

FALL 2025

Impact



WAUKESHA COUNTY TECHNICAL COLLEGE

30
years
COUNTLESS SMILES

THREE DECADES

WCTC's Dental
Hygienist Program
Transforms Lives

MIDWEST, REWIRED

Leveling Up AI in
the Region





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Enjoy this fall edition of the Impact!

WCTC Impact is designed to showcase stories of how our graduates, students, instructors, and community and business partners strive to make a difference in the world around them, and how WCTC has propelled them to succeed. This publication highlights the latest happenings, changes and improvements at the College, and it shines a light on student and alumni achievement.

Impact is published twice a year for the communities of Waukesha County Technical College.

PRESIDENT & CEO	Rich Barnhouse, Ph.D.
CHIEF EXTERNAL RELATIONS & MARKETING OFFICER.....	Andy Palen
DIRECTOR, COLLEGE MARKETING	Liz Paulsen
EDITOR/WRITER.....	Shelly Nelson
LEAD GRAPHIC DESIGNER.....	Kathleen Yanasak
CONTRIBUTORS	Katie Ish
.....	Cheryl Thomas
.....	Chelsey Siwula



WAUKESHA
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COLLEGE

Hands-on
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800 Main Street, Pewaukee, Wisconsin 53072




A Message from the WCTC PRESIDENT

Where were you 30 years ago? I was a college student. That year, 1995, was also the year WCTC began the Dental Hygienist associate degree program. For as much as things have changed on campus over 30 years, many programs endure and get better each year. That is the case for WCTC's Dental Hygienist degree program, which is the lead story in this edition of our magazine.

This academic year, 2025-26, marks my fifth fall semester at WCTC. Just as the Dental Hygienist program has thrived over the past three decades, our College has achieved significant growth in the past five years in programs, enrollment and partnerships. These partnerships keep us sharp, focused and more determined than ever to deliver the best possible workforce for employers. In addition, our relationships with the communities we serve preserves our commitment to meet the needs of all taxpayers and residents. WCTC offers over 100 programs providing limitless opportunities; from traditional technical programs to the liberal arts and transfer degrees, to artificial intelligence and robotics, and everything in between.

WCTC has grown into a large, regional comprehensive college, and our commitment to community and economic prosperity has never been stronger.

Thank you for your support of WCTC.


Rich Barnhouse, Ph.D.

THIRTY YEARS OF *Smiles*

WCTC's Dental Hygienist Program Marks Significant Milestone of Comprehensive, Compassionate Care

As Waukesha County Technical College celebrates the 30th anniversary of its Dental Hygienist associate degree program, it marks a journey of evolution and innovation, paired with a deep commitment to the local community. The program has flourished over three decades, becoming a leader in dental education and shaping skilled and compassionate professionals who are changing smiles, one patient at a time.

A Foundation BUILT ON SERVICE

During its first year in 1995-96, the program had only 12 dental chairs in its teaching clinic at the Pewaukee campus, said Kim Johns, longtime instructor. At that time, it was a shared program with Blackhawk Technical College through 2007, and a partnership program was also in place with Lakeshore Technical College from 1996-2014.

Since then, it has grown significantly. In 2019, the program moved to the Waukesha campus into a new, state-of-the-art Dental Hygiene Clinic with 20 chairs (plus another

10 for the Dental Assistant program) and sophisticated, cutting-edge tools and equipment. Johns said the relocation stemmed from a need to better serve students and the community; it increased patient availability for clinical training and provided a vital resource for a diverse downtown population.

This fall, another 10 new, fully outfitted stations were added to expand capacity. This was made possible in large part by a \$2.1 million grant from the state and another \$169,455 grant from the Delta Dental of Wisconsin Foundation. (Grant money is also being used to create an Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary program; see article on pg. 7.)

"There is a growing demand for dental hygienists, so we've increased our enrollment from 20 to 30 students per cohort to help meet that need," Johns said. That need is supported by national data: the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects a 7% job growth for dental hygienists through 2034, translating to about 15,300 job openings per year.



Dental Hygienist program instructor Kim Johns discusses procedures with students Sienna Balistreri and Evangelina Villafuentes.



Dental Hygienist students Evangelina Villafuentes and Sienna Balisteri work on a dental simulation manikin head with instructor Marlena Schultz, who teaches classes in the Dental Assistant and Dental Hygienist programs, as well as the forthcoming Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary program.

Because of the program's solid reputation and critical demand for practitioners, WCTC Dental Hygienist students are highly sought after, and many have three or four job offers before they graduate, said Lisa Nowak, associate dean in the School of Health. The program also boasts outstanding board pass rates, with students consistently demonstrating a high level of proficiency on the National Board Dental Hygiene Examination and the Central Regional Dental Testing Service, both required for licensing.

"[The faculty's] passion and commitment to the profession permeates into the curriculum, and they take such pride in the students that graduate."

Lisa Nowak
Associate Dean, School of Health

Expert teaching by experienced instructors also contributes to the prestige of the program. "The faculty are the backbone of this program," Nowak said. "Their passion and

commitment to the profession permeates into the curriculum, and they take such pride in the students that graduate."

Building Healthier Futures: A PASSION FOR GIVING BACK

The program has a strong emphasis on public health, and its impact has been far-reaching. For many years, WCTC students led sealant clinics at select local elementary schools, focusing on those with a high percentage of students receiving free or reduced lunch. These efforts highlighted a dire need for affordable care and led to the opening of a nonprofit community dental clinic, separate from the College's teaching clinic, which still maintains strong ties to WCTC.

Additionally, students participate in many other outreach efforts through their classes and the Dental Hygiene Club, including offering screenings for children in early childhood settings, providing oral health education to nursing home and memory care residents, and taking part in special events such as the Give Kids a Smile program.

"We've not met a student that we haven't liked, and they always do a great job of making you feel comfortable."

Louisa Henke
Patient at WCTC's Dental Hygiene Clinic

Student Evangelina Villafuentes said the community service piece enhances her training, ultimately making her a better hygienist. "WCTC requires us to have a hefty amount of volunteer hours (45 hours over the course of the program). With these requirements, we are able to give back to the community and share our love for dental with others in the real world."

The WCTC Dental Hygiene Clinic serves to bridge the gap between students' education and the community's dental health needs by offering high-quality, affordable services to the public, all under the watchful eye of licensed professionals. Students perform teeth cleanings, x-rays, fluoride treatments, sealants, assessments and other services, and they are required to see patients of all ages with dental issues ranging from simple to complex.

Beyond mastering technical aspects, students also hone their communication and soft skills, Johns said. "They learn how to establish rapport and earn patients' trust, which is a crucial skill. Once they enter a dental office, the dentist will expect them to build strong patient relationships."

With a 5-to-1 student-to-instructor ratio in the clinic, students gain the support they need to be prepared for any situation. The team includes five full-time instructors, 10 part-time clinical instructors and seven supervising dentists.

For student Sienna Balistreri, the hands-on component has reinforced her knowledge "in every possible way," she said. "Every day that I am in clinic, I am applying what I am learning in class and being able to practice it hands on. Everyone is different, so every patient is a learning experience."

Supervising dentist Dr. Tracy Davies works closely with students, providing constant oversight during appointments. She mentors students about proper techniques and professionalism, encouraging them to see the patient as a whole person.

She prioritizes teaching students to show patients the highest level of care, sharing a core philosophy she hopes they carry into the field: "You've been taught well, now use your skills to help others. Treat others exactly how you would want your family members treated — with kindness, honesty, integrity — and everything else falls in line after that."



Longtime Dental Hygienist instructor Kim Johns has been with the program since October 1995 - just two months after it began.

Louisa Henke, and her son, Mel, have been going to WCTC's Dental Hygiene Clinic for nearly 15 years. She enjoys helping students gain valuable practice for their careers, and she appreciates the comprehensive services, convenient location and excellent care.

"It's nice and clean and bright, and the students are so attentive," she said. "We've not met a student that we haven't liked, and they always do a great job of making you feel comfortable."

Launchpad for THRIVING CAREERS

Since the program's inception, around 470 students have graduated, and four of those alums — Jenny Maxwell '13, Tina Nissen '13, Colin Meddaugh '19 and Corina Layton '20 — are a testament to its influence, each finding their own unique niche while practicing as registered dental hygienists (RDH).

"When you become an RDH, wear it loud and wear it proud, because you can really make change and a difference in people's lives," said Maxwell, who founded RDH Communications, which provides mobile dental services to elderly residents at care facilities in central Wisconsin.

For Nissen, the dental clinic manager at Lake Area Free Clinic — which also serves as a clinical rotation site for current WCTC students — the program was the springboard for her career success. "At the time, it felt intense, but in hindsight, the high standards and accountability helped shape me into a competent and confident clinician."

These sentiments are echoed by Meddaugh and Layton. "I am beyond proud to have graduated from the WCTC Dental Hygienist program," said Layton, who uses her social media presence to create educational dental-related content. "I truly think it was the best program and education I could have received."

Meddaugh added the program fostered confidence, professionalism and a lifelong commitment to patient care, and he values the bonds he made with students and faculty. "I'm proud to be a part of the WCTC dental hygiene legacy. Here's to many more generations of hygienists who will go on to serve their communities with the same pride and passion instilled at WCTC." ■

INTERESTED IN HAVING YOUR TEETH CLEANED & Helping a Student?

Appointments are **\$30**, which include the exam, cleaning and any necessary x-rays, along with other services.

The clinic is located at 327 E. Broadway in downtown Waukesha, and students see patients by appointment on Tuesdays and Fridays.



Learn more by visiting our Dental Hygiene Clinic website, emailing dhclinic@wctc.edu or calling **262.691.5224**.

NEW EFDA PROGRAM OFFERS DENTAL ASSISTANTS A PATH TO ADVANCED CAREERS

Starting in fall 2026, Waukesha County Technical College will expand its dental program offerings with the addition of a new, 11-credit Expanded Function Dental Auxiliary (EFDA) advanced technical certificate program. This program is designed to upskill practicing dental assistants, providing them with a pathway for professional growth.

A certified EFDA performs work that goes beyond the traditional scope of a dental assistant. This includes specific types of procedures, such as placing and finishing restorative materials, applying sealants and removing stitches. By taking on these tasks, EFDAs streamline efficiencies in dental offices and allow dentists to focus on more complex care.

While many neighboring states have had practitioners working as EFDAs for some time, Wisconsin only recently (spring of 2022) passed a law to address a shortage of dental professionals and authorized the use of EFDAs in the state. The certificate program, which will welcome its first class of 10 students, is a direct response to this legislation.

Dental Assistant instructors Jessica Jacobi and Marlena Schultz will lead the new program. In 2024, both received extensive training at Chippewa Valley Technical College and Madison College to teach in the EFDA program.

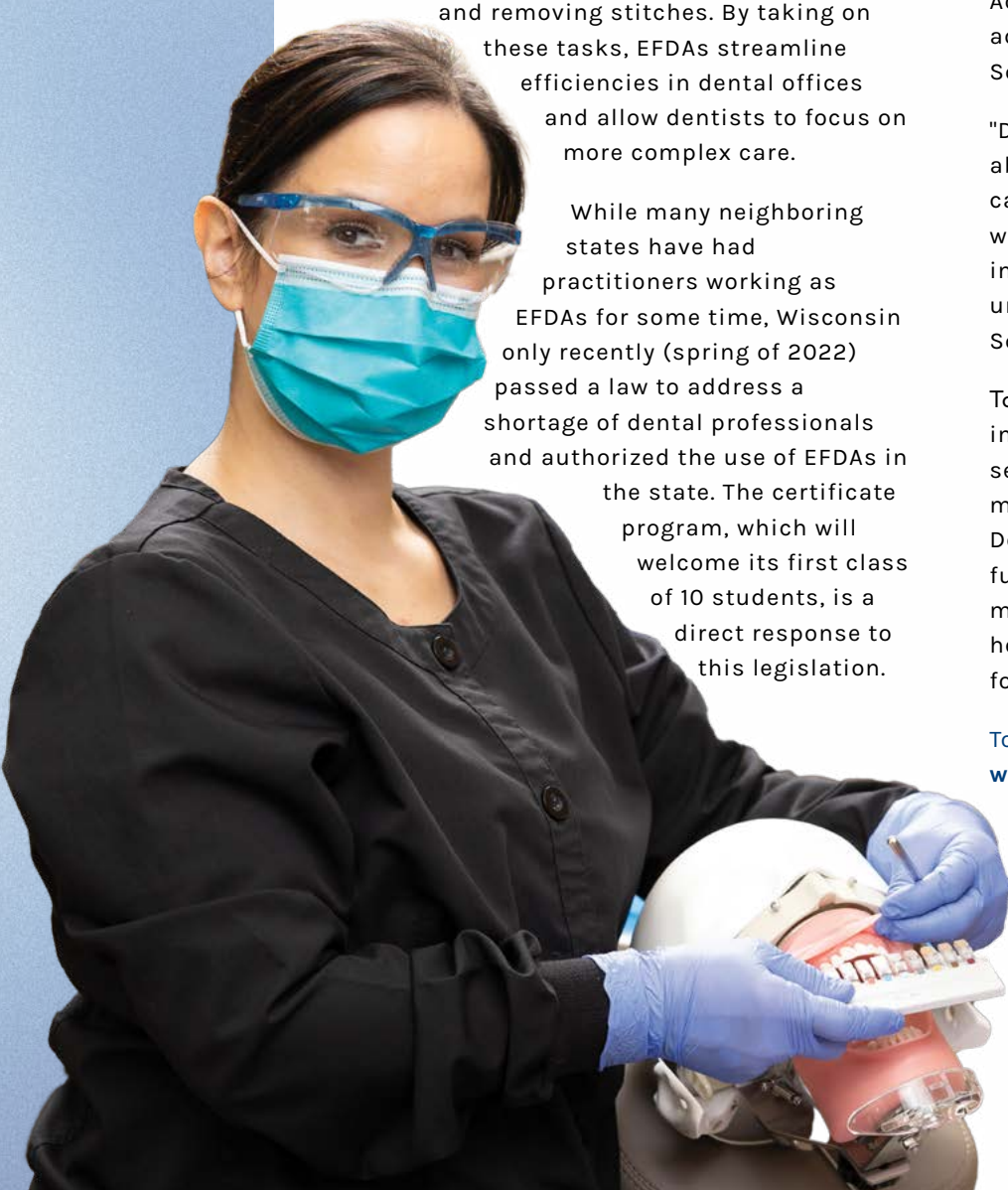
"This program not only strengthens students' existing skills but also equips them with advanced, marketable training that meets the evolving needs of today's dental industry," Jacobi said, noting it is helping to close critical gaps in the workforce.

Additionally, this educational focus addresses a larger, more critical issue, Schultz said.

"Dental professionals are passionate about patient care. A trained EFDA can increase production and optimize workflow in private practice but more importantly increase access to care in unserved and underserved populations," Schultz said.

To support the development and implementation of the program, WCTC secured more than \$2.2 million in grant money from the state and the Delta Dental of Wisconsin Foundation. This funding will help ensure the program meets strict educational standards and helps build a stronger dental workforce for the future. ■

To learn more about this program, visit wctc.edu/efda.





MIDWEST, REWIRING.

WCTC WELCOMES NEW **APPLIED** **LAB DIRECTOR**



As tech giants continue to invest in the Midwest, Sarah J. Buszka, the new director of Waukesha County Technical College's Applied AI Lab, is playing a key role in the region's

technological transition. She is focused on helping businesses build the foundational skills and practical applications needed for the state's workforce to evolve and become more resilient in the future.

"My goal is to make Wisconsin the 'Silicon Prairie' through AI, and I really do feel like we have the best minds in the room and the gusto and gumption to do so," Buszka said of WCTC's leadership and commitment to transformation.

It's a bold goal, but one Buszka is resolute to deliver on.

A FOCUS ON PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Since she began at WCTC, Buszka has consulted with more than 25 regional companies, helped secure major corporate donations for lab expansion and established partnerships that are already reshaping how the region uses AI. Her method involves diving straight into practical applications that solve real business problems.

During summer and fall, Buszka has helped elevate the lab through a variety of speaking engagements, including Summerfest Tech and the Argonne National Laboratory's AI & STEM Education Summit, in which she presented with Alli Jerger, School of Business associate dean. Additionally, Buszka represented WCTC as part of an EDUCAUSE Showcase Series on institutional resilience in an article and podcast with Harvard University leadership.

Her path to AI leadership combines more than a dozen years of diverse experience at Stanford University and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, blending West Coast innovation and research expertise. At Stanford, she was a senior relationship manager and technology strategist, and at UW-Madison, she held multiple roles of increasing responsibility, including critical infrastructure and cyberinfrastructure service lead.

Buszka holds a Master of Public Administration with a focus on AI policy from Cornell University and bachelor's degrees from UW-Madison in Neurobiology and Psychology. She also has various specialty certifications and was honored with the 2024 EDUCAUSE Rising Star Award for emerging leaders in the international higher education technology space.

SCALING FOR GROWTH TO MEET THE DEMAND

The Applied AI Lab is expanding its capacity by hiring international entrepreneurs-in-residence, adjunct faculty and graduate fellows to advance education and innovation in AI, robotics and quantum computing, Buszka said. This approach connects global expertise with local industry to boost workforce development and regional tech leadership.

"The interest from businesses has been overwhelming. We're scaling rapidly to ensure we can serve our community as they come to us seeking AI expertise," she said.

Buszka's efforts are already impacting the workforce, but she has an even broader vision. "A big goal for me is to really democratize AI for everybody and make it feel more accessible," she said. ■

To learn more about artificial intelligence at WCTC, please visit wctc.edu/ai.



Finding Her Voice

Donna Brendel's Story of Grit, Growth and Giving Back

In the spring of 2025, Donna Brendel fulfilled a goal she first set more than three decades ago, proving that it's never too late to finish what you started.

Brendel first attended WCTC in 1992, but with just one semester left, she found herself at a crossroads. Unaware of her autism diagnosis, she struggled to articulate her concerns about her real estate appraisal career. "I didn't know how to share my feelings with anyone," she recalls. "So I just stopped going to school."

After leaving WCTC, Brendel worked in various roles while raising her three children. When her son was diagnosed with autism, she learned about the condition and how it presents differently in women.

"As I educated myself... for my son's sake, I learned more about myself than I ever had before."

"Show up for yourself. Talk to people you feel safe with to share your dreams and then pursue them."

Through this research, she started to understand her own past struggles. "As I educated myself about autism for my son's sake, I learned more about myself than I ever had before," she said. "Once I started to advocate for my son, I started to advocate for myself as well."

Since then, Brendel has become a passionate advocate, leading an online support group and serving as a speaker for the Autism Society of Greater Wisconsin. She also hosts a podcast, "I Should Say That Out Loud," where she shares insights on navigating life with autism, striving to reduce stigma and inspire hope.

As she guided her children through their college journeys, her own desire to return to school was reignited. With decades of experience in the human services field, she returned to WCTC in 2024 to pursue an associate degree. This time, she knew herself better and found herself enjoying college more than ever.

Brendel's return culminated in an array of achievements, including membership in two honor societies and winning the Human Services Program Award. She also took home the 2025 Grit Award, an honor presented to one graduating student who demonstrates tenacity in working toward and achieving long-term goals, even in the face of adversity.

Graduation was just the beginning for Brendel. She has since started her bachelor's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, published her second memoir and started offering life coaching.

For others considering a return to college, her advice is simple yet profound: "Show up for yourself. Talk to people you feel safe with to share your dreams and then pursue them."

Brendel's story is a testament to the power of perseverance and the courage to redefine one's own path. Her journey reminds us that with grit and a little help along the way, anything is possible. ∞



For an extended version of this story, visit wctc.edu/newsroom.

Partnering for Progress

UWM and WCTC join to create a seamless route to bachelor's degrees

WCTC officially celebrated the grand opening of the UWM University Center at WCTC this summer, with the first group of students starting in the fall.

The center is focused on helping students stay local for their education, from associate degree to bachelor's degree, and the opening of the center signifies a new level of collaboration between two of Wisconsin's premier higher education institutions.



Higher education leaders and legislators were on hand at a ribbon cutting to celebrate the opening of the UWM University Center at WCTC. From left, are Brad Piazza, Rich Barnhouse, Mark Mone, Andrew Daire and Paul Farrow. *UWM Photo/Troye Fox*

While WCTC and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee have worked together for many years, this effort provides affordable UWM bachelor's degree completion options right in the heart of Waukesha County.

"UWM and WCTC have a longstanding relationship of more than 20 years, and the new UWM University Center at WCTC exemplifies our continued commitment to student success and providing access to affordable higher education in Waukesha County," UWM Chancellor Emeritus Mark Mone, Ph.D., said.

Students can complete their bachelor's degree at the UWM University Center at WCTC, the main UWM campus, online or through hybrid options, depending on their major. In its first year, the new center is focusing its offerings on social work, information science and technology, and business – with the goal of adding several more programs.

"This is what the future of higher education looks like in meeting the needs of local business and industry, and we're so pleased to build a model for Wisconsin with our closest partner, UWM," said WCTC President and CEO Rich Barnhouse, Ph.D.



For details about the new UWM University Center at WCTC, visit the center's webpage. ■

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- Information Technology
- Liberal Arts & General Studies
- Management & Entrepreneurship
- Marketing & Sales
- Public Service & Safety
- Supply Chain & Transportation



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