the selection of diverse technical college boards, vacancies can be filled quickly and inexpensively at a public hearing of the appointment authority rather than through special election. While the removal of a board member is understandably very rare, it may be done more readily than would be possible in an elected environment. A board member may be removed without cause by the same appointing authority so long as the regular public hearing process is followed.¹²

Competitive appointment processes requiring incumbents follow the complete process every three years, and annual adoption of plans of representation, lead to healthy turnover on college boards. Even though no college appointment authority has a "term limit" for board service, boards include a healthy mix of veteran and new members. As of 2013, the median date of first appointment for Wisconsin technical college board members is 2008.¹³ That is, one-half of all district board members were first appointed in 2008 or later. By law, no person may serve as the chairperson of a board for more than two consecutive one-year terms.¹⁴

A proven national model for community and technical colleges

While Wisconsin focuses more than other states on assuring boards are dominated by employers, employees and school/public officials, the majority of all states with independent 2-year college systems are also governed by appointed boards. Fifty-three percent of states (19 of 36) appoint all board members.¹⁵ Four states appoint a portion of board members. Among the thirteen states that elect all board members, three of these are state-level only, not local, boards.¹⁶

Ten states have local community and technical college boards that are entirely elected. These states tend to organize college districts along county and major municipality boundary lines, not as regional districts that cross multiple communities and counties.¹⁷

Balanced and shared local-state governance

The Best of Combined State and Local Governance – The Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) and its constituent 16 college districts are governed through a balance of locally accountable boards working with the state-level WTCS Board, which provides strategic direction, coordination, accountability, and leadership.¹⁸ The result is a locally responsive system of colleges that meet overall statewide needs and priorities as efficiently as possible.

The state-level WTCS Board is comprised of gubernatorially appointed and ex officio members. The State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Secretary of the Department of Workforce Development and president of the UW Board of Regents serve as ex officio voting members. Ten other members are appointed by the Governor, including a student, a farmer/agriculture representative, an employer member, an employee member, and 6 others.¹⁹

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 also coordinates accountability measures ranging from accounting and audit standards to reports on each college's expenditures, programmatic success, and community outcomes.²⁰

The WTCS Board also assures local district board appointments meet the statutory requirements for responsive boards and the local appointing authorities' own plans of representation.²¹

Guided by broad public input

The detailed accountable local-state board process is just one aspect of community involvement in college governance. Every program at every college - more than 300 statewide - has its own community-based advisory committee making recommendations to the board.²² These advisory committees bring together private sector experts and business leaders with college faculty and

staff to help create and shape programs, design curriculum, and determine the equipment, job skills and competencies needed in the marketplace.

The colleges aggressively manage their program “mix” based on direct advisory committee and employer input, and on regional labor market intelligence. In 2010-11 alone, technical colleges started 29 new programs and ended 34 programs.²³ They adjusted many more and started dozens of new short-term and industry-driven certificates. In less than eight years (2005-06 through 9 months of 2012-13), Wisconsin technical colleges have started 234 new programs and disbanded 211.²⁴

We are not aware of any higher education institutions in the nation exceeding this rate of constant updating and responsiveness.

Every technical college also follows affirmative policies to monitor public-private competition and to advise the board on responsiveness without intruding on private sector competition.²⁵ Additionally, each college has a foundation and active faculty, staff, student, and profession-specific groups that add to the value of services provided in the community.

Operate as openly, publicly, and accountably as other local and state government

Technical college board members follow the same ethics rules and financial interest reporting requirements as other public officials.²⁶ Board members’ economic interest statements are available to the public through the Government Accountability Board. Every aspect of public scrutiny and ethical conduct applying to local elected officials applies to technical college board members as well.²⁷

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.²⁸ College boards provide broad opportunity for public comment and input and assure that public input is sought on budgeting, programming, and other issues. As a form of local municipal government, and as creatures of state statute, technical college boards also follow open bidding, procurement, accounting, reporting and other laws and rules to assure public accountability.²⁹

Performance outcomes demonstrate results for Wisconsin

Wisconsin technical colleges collectively comprise the state’s largest higher education system with more than 350,000 individuals enrolling in credit-based instruction annually.³⁰ This represents 1 in every 9 working age adults statewide.³¹ The colleges also deliver on more than 4,000 contracts for customized instruction with business and industry annually.³²

The direct result is exceptionally high job placement rates across programs, an immediate economic impact for Wisconsin, and enduring graduate success:

- 88% of 2011 graduates were employed within six months with annual salaries up to \$65,000 and a median salary of \$36,000 for associate degree grads.
- 86% of graduates were employed *in Wisconsin* and 71% were employed *in their field of study*.
- 2006 graduates reported a 50% earnings increase in the 5 years post-graduation, far exceeding the rate of inflation and average employee increases.³³

For more performance data, see www.technicalcollegeeffect.org.

Dedicated volunteers and recognized national leaders

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 4,500 hours of professional growth and development activities; an average of more than 30 hours per board member annually statewide.³⁴ This service is in addition to official board duties and participation in college and community events (estimated at 18,000 - 20,000 aggregate volunteer hours annually).³⁵ Many college board members report using personal vacation/leave time from their regular jobs to participate in board development activities.

In each recent year, the number of presentations made by Wisconsin board members at the Association of Community College Trustees leadership congress was approximately four times greater than Wisconsin's relative attendance.³⁶ In other words, a person attending a national convention session featuring top college and college board practices and outcomes has been 4 times more likely to hear from a Wisconsin board member than the state's delegation size would predict.

Wisconsin's college boards are known for promoting collaboration across the colleges. Just one example is the creation of Districts Mutual Insurance, a wholly-owned company that has saved millions of dollars by aggressively managing pooled property, casualty, liability and workers compensation coverages.³⁷

Conclusion:

Wisconsin Technical College Boards are Highly Representative and Accountable

Ultimately, governing in a democracy takes many forms across the many functions of the public interest. Technical colleges are owned by every Wisconsin citizen. Everyone has an interest in their effective governance and their responsiveness to community and taxpayers. This report is intended to demonstrate how and why board members are selected as public officials and that they are just as representative and accountable to the public as other officials.

The nature and composition of Wisconsin technical college boards has been carefully studied. For example, the Assembly “Speaker’s Taskforce to Review the WTCS” was comprised of legislators and citizens from around the state and completed a multi-year review of the colleges including governance, funding, mission, outcomes and accountability to taxpayers. As the taskforce began its work, several legislative and public taskforce members stated their support for legislation to require the election of college board members. However, based on the careful study, the taskforce’s unanimous consensus instead was to recommend: “Maintain the current method of appointing members of technical college district boards.”³⁸.

As public bodies, public servants and public institutions, we welcome input and dialog on what makes the local government as accountable and responsive as possible. We encourage public participation in our advisory committees, board activities, public hearings, the board appointment process, and in many other ways. We work carefully in a balanced state-local system to assure compliance with state law and adherence to the best practices of good and open government and efficient operation.

With that said, we also believe that *a public institution’s outcomes – its results for the community – are a function of its governance model and its leadership.* Wisconsin technical colleges are very responsive in large part because of how they are governed: by local boards with members driven by the world of work and selected publicly and openly on a competitive merit basis.

Any proposal to alter the nature of technical college governance should carefully assess the underlying facts, history and rationale supporting this effective and proven model. This model has served the state well for 102 years and has never been more relevant than it is today as a case study in public governing excellence.

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

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Paul Gabriel
Executive Director
Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association
22 N. Carroll Street, Suite 103
Madison, Wisconsin 53703

608 266-9430
pgabriel@districtboards.org
www.districtboards.org

End Notes:

1. Kathleen A. Paris, *A Political History of Vocational, Technical and Adult Education in Wisconsin* (WVTAE, Madison, WI, 1985) p. 181.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
3. Information concerning district board appointment law and procedures is found in Wis. Stats. § 38.10; Wis. Admin. Code § TCS 2; and in the Wisconsin Technical College System's *Board Appointment Manual* available at: <http://systematic.wtcsystem.edu/Policy/Board-Appoint-Manual-2012.pdf>.
4. Wis. Stats. § 38.08.
5. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association data. *See* www.districtboards.org, or contact the author for more information.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Wis. Stats. § 38.10(2)(c). *See also* Wisconsin Admin. Code § TCS 2, and the Wisconsin Technical College System's *Board Appointment Manual* available at: <http://systematic.wtcsystem.edu/Policy/Board-Appoint-Manual-2012.pdf>.
10. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association data.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Wis. Stats. § 17.13.
13. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association data.
14. Wis. Stats. § 38.08(3).
15. Data from the Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association and the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT), Washington, DC. *See* www.acct.org, or contact the author for more information.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *See* Wis. Stats. §§ 38.001, 38.04.
19. Wis. Stats. § 15.94. *See also* <http://www.wtcsystem.edu/board/members/index.htm>.
20. Wis. Stats. § 38.04. *See also* <http://www.wtcsystem.edu/about.htm>.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Wis. Stats. § 38.14(5)
23. Staff presentation to the Wisconsin Technical College System Board, May 15, 2012. Updated by WTCS staff through 3/13. *For additional data, contact WTCS Office of Instruction, Division of Teaching and Learning, or the author.*
24. *Ibid.*
25. WTCS Administrative Bulletin (AB) 99-09, *see* <http://systematic.wtcsystem.edu/Policy/Adminbul/99-09.pdf>.
26. Wis. Stats. §§ 19.42(7u), 19.41(7w); *see, especially*, 19.42(13)(f), which states: 19.42(13) "State public office means.... (f) A member of a technical college district board...." *Also, see generally* §§ 19.41 through 19.59.
27. *Ibid.*

28. Wis. Stats. §§ 19.31, 19.32, *see generally*, §§ 19.31 through 19.39 and §§ 19.81 through 19.98.
29. Wis. Stats. §§ 38.14 (1)-(3), 38.15, 38.18, 38.20, 66.0131, 67.01(5); *also see the* “WTCS Staff Accounting and Users Guide, Financial and Administrative Manual” *at:* <http://systematic.wtcsystem.edu/mis/DataSys/FAM/FAM-Manual.pdf>; *and see* Wisconsin Admin. Code §§ TCS 5 through TCS 8.
30. Wisconsin Technical College System data. *See* <http://www.wtcsystem.edu/reports/data/factbook/index.htm>, *and, see also* www.technicalcollegeeffect.org.
31. U.S. Census Bureau data *retrieved at:* <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/55000.html>.
32. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association and Wisconsin Technical College System data. *See also* <http://www.witechcolleges.org/employers/index.php>.
33. WTCS “*Graduate Follow-up Report (2011)*.” *Retrieved at:* <http://www.wtcsystem.edu/reports/data/graduate/index.htm>. *See also* www.technicalcollegeeffect.org.
34. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association data.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Wisconsin Technical College District Boards Association data. *See also* <http://districtsmutualinsurance.com>.
38. Final Recommendations to the Wisconsin Assembly Speaker, *Taskforce to Review the WTCS*, Wisconsin State Assembly, November, 2003.