



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON

**children
& families**

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To: Members of Assembly Committee on Colleges and Universities
From: John Keckhaver, Research Analyst – Work and Economic Security,
Wisconsin Council on Children & Families
Re: AB 439
Date: August 28, 2007

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families strongly supports passage of AB 439. The bill was unanimously approved by the bipartisan Strengthening Wisconsin Families Legislative Council Study Committee, and then forwarded to the Assembly by the full Legislative Council Committee. There are three distinct and important parts of AB 439.

- (1) Reporting of adult basic education outcomes and setting goals for improvement.
- (2) Removal of the “at least half time” barrier to WHEG grants for Technical College students.
- (3) Establishing concurrent enrollment options for selected students to be enrolled in both adult basic education and postsecondary programs simultaneously.

Each of these directly impacts efforts to meet an important workforce challenge facing the state: how to help more low-skilled adults gain the skills they need in order to earn a decent wage in our increasingly knowledge-based economy. Each of the three parts of this bill addresses a critical barrier to meeting our current and future workforce challenges and will help our workers – and the employers who need them – compete.

1. Reporting of Adult Basic Education outcomes and setting goals for improvement.

Currently, the Wisconsin Technical College System reports certain data annually including, among other things, the number of a *subset* of students transitioning from basic education to postsecondary programs. Unfortunately, only those students who have *stated college as their goal* are included in this statistic – giving a cloudy view of actual completion and transition rates. AB 439 requires a number of new data points to be reported by the Wisconsin Technical College System to the legislature annually. Those include:

- (1) The numbers of students entering adult basic education programming.
- (2) Those that complete basic education programming and gain the GED.
- (3) Those that then transition to post-GED programming within 2 years.
- (4) What programs these students enter (ex. certificates, technical diplomas, associate degree programs).
- (5) Whether they complete any post-GED programming within 5 years.

These represent the most basic of outcome data, and Wisconsin Technical College System personnel have indicated in the past that the requested data is currently collected, but not reported. The change, therefore, should require only minimal change from current practice and minimal administrative resources.

While reporting program data is often a secondary consideration, the Strengthening Wisconsin Families Study Committee recognized the importance of having relevant outcome information in order to strive toward improved adult basic education outcomes and program performance and an appropriate return on our basic education investments. With complete baseline data on the numbers of adult basic education students gaining their GED, and transitioning to postsecondary programs, for instance, goals can then be set by the Wisconsin Technical College System Board for improvement in this critical aspect of meeting our workforce challenges. AB 439 also requires the Board to then set such goals.

2. Removal of the “at least half time” barrier to WHEG grants.

Currently, the state’s main need-based financial aid tool, the Wisconsin Higher Education Grant, is only available to students attending at least half time (6 credits). This restriction is addressed in AB 439 by removing the half-time minimum enrollment status requirement. Also, the current 10-semester limit on WHEGs is changed to a lifetime credit limit of 135 – reflecting the growing trend toward lifelong learning and ongoing skill development needs. This change only impacts the Wisconsin Technical College portion of WHEG funding as AB 439 is currently written.

These WHEG changes will help more working adult students *complete* their programs of study. Currently, for a number of reasons (balancing school with family and work obligations, scheduling of courses, etc.) these students often have to temporarily drop down to just one class a semester. When they do so, they’re not eligible for a WHEG. Without financial aid, working students are less likely to remain in a program of study.

We know that when students drop out of programs it is less likely they will ever complete their studies. When students drop out, there is in effect no return on the publicly-funded investments made in them, through the already-invested WHEGs and other financial aid funds as well as the higher education services provided. Also, research indicates that having completed some college credits but not obtaining a post-GED credential does little or nothing to increase employment and earnings outcomes.

A number of other states have recognized how their financial aid tools do not match up with current student (and job market) realities, and have made this change, and their experiences are available for review. Some examples are Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, Indiana, Massachusetts, West Virginia, Georgia, and Arkansas. AB 439 will help Wisconsin keep pace with other states such as these that are already finding ways to respond to skill shortages and workforce challenges similar to Wisconsin’s.

Officials in those states are not allowing perennial debates about overall financial aid funding levels to stop them from improving the *design* and effectiveness of their financial aid tools.

One thing these examples show us is that it is very inexpensive to serve these students. For example, financial aid for students attending less than half time totaled less than 0.5 percent of all aid awarded through Illinois' Monetary Award Program (MAP), their main financial aid tool, in a recent evaluation year. Financial aid administrators there also told us they are convinced the change has helped keep students enrolled who would otherwise have dropped out.

Data on who has been served by the change in Illinois also illustrate how this change has clearly targeted the working adult population it was meant to target, with the average impacted MAP recipient being 30 years old, low-income, and working about 28 hours per week.

Overall funding levels of our financial aid tools will continue to be a topic of discussion and debate. That fact should not preclude the legislature from ensuring that the design of our financial aid tools matches the experiences of and fits the needs of our students and our employers. This change is a small but smart reform that will help more students complete their programs of study, particularly the growing numbers of students trying hard to balance work and family obligations with their attempts to increase their skills and credentials.

If concerns persist about this reform diluting an already strapped financial aid tool, despite the evidence to the contrary, the bill could be amended in a number of ways. For instance, a limitation could be included in the bill that would require students to have been enrolled for at least one semester in the prior year or two of study at the half-time or higher level in order to be eligible for a grant at the less than half time level. Another option would be to pilot the change in a number of technical college districts, and closely monitor the costs and impacts on enrollment and completion figures. Neither limitation appears necessary given the experience had in a number of other states, however.

3. Establishing concurrent enrollment options for *selected* students to be enrolled in both adult basic education and postsecondary programs simultaneously.

While Wisconsin does not have the *statutory* requirement that a GED is required before postsecondary study, it appears that individual colleges still utilize and focus on the GED as a requirement for many postsecondary programs.

This barrier for entry to valuable postsecondary training is addressed in AB 439 by prohibiting technical colleges from using the GED as an *automatic* requirement to postsecondary programs in general, and requires the Wisconsin Technical College System to establish “concurrent enrollment” options, where a portion of adult basic education students (those assessing at sufficiently high levels) can work toward their GED and also enroll in some parts of their preferred postsecondary programs. The WTCS would be allowed, under the bill, to establish criteria for when this is not appropriate.

Other states have found that dual enrollment increases motivation of students and also significantly shortens the time needed to complete programs of study (a key for working students needing to retool their skills).

Washington State is a leader in this area, having established its Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) programs a number of years ago. Their I-BEST model consists of “bridge” programs in which basic education and occupational postsecondary programming are combined, in

order to increase motivation and “build in” the critical transition from basic education to postsecondary. The impacts have been significant, with I-BEST students five times more likely to earn college credits, and 15 times more likely to complete occupational training, than traditionally taught basic education students. The I-BEST model, which began as a pilot project, was recently replicated statewide in Washington.

A number of other states have created similar bridge and career pathway programs that allow basic education students to also be enrolled in postsecondary – typically *occupational* postsecondary – programs, with Arkansas, Kentucky, and Illinois providing other examples.

Response to Accreditation Concerns

While the concern has not been fully explained, the WTCS has raised the possibility that such an option for students could put our colleges’ accreditation at risk. It’s unclear, given the growing experience with such efforts around the country, how this is the case. Given the seriousness of such a claim, however, we contacted officials and colleagues in Illinois and Washington State, as well as national researchers familiar with other such educational models. While we are able to speculate as to what some accreditation considerations may be, in the end it became clear that accreditation has not proven to be a problem elsewhere nor should it prove fatal to this bill.

Could Students Possibly Matriculate Before Getting the GED?

One potential fear is that the situation would arise where a student could matriculate from a postsecondary program before actually earning their GED and that federal accreditors would look unfavorably on this. It is difficult to imagine such a situation occurring. However, in order to alleviate this fear, a provision could be added, or the policy adopted by the Wisconsin Technical College System, that the attainment of the GED is required in order to actually matriculate from the postsecondary program (for example, a certificate of training or technical diploma program).

Is the GED Required to Meet the Federal “Ability to Benefit” Test?

In order to qualify for federal financial aid, states must assess students in some way in order to show that they are at a sufficiently high skill level that would suggest they would, in fact, benefit from federal financial aid and would most likely be able to complete the postsecondary program they are enrolling in. There is a long list of tests, approved by the Federal Department of Education, which states can use to satisfy the federal ability to benefit test. If the WTCS is suggesting that its colleges only use the obtainment of the GED to satisfy this test, the remedy is rather straightforward. Instead of utilizing a somewhat outdated credential such as the GED (which does not guarantee individual skill levels as clearly as other assessments can) colleges should instead begin using one of the many other options available to them.

In other words, the Ability to Benefit test is not a barrier to the creation of concurrent enrollment programs (as officials in other states, who we assume would also be cognizant of the importance of not losing accreditation, have found).

Can the System Ensure that Basic Education Courses are Not-For-Credit?

One potential concern is the fact that basic education courses must be not-for-credit, and that this could get confused in a concurrent enrollment situation. Unlike the basic education courses, the postsecondary course or courses enrolled in under such a concurrent enrollment program described in AB 439 would generally count for credit. In some states, officials have created concurrent enrollment programs, often referred to as “bridge” programs, in which the basic education material is actually combined in the classroom with postsecondary vocational material.

In those cases, program officials have to parse out the portion of the course that appropriately counts toward the postsecondary degree and award credit only for that portion, not for the adult basic education portion of the course. **This scenario is not mandated by this bill, however. AB 439 only requires the opportunity for some students (assessing at a sufficiently high level) to be enrolled in their basic education coursework at the same time that they are getting started on their postsecondary program of choice. AB 439 does not mandate co-teaching or mingling of course material.** (If a school chose to go that route, however, a model which has proven effective elsewhere, it would merely have to apportion some amount of the coursework to count toward credit, and some that would be considered not-for-credit: a step education officials in other states have been able to take without much difficulty.)

After speculating about the stated fear of losing accreditation, and communicating with a number of experts on these issues, we could not identify any serious accreditation issues involved with the creation of concurrent enrollment options for students. Leaders in other states have not been hampered by accreditation issues. However, another option for alleviating any concerns associated with accreditation would be to add the following provision to the bill:

"Nothing in this law shall be construed to require colleges to adopt policies specifically prohibited by their accrediting agencies."

Such a provision would allow the WTCS to explore a number of options for implementing the bill in communication with the accreditation agency for Wisconsin, the North Central Higher Learning Commission.

Conclusion

AB 439 will focus attention, through basic data *reporting*, on the need to foster more transitions to postsecondary study. The bill will help students, mostly existing students, access financial aid at critical times in their studies, and we believe will result in improved completion rates, particularly for working adults attempting to balance the many requirements of work, family and schooling. The bill also creates innovative opportunities for adult basic education students, ensuring that more of them make the critical transition to postsecondary programs that pay off so significantly for them in the labor market. AB 439 will help many working families achieve the kind of employment and earnings needed to sustain themselves, and we urge you to vote for the bill.