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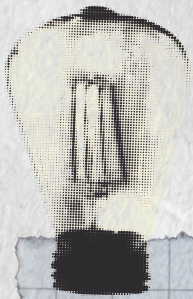
SPRING 2026



WAUKESHA COUNTY TECHNICAL COLLEGE

BEYOND

the



New Energy. New Era.

Melissa Wegner steps in to lead Waukesha Campus forward.

AI, Elevated.

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TASSEL



A MESSAGE FROM THE WCTC

PRESIDENT

Waukesha County Technical College is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (hlcommission.org), a regional accreditation agency recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, and it is a member college of the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS).

All information in this edition of Impact is current as of publication printing. The most current information is located on our website at wctc.edu.

Text "wctcalerts" to 78015 to sign up for WCTC emergency alerts.

WCTC prohibits discrimination or harassment based on any status protected by applicable state or federal law.

Forever, well, at least for the last 25 years, Americans have said that higher education needs to change. More specifically, that it needs to modernize, become more efficient, more effective for current needs, and of course, more affordable. How to do all of this while maintaining high academic rigor? **I'd suggest joining us.**

At WCTC, we believe that if you have the ability, nothing should hold you back. We've partnered with K-12 school districts to amplify and expand college opportunities for students in high school. In fact, our Excelerate program provides juniors and seniors with the pathway to graduate from WCTC and high school simultaneously at the age of 18. They can either go directly into the workforce with their associate degree, or transfer to a university as a college junior, completing their bachelor's degree two years early, while doing their first two years at no cost with WCTC.

Our cover story highlights a few of the many successful high school students who have broken the traditional higher education path to college credentials. They are leading the way for the next generation. They are the ones changing higher education, and WCTC is providing the streamlined pathway to do so.

Thank you for supporting WCTC and the students blazing the trail.

Rich Barnhouse, Ph.D.



WAUKESHA
COUNTY TECHNICAL
COLLEGE

Hands-on
Higher Ed

800 Main Street, Pewaukee, Wisconsin 53072

COMMITTING TO THE COMMU

If you did not know WCTC has a campus in Waukesha, you're not alone. Sitting across from the YMCA, the College's Waukesha Campus is an often-overlooked resource. To the College's leadership, this is a problem. So, how do you fix it?



Enter Melissa Wegner, WCTC's dynamic new manager of Community and Campus Relations.

Wegner is a nationally certified medical interpreter and former Milwaukee Public

Schools' bilingual teacher who runs her own business helping companies overcome language barriers. She has a master's degree in teaching. Plus, she graduated from WCTC's Spanish Medical Interpreter program before returning to be a coordinator and adjunct instructor for the program.

Combine all that with her membership on the boards of directors for the Lake Area Free Clinic and the Midwest Association of Translators and Interpreters, and it is clear that Wegner is a great fit for the role.

"Community engagement, outreach, education and really taking stock of how we can best serve others has been my focus for my entire career. And this position is the perfect culmination of all of that," Wegner said. "Having worked with the community as an interpreter and educator, I'm excited to dive into this role to increase visibility of the campus and

embed us into the City of Waukesha – to double down on our commitment to residents by building partnerships and programming that directly meets needs of the community."

The Waukesha facility has suffered from a lack of attention. But it has so much potential to serve the city and its communities. The WCTC Dental Hygiene Clinic, where students provide affordable dental hygiene care for community members, serves as proof that the campus can be a public good.

Getting the most out of such a promising resource is where Wegner's thoughtful leadership comes into play.



Step one for Wegner was bringing access to many of the same services that are offered at WCTC's Pewaukee location by staffing the front desk with team members from Ollie's Compass – a centralized student resource hub.

NITV

"Community engagement, outreach, education and really taking stock of how we can best serve others has been my focus for my entire career."

"Students now have the ability to get connected with resources, register for classes and even print their ID card," Wegner said. "These things sound simple, but in the past, students would've had to make an additional trip to our Pewaukee Campus to do them. Transportation and time are barriers for students. By offering these services here, we make education that much more accessible for the community."

Combined with the addition of an Ollie's Market student snack shop that mirrors the one on the Pewaukee Campus, the student experience is already improving.

The ultimate goal for Wegner is to establish the WCTC Waukesha Campus as a pillar of both the community and the College. That means more courses on campus, more learning opportunities for the public, more services and more students.

Wegner's job is to find out what is needed, what is wanted and how to make it happen. ■

AI PROJECT MANAGER HELPS EMPLOYEES SAVE TIME

While Waukesha County Technical College has been rapidly launching academic programs in artificial intelligence and developing training sessions for the business community, the College is also turning that lens inward, ensuring its employees are using these vital tech tools, as well.



Segun Onilude recently joined WCTC as the College's first AI project manager. His mission is to help faculty and staff harness AI to work smarter; simplify complicated workflows, projects and tasks; and ultimately, free up time to allow them to do more of the rewarding work they enjoy.

"I want to help people find ways to make good use of their time," Onilude said. "We are trying to help everybody – if that's admissions or marketing or finance – do their job more efficiently."

Please read more about Onilude at wctc.edu/newsroom. ■

Driven by



AMBIITION

Meet five grads who are blazing their own path

The traditional path to a rewarding career often begins as a steady, predictable climb. For five late-teen and early 20-something Waukesha County Technical College graduates – Yajaira Burgos, Wesley Lidwin, Audrey Swigert, Gavin Travanty and Deirdre O’Day – it’s been more of an intentional, high-speed sprint, with elements of self-discovery along the way.

Thanks to WCTC’s Dual Enrollment Academy (DEA) as well as the Excelerate initiative, these young alums are getting a marked head start. They are making significant strides toward their professional goals or next level of education, and many of them started taking WCTC classes as early as age 16.

The DEA and the Excelerate initiative allow qualified high school juniors and seniors to earn certificates, technical degrees – and full associate degrees – while in high school. DEA students participate in a cohort group with students from other high

schools, spending part of the day at their home high school and part of the day at WCTC. Excelerate students take classes just as any other college student; this option is best for those who already have a clear idea of which program they would like to pursue and are ready to jump-start their careers. For both DEA and Excelerate, the student’s K-12 school district generally covers the majority of the cost.

These are just a few WCTC grads who have used the College as a launchpad for their future. Since DEA programs originally began in the 2013-14 academic year, nearly 1,500 students have completed an academy. The Excelerate initiative began in the 2022-23 school year and nearly 200 students have gone on to earn WCTC diplomas or degrees. On the following pages, read the individual stories about these ambitious young alums and where their post-WCTC path has taken them.



YAJAIRA *Burgos*

A HEALTHCARE TRANSFER PATH - PRE-NURSING TO BSN

By the time Yajaira Burgos graduated from New Berlin West High School, she wasn't just a high school alumna, she was a certified nursing assistant (CNA) with a year of college credits already under her belt. She was using her junior and senior years to gain a better understanding of the rigors of college coursework and the realities of what a healthcare profession entails.

Through WCTC's Dual Enrollment Academy, Burgos earned her CNA credential in July 2024 and completed the Pre-Nursing program in May 2025. The credits earned from the DEA, 31 in total, transferred to Alverno College, effectively shaving a full year off her Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program.

A SAVINGS OF TIME

The credits she earned through tests, WCTC courses and AP exams moved her anticipated graduation date from 2029 to 2028. Because she arrived at Alverno with her general education requirements largely fulfilled, she began clinical rotations in the spring of 2026 – an opportunity most nursing students don't reach until later in the program.

Her educational path required more than just an interest in health care; it required a shift in mindset – one WCTC helped Burgos refine.

"Key skills a high school student needs to be successful are definitely time management and discipline, but also being organized, responsible and mature," she said.

Developing those soft skills benefited Burgos in multiple ways. When she applied to Alverno, she was eligible for the prestigious Roosevelt Scholarship, a full-ride award given to only one incoming student.

The selection process was rigorous, involving two essays and a finalist interview focused on community involvement and character: Burgos was selected as the recipient. *(Continued on pg. 6)*



"THE [DEA] PROGRAM ALLOWS FOR YOU TO GET AN IDEA IF THE PATH YOU HAVE IN MIND IS MEANT FOR YOU."

(From pg. 5)

BALANCING RESPONSIBILITIES, PREVENTING BURNOUT

By navigating college-level courses while still in high school, she developed a system to balance her responsibilities and prevent burnout. Her CNA training also provided a foundation in basic nursing skills and experience in nursing home environments that she draws on today during her clinicals and will use in her future healthcare career. Her goal is to work in a neonatal unit.

For students considering a similar path, Burgos encourages them to take a chance.

"The [DEA] program allows for you to get an idea if the path you have in mind is meant for you, while at the same time exposing you to the life of a college student," she said. "I 100% recommend taking the opportunity." ■

WESLEY *Lidwin*

WORKING TOWARD FOUR DEGREES IN FIVE YEARS

In fall 2022, Wesley Lidwin first enrolled in WCTC's Automation Systems Technology/Robotics Dual Enrollment Academy (DEA), but he couldn't have imagined it would lead to multiple degrees in five years' time.

"Absolutely not," Lidwin said. "Then again, I suppose I didn't put much thought into it. At my core, I am a very pragmatic and opportunistic person who takes opportunities as they come."

That mindset has launched an unstoppable trajectory: he's laddering his education and making every credit count. Since graduating from Muskego High School in 2023, Lidwin has maximized his academic potential, positioning himself to earn two associate degrees and two bachelor's degrees by the end of 2028.

STACKING DEGREES FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

After completing the DEA in 2023, he finished the full Robotics associate degree, graduating in 2024 and earning outstanding program and school awards. He leveraged that experience, using 81 credits from the Robotics degree and industry certifications (plus nearly 30 more credits from other programs and AP exams), to trim two years off his time at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, where he is completing a bachelor's degree in Automation Leadership (expected graduation in May 2026).

Simultaneously, he is currently enrolled in a second associate degree at WCTC - Electrical Engineering Technology (expected graduation December 2026). And he will soon begin the Mechatronics Engineering bachelor's degree program at Northern Illinois University, where he will transfer numerous WCTC credits. He plans to graduate from NIU in 2028.





"I WAS ABLE TO GAIN CRITICAL MENTORS IN MY LIFE THAT HAVE ASSISTED AND GUIDED ME IN MY PATHWAY BOTH IN COLLEGE AND MY PROFESSIONAL LIFE."

Outside of class, Lidwin has been interning at Aptar, a plastics fabrication company, since 2023, and his role has expanded exponentially. He works part time to accommodate his school schedule, but he has taken on many new tasks, including serving as a quality inspection expert and developer, and electrical and controls specialist. He became a member of Aptar's Technology Expert Career Path and was recognized as a technology first-level specialist in inspection automation. Additionally, he served as a WCTC teaching assistant, where he helped develop lab curriculum and built inspection systems.

PROVIDING THE BACKBONE OF EDUCATION

Lidwin says WCTC has given him a "stronger backbone of education," than some other institutions may have, thanks to the hands-on experience. It's also setting him up for financial success, by saving money on tuition and preparing him for good-paying,

in-demand jobs. Already, he said, he's been able to pay off his newer car and fund a variety of outdoor hobbies.

The DEA has served as the cornerstone of Lidwin's future education and career aspirations, but the networking component has also been an asset.

"Dual enrollment did a lot for me outside of the educational aspect," he said. "It allowed me to grow as a person. I was able to gain critical mentors in my life that have assisted and guided me in my pathway both in college and my professional life."

As for what's next? Lidwin said his career could go in a number of different directions: a field service engineer working throughout the country, a management pathway leading to an executive-level job or even a role focusing on patent and intellectual property.

"While I am not totally sure what opportunities will open themselves to me or what pathway I may follow, I do know that I have options; [there are] many ways things may shake out for me," he said. ■



MASTERING THE FUNDAMENTALS

She became increasingly interested in the tattoo art form, but before focusing on that specialty, she wanted to immerse herself in the design foundations and technical aspects of art.

AUDREY *Swigert*

A CREATIVE EVOLUTION LEADS TO LASTING IMPRESSIONS

For Audrey Swigert, creativity is a daily ritual. Whether she's sketching designs on three-inch sticky notes for her thousands of Instagram followers or meticulously applying ink onto a client's skin, her work reveals a talent honed through experimentation, practice and a steady commitment to her art.

When Swigert started at WCTC, she did so in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a high school senior in 2022-23 – the first year the Excelerate initiative was offered – she enrolled in the Graphic Design program.

"I was very much ready to be done with high school and work towards a career," Swigert said. "My high school experience was very strange with COVID interrupting most of it, so by the time my senior year came by, I was getting the itch to meet new people and learn new skills that would help my career path more directly."

"A Graphic Design degree definitely helped me get a better grasp of fundamentals of design and apply it to tattooing, like layout, composition and contrast," said Swigert, who earned her associate degree in 2024. "Also, communication is a huge thing when talking to clients about their tattoo vision."

For a Professional Studies class assignment, Swigert had to interview someone working in the field. She met with an artist at Milwaukee's Studio 84 Tattoo Co., and their conversation took place while he inked her first tattoo. A year or so later, the tattoo artist reconnected with Swigert and invited her to interview for a formal apprenticeship.

She's been at Studio 84 since August, creating designs and flash sheets, interacting with clients and practicing tattooing on synthetic skin. Recently, she started working on real skin, creating her first full tattoo on her sister. To truly understand the process, she has tattooed her own skin to learn firsthand how the needle and equipment should feel, from both the tattooist and client end.

**"I WAS GETTING THE ITCH TO MEET
NEW PEOPLE AND LEARN NEW SKILLS
THAT WOULD HELP MY CAREER PATH
MORE DIRECTLY."**

SAULTEAR'S SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE

When she isn't at the shop, Swigert is the creative force behind Saultear, a moniker she uses on Instagram that's a fusion of her nickname and first name. Through Saultear, Swigert started a sticky note drawing project in October 2024 where she posts a new, quick sketch daily. "Every single one has a story," she said. "I draw things I saw that day, something I felt or just something silly."

Through this platform, Swigert said she has reached over 3 million users, and she launched a website where she sells her own art prints, clothing, stickers, blankets and other items.

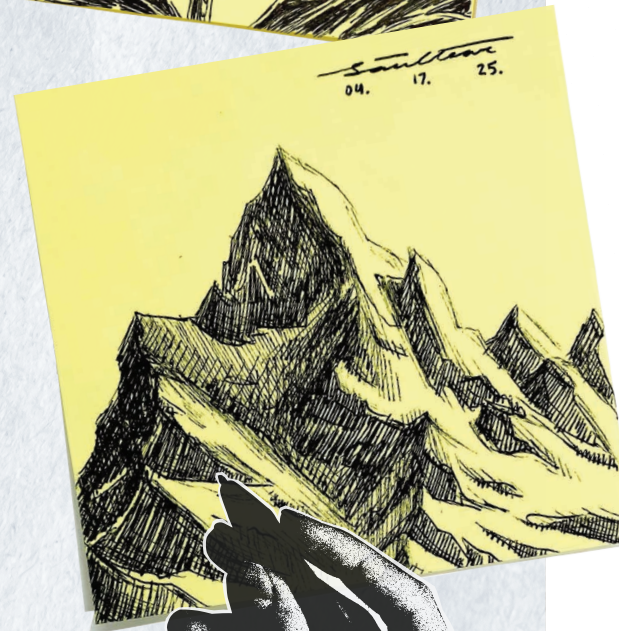


Additionally, Swigert has completed commissions large and small for area businesses and schools. She finished her biggest project to date last summer after more than a year of planning and design:

a massive, 25-by-25-foot outdoor mural at Brewed Omen in Hartford, Wis., depicting hundreds of jovial caricatures.

Swigert is now more than halfway through

her tattoo apprenticeship, and she continues to blend her WCTC foundations with hands-on shop experience. To check out some of Swigert's original work, visit her on Instagram [**@Saultear**](#). ■



GAVIN *Travanty*

AN EARLY START TO A LIFESAVING CAREER



When most high school students were deciding what careers to explore, Gavin Travanty was already spending nights at a fire station and preparing for a future in public safety. He's proof that it's never too early to start pursuing your dreams.

EARLY CAREER SPARK

From a young age, Travanty was drawn to firefighting and emergency medical services. He credits his neighbor, a retired WCTC Fire/EMS instructor, with encouraging him to explore the opportunities at WCTC.

"CHOOSING TO PARTICIPATE WAS

ONE OF THE BEST DECISIONS I

EVER MADE."

As a sophomore at Waukesha West High School, Travanty applied and interviewed for WCTC's Firefighter/EMT Dual Enrollment Academy (DEA). Soon after, he was offered a spot and began taking Firefighter 1, Firefighter 2 and EMT courses during his junior year of high school.

After earning those certifications, he joined the Village of Vernon Fire Department as a part-time firefighter/EMT, the same place he had volunteered the summer before, deepening his commitment to public safety.

"During that time, I often stayed overnight at the station before heading to high school – fully committed to balancing both my education and my career goals," Travanty said.

A FAST-TRACK TO TRAINING

Upon completing the DEA at the end of his junior year, he began planning how to fast-track his remaining classes and continue his training to become a paramedic. That choice reshaped his senior-year schedule: he completed two online courses over the summer and then doubled up on English classes in the fall, allowing him to graduate from high school a semester early.

At the same time, Travanty interned with the Waukesha Fire Department, starting at 7 a.m. and staying until noon before heading back to high school in the afternoons. This demanding schedule enabled him to finish his graduation requirements and gain valuable hands-on experience for WCTC's accelerated Paramedic Technician technical diploma program.

He graduated from the program in August 2025 – becoming the youngest certified paramedic in Wisconsin – and is now working full time as a firefighter/ EMT-paramedic for the Greenfield Fire Department.

PREPARED AND CONFIDENT AT A YOUNG AGE

"I was a little nervous to be so young and take on such significant responsibilities," he said. "However, I felt confident knowing that WCTC instructors had given me the knowledge, skills and resources to guide me. Every day in the field is different, but I'm there to help people during some of the toughest moments of their lives."

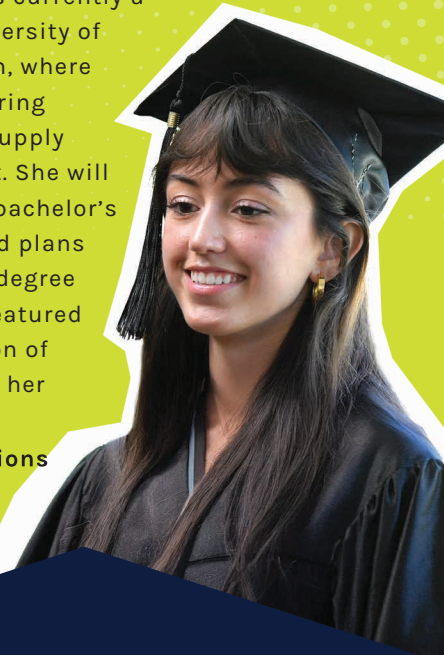
Travanty said while the program was demanding, it was the right choice.

"Choosing to participate was one of the best decisions I ever made," he said. "Through DEA, my high school covered the cost of my College classes, and I received \$1,500 from the State of Wisconsin for earning three state certifications. It gives you a huge head start and lets you begin working in the field early." ■



Deirdre O'Day

A 2024 WCTC Business Management grad and one of the first students in the Elmbrook School District to earn an associate degree through the College's Excelerate initiative, O'Day has used her WCTC experience as a springboard to her next level of education. She is currently a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she is double majoring in Marketing and Supply Chain Management. She will graduate with two bachelor's degrees in 2027 and plans to earn a master's degree by 2028. O'Day is featured in our digital edition of WCTC Impact. Read her full story here: wctc.edu/publications



ONLINE

bonus content

THE APPLIED AI LAB

LEVELS UP THIS JUNE

Generous gifts from donors move project forward

WCTC is getting ready to break ground on a major expansion of its Applied AI Lab, with construction for a second-story addition slated to begin around June 1. The project adds 12,200 square feet to the facility with the building of a second floor plus another 720 square feet to the main level to accommodate new stairs and an elevator. Construction is expected to last approximately 13 months, with substantial completion by July 2027.

Since the Applied AI Lab first opened in 2024, it has been dedicated to helping local businesses and startups looking to learn about and implement artificial intelligence. The main floor includes modern offices, conference rooms, open workstations, and collaboration and incubation spaces. Plans for the second story focus on student learning and will include multiple dual-format computer/network classrooms, a state-of-the-art "pitch" space, student collaboration and social spaces, faculty and administrative offices, quiet work areas and an outdoor terrace among other features. It will be used primarily by WCTC students, faculty and staff in information technology programs.



A successful campaign

To bring this second floor to fruition, the WCTC Foundation launched a \$6 million fundraising campaign in summer 2024. That effort reached its goal last fall following a generous \$2 million donation from the PPC Foundation – the philanthropic vehicle for the PieperPower family of companies.

"We are deeply grateful to the PPC Foundation for their leadership gift to the Applied AI Lab campaign," said Robyn Luttke, WCTC Foundation executive director. "This pivotal contribution allows the project to move forward from vision to reality."

The campaign began with an initial \$1 million gift from the Harry V. Quadracci family's Windhover Foundation. Over time, that momentum was built upon by

...MEANINGFUL PROGRESS is achieved through COLLABORATION, CONNECTING EDUCATION, ENTERPRISE AND COMMUNITY to create lasting impact."

Mike Tillman

President & chief operating officer of MP Systems, Inc., and president of the PPC Foundation

WCTC and individual donors, as well as regional business partners, including Inpro, Eaton, Waukesha State Bank, the Petcoff Foundation, Trace-A-Matic and the We Energies Foundation – all of which sponsored an area within the Applied AI Lab. The PPC Foundation gift closed out the campaign, allowing WCTC to move forward with the addition.

"Our investment in the Applied AI Lab reflects our commitment to advancing innovation and shaping the future of our industry in a way that serves people first," said Mike Tillman, president and chief operating officer of MP Systems, Inc., and president of the PPC Foundation. "We believe meaningful progress is achieved through collaboration, connecting education, enterprise and community to create lasting impact. By strengthening ties between students, industry and regional development, we're helping to build both the talent and the technologies that will define tomorrow's success."

During the construction phase, all Applied AI Lab events and activities will continue; however, they will be temporarily housed at other locations on WCTC's Pewaukee Campus (along with faculty and staff offices). Programming will remain fully active throughout the project.

To learn more about AI at WCTC, visit wctc.edu/ai. ■



Waukesha County Technical

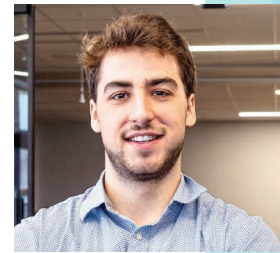
College's Applied AI Lab, innovation is already built into its foundation, and to help that expand, the College welcomed its first two AI fellows at the start of the spring semester.

Joel Roberts, a Ph.D. student in Civil Engineering at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and Muhammad Alliyu, a bachelor's and master's student in Computer Science and Machine Learning, respectively, at the Milwaukee School of Engineering, are driving momentum in the lab.

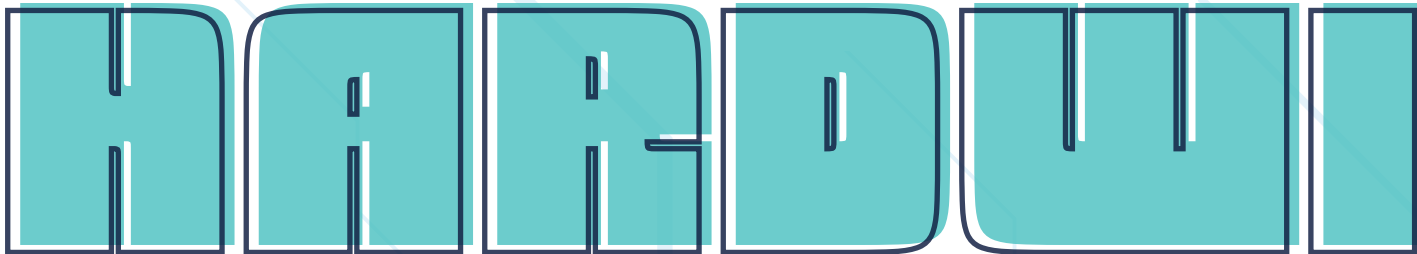
They bring an added layer of insight as well as technical acumen to WCTC's AI space. Their specialized expertise benefits WCTC students, the College as a whole and even the regional workforce; in return, they gain valuable practice in hands-on instruction and advanced research.

ACADEMIC PRECISION PLUS TECHNICAL EXPERTISE

Roberts brings a background in civil engineering and high-level mathematical skills to this role. He founded Shepherd Traffic, a startup company that uses computer vision to transform standard traffic camera feeds into detailed, real-time analytics for safer, more efficient transportation. While building the startup, he participated in the spring 2025 cohort of the gener8tor gBETA accelerator – his first introduction to the Applied AI Lab.



Now, Roberts can tap into that startup experience and share it with the wider campus community, providing students with concrete examples of how an AI-powered idea moves from concept to application.



"Joel and Muhammad are both exceptionally enterprising, curious and talented fellows whose contributions are already making an impact here at the Applied AI Lab. They're paving the way to demonstrate what's possible when we infuse rigorous academic approach with tangible, practical problem-

"THIS IS WHERE NEW METHODS OF ATTACKING WICKED PROBLEMS ARE BORN, AND WE'RE AT THE FRONTIER OF IT."

Sarah J. Buszka
Applied AI Lab director

solving with AI," said Sarah J. Buszka, Applied AI Lab director. "This is where new methods of attacking wicked problems are born, and we're at the frontier of it."

He also has a sense of what artificial intelligence tools will become commonplace, which will become obsolete, and which will alter how people work.

"We're constantly trying to figure out what's the new thing that we can leverage to go faster, do something better," Roberts said. "We might have a little better idea of what the landscape will look like in five years – or how long it will take for things that are cutting-edge right now to become standard business practice."



Alliyu brings a multidisciplinary background in business and information technology, with experience in risk management, software engineering and machine learning research. He has a solid interest in quantitative finance and private equity and the role of AI in investment decision-making.

As a fellow, Alliyu hopes those using the lab develop a clearer understanding of AI, shifting the mindset from theory to utility.

"It's very easy to get fixed into that theoretical bubble," Alliyu said. He explained that the primary challenge lies in moving AI from concepts on a PowerPoint or in a Python script, for example, to something more functional. "How does this help me achieve this goal? How does this give me something physical or something tangible?" he asked, noting it's a question he wants to help others solve.

ENHANCING A ROBUST ECOSYSTEM

Alliyu and Roberts' scope of work is broad. They have been reviewing AI course materials to ensure students are training on the most sophisticated tools available and determining what can be used in classes; they are serving as a tech resource for students in the AI Capstone course; and they are collaborating with a global Fortune 500 company to pilot advanced AI software that integrates large language models (LLMs) and computer vision into WCTC's computer numerical controls programs.

Beyond these tasks, they support AI training sessions for local businesses. To ensure the lab remains an accessible community resource, they are also developing a comprehensive user guide tailored to the needs of novices and advanced practitioners.

"We need to make sure anyone who walks into the lab is able to at least get something done, regardless of technical proficiency," Alliyu said. "The user guide helps create that ramp up ... you're able to get to know the lab, get to know the equipment available and do some really cool stuff – and we can help you figure out how to build that out." ■



READ FOR UTILITY:

WCTC fellows focus on tangible AI

WCTC JOINS NMDSI TO STRENGTHEN

TECH INNOVATION

WCTC recently became one of three new partners in the Northwestern Mutual Data Science Institute (NMDSI), joining a collaborative effort to strengthen the technology landscape in the region. Originally formed in 2018 by Northwestern Mutual, Marquette University and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, the NMDSI invited WCTC, Milwaukee School of Engineering (MSOE) and the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) to broaden its scope.

Presidents and chancellors from all five higher education institutions, along with leaders from Northwestern Mutual, came together at a special event in February – Elevating and Accelerating AI Excellence in Southeast Wisconsin – for the official announcement.

"We're thrilled to welcome three outstanding academic institutions to the NMDSI that have made substantial advancements in the field of AI and data science," said Tim Gerend, chairman, president and CEO of Northwestern Mutual.

"This expansion will result in significant knowledge sharing and greater institutional collaboration, which ultimately accelerates our efforts to develop the next generation of exceptional tech talent and future-ready leaders in Southeastern Wisconsin."

Since its formation, the NMDSI has been a champion for artificial intelligence and data science-driven transformation in both industry and education.



Rich Barnhouse joins regional partners through NMDSI to advance technology in the region. Photo courtesy of NMDSI.

With the new partners, the NMDSI can continue to advance these technological efforts by supporting key research, expanding training opportunities and academic programming, cultivating talent and more.

"This expansion will result in significant knowledge sharing and greater institutional collaboration"

Tim Gerend
Chairman, president and CEO of Northwestern Mutual

WCTC President and CEO Rich Barnhouse, Ph.D., sees the College's involvement as an important piece of a larger technological shift.

"We're happy that WCTC has become part of this partnership and platform. It really helps Wisconsin drive these emerging technologies – AI, quantum computing and humanoid robotics – into business and industry," Barnhouse said.

To learn more about the NMDSI, visit nmdsi.org. ■



WHERE AI MEETS AMBITION

When he learned that Waukesha County Technical College was going to start offering an AI Data Specialist associate degree program, Cameron Pearce immediately wanted in.

"It just screamed out to me because I had gotten into AI kind of around when ChatGPT released," Pearce said. "This just felt like the right time. It's just coming out. I'm going to make my move and make my impact."

Pearce, 29, has always been a tinkerer with a knack for computers, and the new AI degree offered him a chance to be on the forefront of something transformative.

When he started his classes, Pearce was working full time at Quad, pulling 12-hour night shifts in the Inventory Control Department. When the company had an opening for a data position, Pearce's boss, who knew Pearce was taking AI classes, suggested Pearce for the role of business operations analyst.

It was exactly the kind of job Pearce had in mind when he started the AI program. Suddenly, he not only had the job he wanted, he also had the backing of his employer to complete his studies.

"They were super enthused about the whole program and everything," Pearce said. "I've been able to use everything that I've been learning at the same time

in the workplace. So, it's really helped to strengthen that learning, too, because it's not just school projects or homework. I'm starting to have an impact right away. And they've been super flexible."

And it is not just his bosses at Quad who have been vital to Pearce's progress. He credits the AI faculty at WCTC for helping him every step of the way.

"There's always somebody there to support you," he said. "You never feel like you're alone on an island trying to work something out. You can always find somebody if you need it. It's been amazing. I definitely attribute all my success over the last two years to WCTC."

For Pearce, it feels like years of hard work and personal growth are paying off. He entered the workforce right after high school because he was not sure he was ready for college.

Now that graduation is on the horizon, he's long past those doubts about his abilities. He is focused on and excited about using his AI skills to help Quad continue to thrive.

"My goal for this year now that I'm towards the end of the program is to start to get some of that machine learning into production," he said. "It's super exciting. You're using the historical data that you have to more than likely predict what's going to happen next. You can leverage that data for future business value." ■



FROM FINANCE TO AI:

Caleb Bryant

WCTC's District Ambassador for 2026-27

Caleb Bryant spent the bulk of his career working in finance, specifically, mortgage banking, before deciding to shift gears. His job was solid, but the satisfaction and excitement in his day-to-day work was average, at best, he said.

"Personally, I didn't feel like I had challenged myself to the level at which I am capable. WCTC was the conduit for me to be able to do that," he said. "It was an obtainable challenge that made me just uncomfortable enough to say, 'Go for it!'"

And go for it, he did. Bryant followed his curiosity and dual enrolled in the IT-Data and Analytics Specialist program as well as the AI Data Specialist program, swapping spreadsheets and timesheets for machine learning models and class projects. He left his job and is now focusing on school full time, with plans to tackle an entirely new career in information technology.

REPRESENTING THE DISTRICT

Earlier this semester, Bryant was chosen as the new WCTC District Ambassador for the 2026-27 academic year. He will represent WCTC as a technical college advocate and participate in a state-level leadership development and recognition program, along with student representatives from each of the 15 other Wisconsin technical colleges.

"I love the technical college atmosphere because we are all there to 'get things done.' There isn't any fluff," he said, noting how classes are dense with material, expectations are high and students are responsible for putting in the effort to achieve personal success. "There are still plenty of group activities, clubs and social engagements. So, yes, it is 'get things done,' but it's fun and supportive at the same time."

IMMERSIVE LEARNING AND INNOVATION

Bryant has taken advantage of many extra curriculars at WCTC, fully immersing himself in his education on multiple levels. He has participated in student panels and an AI podcast, and he is an IT Club member and the dedicated AI liaison to the students in the group. Additionally, he oversees the IT Hoot Club AI Newsletter that he started from scratch as a manual creation/process and is working to make it fully AI autonomous. His goal with it is to help others understand AI basics by highlighting tools, offering tips, providing curated AI news and simplifying complex tech terms.

"As a student, you can engage as much as you want with all the opportunities WCTC offers with its program – not to mention the program-specific career fairs. I am midway through my degree and have already established meaningful connections with potential employers due to the career fair alone," he said.

A result of those connections led Bryant to a part-time gig with Handshake AI, where he trains AI models by reviewing outputs, creating prompts and providing feedback.

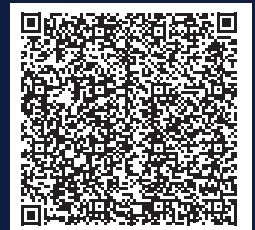
BUILDING A DATA-DRIVEN FUTURE

Bryant plans to graduate in 2027 and he's eager to jump into his new career but also continue to challenge himself academically.

"My post-WCTC plans are to get a job, but this time it will be something new and exciting for me," he said. "I don't want to stop this educational enlightenment that I'm on, so I hope that I can balance a job and pursue a bachelor's or master's while working. Learning is just a hobby of mine. I don't ever want to stop." ■

"I love the technical college atmosphere because we are all there to 'get things done.'"

Tap into the **IT HOOT CLUB AI NEWSLETTER** for what's next in AI.



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ANONYMOUS DONOR PROVIDES FUNDS FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT VEHICLE AND SIMULATOR

Earlier this year, WCTC received a \$300,000 gift from an anonymous donor for a new squad car and sophisticated simulation equipment, which will enhance training opportunities within the College's School of Protective & Human Services.

The heavy-duty sport utility vehicle, a 2025 Ford Police Interceptor, allows students to practice high-speed maneuvers, skid control and precision driving techniques. It will be integrated into the College's Criminal Justice-Law Enforcement Academy, law enforcement in-service sessions, vehicle pursuit training and other specialized classes.

"This vehicle allows us to provide more realistic, hands-on instruction to both our students and current law enforcement

officers," said Jodi Crozier, WCTC's associate dean of Law Enforcement.

In addition to the new squad car, the College was able to purchase a VirTra, three-screen interactive training simulator.

These simulators provide an immersive, high-fidelity environment to sharpen decision-making and de-escalation skills through realistic scenarios.

"We are grateful to the donor for this generous gift and for supporting our programs," Crozier said. ■



WCTC RECEIVES AMBULANCE DONATION

The New Berlin Fire Department (NBFD) recently donated an ambulance, a Ford 550 equipped with a Stryker Power Load system and power cot, to WCTC, for use in the College's Fire and EMS programs. The vehicle provides a realistic environment for up to six students and an instructor to practice lifesaving techniques and patient care within a confined space. The approximate value of the donation is around \$65,000.

By training inside the ambulance, students can practice communication with the patient and driver, gain a better understanding of equipment layout, and adapt their medical techniques within the limited footprint.

"This helps us teach students how to care for patients in the back of an ambulance as well as practicing certain skills 'on the move,'" said Courtney Hull, WCTC associate dean of Fire/EMS Training, noting the College is grateful to the NBFD for the generous donation.

For more information about WCTC's Criminal Justice/Law Enforcement and Fire/EMS programs, visit wctc.edu/programs. ■

WCTC IN THE NEWS

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AI, Applied is a new podcast hosted by Applied AI Lab Director Sarah J. Buszka, exploring how artificial intelligence is shaping our College, community and the nation. Tune in for conversations that connect innovation to real-world impact. Learn more at wctc.edu/ai.



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