

WESTERNCONNECT

THE ESSENTIAL EXPERIENCE | A publication for alumni & friends of Western Technical College



Natasha Normand, Western graduate
See Natasha's story on page 3!

Hello, Western Alumni & Friends!

What a wonderful summer we have had in the Coulee Region. Summer is a great reminder of the beauty this area has to offer. My hope is everyone enjoys some leisure time with friends and family.

Our fall term has kicked off and Western students are filling the classrooms! The start of the school year is always an exciting time on campus. In this edition of the *Connect*, we focus on things that are happening on campus, in addition to the Western Alumni and Foundation.

The *Connect* gives us an opportunity to share the amazing work that happens within the communities Western serves. We encourage all of you to reach out and keep us informed of the meaningful work you are doing. We would love to share these stories. Remember to follow us on social media for event updates and other alumni news!

Be well, Western supporters!



Stephanie Knutson
Alumni Relations Coordinator



Stephanie Knutson

Connect with us!



westerntc.edu/alumni

Western Connect is published twice a year for alumni and friends of Western Technical College.

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Thank you

With gratitude

The Western Alumni Association Board shares our deep gratitude for the work **Craig Halvorson** contributed while serving multiple terms. We appreciate Craig's commitment to advancing the mission of the college and supporting our students.

Thanks for all you have done, Craig!



The alumni board encourages more Western alumni to join. If you are interested in serving, visit: www.westerntc.edu/alumni-association.



Congratulations, Paul Bagniefski!

The Western Alumni Association is honored to recognize **Paul Bagniefski** as the 2023 Distinguished Alumni Award recipient.

Bagniefski is currently the president and CEO of Mid-City Steel. He is also a 1994 graduate of the HVAC Design program. Following a stint as a HVAC journeyman, Bagniefski completed his bachelor's degree in Accounting in 2006. From there, he served as controller for Agropur before becoming president and CEO of Mid-City Steel in 2012. While there, he helped streamline processes and update critical infrastructure. He also continuously develops relationships with community clients and stakeholders.

Bagniefski is a strong advocate for Western Technical College. Under his leadership, Mid-City Steel has strengthened the partnership between the two institutions, offering clear career pipelines, and scholarships to Western students. He consistently voices his support for career and technical education and its impact on the local community.

Western's Distinguished Alumni Award recognizes dedicated service to the community or nation, leadership, personal growth, professional achievement, and contributions to the Western district.

Nominations are open for our 2024 Distinguished Alumni Award. Do not miss this opportunity to recognize Western Alumni for their exceptional work. Nominations will be closed by January 15 and the 2024 recipient will be announced prior to Western's Commencement Ceremony in April.

To learn more, visit: www.westerntc.edu/form/distinguished-alumni-award-nomination-form.

Natasha Normand is redefining roles

Once upon a time in the town of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, there lived a remarkable woman named **Natasha Normand**. However, Normand's current reality is one of an Army veteran living with PTSD, and a single parent to a lovely 5-year-old daughter, Aurora, and the world's greatest dog, a black lab named Diesel. After serving with bravery and dedication for six years, she has been discharged and found herself at a bit of a crossroads. Normand is not one for fairy tales, but she has thoughtfully organized her life in an enviable fashion.

After her time in the Army, Normand pondered life's next steps. She made the solid decision to attend Western to secure an education that would open doors to a fulfilling career with financial security—she has a family to care for! Normand has always had a sharp mind for mechanical things and has fond memories of working on cars with her father—often triggering the warmth of nostalgia. So, Normand enrolled first and finished the Automotive Technician program, and then enrolled in the Diesel and Heavy Equipment program, for which she harbors a strong preference. She dedicated her time and efforts to becoming a skilled diesel technician.

Normand faced the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic soon after entering the diesel program. She begrudgingly adapted to online lectures while juggling her time as a single parent and student. Doing and practicing mechanical work with her peers in a collaborative classroom setting works best for her; relief was felt when they could join each other in the classroom for hands-on learning. Normand appreciated her

instructors a great deal—due to her PTSD symptoms, she experienced their accommodating and understanding sensibilities to the fullest.

Normand began her career at Peterbilt while she was still in school. Skeptical of the time commitment, her instructor assured her it would be both beneficial and worth her time. She managed her part-time work schedule, full-time school schedule, and home life efficiently, ensuring no compromise on family time.

Peterbilt has a small shop equipped with six mechanical bays. Each day at Peterbilt brought new puzzles to solve: "You never know how it is going to go, but you have a team of experts working together. I love that collaboration," says Normand.

Normand felt the gratification that came with each thought-out solution. Her mind worked like a skilled problem solver, equipped with the knowledge she gained from her time at Western and on the job. "Every day is a different challenge; boredom is never a problem," says Normand. Her coworkers welcomed her as an equal, which is exactly what she is. She quickly became a valuable team member. The fact that she is the only woman in the department as well as the entire building is not something she thinks about. Reflecting on her life's journey thus far, Normand feels proud of



"I learn, think, and adapt. I am still learning and building my list of mechanical issues to solve. My mind works like that, a problem solver. I enjoy the challenge because I am equipped to."
— **Natasha Normand**

her progress and how she took control of her life after the Army. She is grateful for the opportunities she created, including finishing school and becoming a mother. If she had to do it again, she states that she would do it the same.

Beyond her career, Normand finds joy in her family. She is a member of the Combat Veterans Motorcycle Association, where she combines her love for motorcycles with veteran solidarity. Normand's friends affectionately call her Storm, a nickname that captures her unwavering spirit. As Normand's story continues to unfold, filled with the magic of perseverance, she showed the world that with dedication, one can leave the difficulties and hardships behind. And so, she and hers are living happily ever after, leaving behind a trail of enchantment and inspiration. A true fairy tale ending, even Normand would admit.

Every day, independent thinkers and doers go against most of their gender to bring incomparable value to a career outside gender-normative stereotypes. We thank Natasha Normand for helping pave the way. Follow Natasha's example and discover your own place to thrive!

To learn more about Western's non-traditional occupations, visit: www.westerntc.edu/non-traditional-occupations



Normand on the right, one of three Western Technical College Diesel & Heavy Equipment Technician students who received \$5,000 scholarships from the Independent Equipment Dealers Association (IEDA), a non-profit tradition promoting the participation, professionalism, and advancement in the independent distribution of heavy equipment.

Welcome Leah Achterberg!

Leah Achterberg joins the Foundation and Alumni department as our new development officer. Leah brings a wealth of knowledge with her, and we are excited to have her on our team.

Getting to know Leah

I have over 20 years of experience in a variety of industries, including hospitality, direct sales management, product management, and higher education. My undergraduate degree is in marketing, and I recently completed my Master of Business Administration at Viterbo. I married my college crush, and we have two beautiful boys.



I was born and raised on the north side of La Crosse; my parents, who both attended Western, still live in that same home. My family and I moved back to the area after living in Lexington, Kentucky for 13 years. My husband, a Western graduate, continued his education at the University of Kentucky where he completed his Master of Fine Arts. We are excited to be back here amongst all the beauty and fun La Crosse has to offer. We discovered we missed having all four seasons more than we realized.

Why Western?

Upon moving back to the La Crosse area in 2019, I had the opportunity to take a year off to be with our children. During that year I had time to reflect on my WHY. Call it a midlife reset, but my job needed to matter to me. Education is a mission that I am passionate about. Continuing to learn and grow is at the heart of great communities that support each other for the greater good. Western has been a pillar in our community for a long time, and I am thrilled to be a part of advancing our mission in "providing relevant, high-quality education to students." Which in turn impacts our La Crosse community in a big way. As a development officer at Western, I have the pleasure of helping the next generation of Western students.

Western Way donations

Looking for ways to support Western students and our community?

The Western Foundation works diligently to provide supportive funding to students as they are achieving their academic and career goals. Donating to the fund enables us to help students financially. During our last academic year, 550 students requested and were awarded some type of emergency funding. The average gift for these requests is around \$90.

Students face many unexpected challenges that hinder degree completion. We are dedicated to alleviating these financial barriers.

The Western Way fund supports:

- tuition assistance
- childcare support
- gas & grocery gift cards
- so much more!

Consider donating!



Western Urban Greenspace dedicated to public servants

The construction of **Western's NEW Urban Green Space** on the corner of 6th and Pine Streets in downtown La Crosse is almost complete! A ribbon-cutting ceremony takes place on September 19, 2023; we welcome all community members to join us. This once-empty lot has been transformed into a beautiful and educational green space open to the public.

Current Western Landscape and Horticulture students designed the green space to include many sustainability features. There will be demonstrations on a range of topics, such as how plant selection and landscaping help with rainwater management, small space food production, and how home and property owners can reduce their environmental impact.



Western Technical College is dedicating the Urban Green Space to public servants. We want to honor all who serve our community through their daily work.

Focus on Energy Award

Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez presented **Western President Roger Stanford** with the 2023 Energy Efficiency Excellence Award from Focus on Energy. This award recognizes efforts made by organizations to reduce their carbon footprint while increasing energy efficiency.

Since 2009, Western has saved around \$4 million using energy efficient programs. Installing solar panel arrays, switching to LED lights, and providing EV charging stations are just some of the initiatives that help with cost savings and lowering Western's carbon footprint.

"It's not only the energy efficiency of the air circulation and what type of systems are put in place, but what your commitment is to the people who live in and use the building," said Roger Stanford.



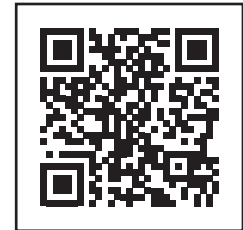
L to R: Western President Roger Stanford with Wisconsin Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez.



Connect opt-in

In a world where costs seem to only keep rising, we are asking our audience if you prefer to receive an online version of the **Western Connect**, or if you would prefer to continue to receiving the printed version.

Your feedback is very important to us! Please visit: www.westerntc.edu/connect to let us know your preference.



Congratulations to our 2023 Western graduates

Welcome to the Alumni Association!

We are proud of your accomplishments and look forward to seeing where your road takes you. Please keep us updated on future successes. We want to hear from you.

As an alum, you have many benefits available to you including career resources, shopping discounts, athletic event admission, library services, Wellness Center discount, and more!

Visit www.westerntc.edu/services-and-benefits to learn more.



Agribusiness Science and Technology program wins big

The Wisconsin Association of Agriculture Educators (WAAE) recognized Western's agribusiness program as their 2023 Outstanding Postsecondary Program. Program chair and instructor **Dona Goede** and instructor **Brad Sirianni** were present to accept the honor.



L to R: Agribusiness and Science Technology Instructors Brad Sirianni and Dona Goede

The agribusiness program completed an innovative course redesign in 2020 to include additional classes in business management and the soft skills regional employers prioritize. During first term classes, students complete a three-day job shadow with area agribusiness leaders to create strong networking opportunities. Additionally, during the redesign a partnership was created with GROW, a local non-profit that educates students about ecology, agriculture, and growing food.

The Agribusiness and Science Technology program helps students develop valuable skills, from healthy crops and soil management to the technical side of things for a healthy and profitable farm.



Over 85% of Western agribusiness students participate in the Professional Agricultural Student Organization which includes national competitions and community service is emphasized.

**WAAE is the professional association for agricultural educators in Wisconsin. The focus of the association is to provide professional development, legislative support, and educational resources for teachers to enhance their local agriculture education programs.*

Western Scholarship Golf Outing

We are grateful to all our sponsors and participants for making this year's Scholarship Golf Outing an enormous success! Your continued support for this event profoundly changes student lives. We are already looking forward to next year. *So...save the date.*



May 22, 2024
Cedar Creek Country Club
Onalaska, WI



Thank You!

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Silver

Bronze

Bronze

Congratulations Dream Scholar: Tena Quackenbush

Western Technical College Nursing student **Tena Quackenbush** was selected as one of eight 2023 DREAM Scholars from Achieving the Dream, a network of colleges committed to making higher education more accessible, equitable, and possible for all students.

Originally from Black River Falls and a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation, Quackenbush fell into drug addiction while in the Marine Corps following the tragic death of her brother. Quackenbush was lost and grief-stricken and didn't know how to cope; she made terrible decisions and became an addict, like so many other Americans. Years of drug use left her destitute and in despair. But she found help and surrounded herself with the right people and started attending support groups. She worked hard to turn her life around but was still judged harshly.

Following her recovery, she started #StopTheStigma, an organization designed to help and support those with drug addiction. #StoptheStigma of Addiction works in our communities by assisting people battling substance abuse disorders by getting them helpful resources immediately. Quackenbush realized she could make more of an impact in

her community with a nursing degree, so she enrolled in Western's Nursing program, an essential first step. She was chosen as a DREAM Scholar because of her drive to help people who need it most and a willingness to share her story.

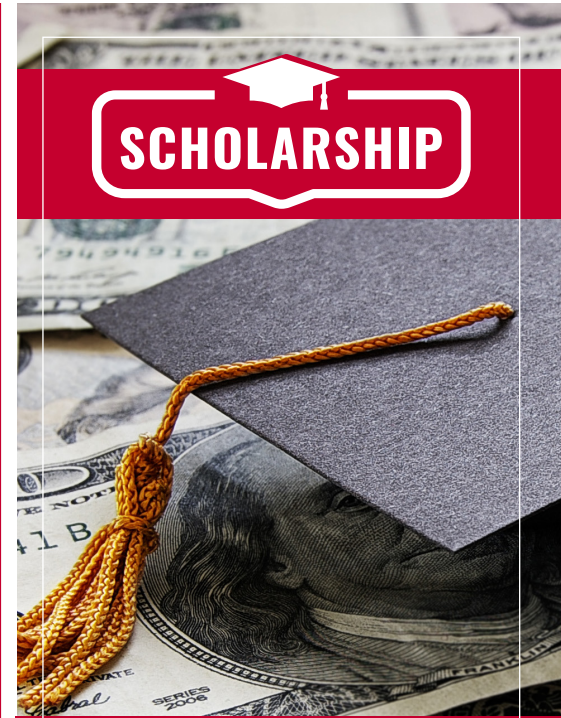
"The fact that Western was able to provide support for me in my time of need is really special," said Quackenbush. "It was a lifesaver, and I am very proud of my school. I am so proud to represent this college at a national level."

"She is a compassionate, thoughtful individual who cares about her community," said Western President Roger Stanford. "She is an inspiration to others and demonstrates the best of what Western students have to offer."

During Achieving the Dream's annual conference, Quackenbush spoke to 2,200 technical and community college experts. She received a \$3,500 scholarship and shared her educational experience while attending sessions on improving student success and closing equity gaps for historically underserved student populations. Tena is proof that the work done at Western makes an everlasting impact.

"Whether you donated to scholarships, taught me in class, helped with my schedule, advised my education plan, or walked me through financial aid, I cannot begin to tell you how much it all means to me. I am living proof; no matter your past, your life matters. It is never too late to go back to school, and Western is there to help you achieve your dreams. From the bottom of my heart, thank you."

—Tena Quackenbush



SCHOLARSHIP

Are you or someone you know planning to attend Western?

**Check out the Western Foundation scholarships:
www.westerntc.edu/scholarships**

Many are available!

Refer a student to Western

Do you know someone looking to pursue an education? We'd love your help identifying the next generation of Cavaliers.



Refer a student by clicking "Request Info" at www.westerntc.edu.

Indicate you're filling out the form for someone else by checking the box at the top of the form. After submitting the form, one of our admissions coaches will reach out to the student.

Western's Diesel Facility gets a big update

For Western Technical College's Diesel and Heavy Equipment Facility, a year makes all the difference.

In 2016, the diesel building was partially remodeled, and in 2022, it finally got the second half done after several construction delays. It was part of a \$4.7 million expansion and remodeling project which saw several changes and improvements to the building.

Perhaps the biggest change itself was the expansion to the building's bay system. Previous years saw instructors and staff struggling to find appropriate space for trucks and other heavy equipment during instruction time. The expansion added 3,168 square feet to the north end of the facility. The addition adds much needed space and safety and allows instructors to focus on teaching, rather than organizing.

"In order to get the number of trucks into the proper place, it was like a jigsaw puzzle," said Mike Poellinger, associate dean of the Integrated Technology division at Western. "It would take 3-4 people because you had to back in vehicles. It was like Tetris."

Another large portion of the project was dedicated to improving classroom space in the building. The existing space missed the 2016 update, which left rugs in place for carpeting and HVAC problems that rendered the space unusable during hot and cold stretches of weather.

"The project provided a much better environment for students to learn what they needed to learn," added Poellinger.

Like so many of Western's programs, Diesel graduates are in high demand. According to Poellinger, the program graduates approximately 20–24 students each year. Of those graduates, nearly all of them had jobs within one year of the two-year program, and several are local businesses, including Kwik Trip and Convenience Transportation. If they don't have a job by graduation, it's by choice.

"We've had graduates come in and talk to our students," said Poellinger. "Some of them are making six figures a few years out of graduation. That's how in-demand these students are coming out of college."

That's why the new space was very much welcomed by faculty and local employers.

"We had a national group come through our facility, and they said it was the nicest facility they have ever seen," said Poellinger. "This is a great investment for our students and our local economy."

Poellinger added that several students began the program prior to the renovations, then completed the program following the project. For those students, he says, it's a huge and welcome change.

"It is a night and day difference," he said. "The facility is completely different than what it was a year ago. It is just fantastic."

Western's Diesel and Heavy Equipment Technician program is 54 credits and begins every fall. To learn more, visit www.westerntc.edu/diesel-heavy-equipment-technician.



Ribbon cutting ceremony at the Diesel and Heavy Equipment Facility

Stay Connected



Stay in touch—we love to hear about your successes and life events.

Visit:
www.westerntc.edu/stay-connected

Email:
Alumni@westerntc.edu

Make sure to follow us on our social media channels:
[@westerntcalumni](https://www.instagram.com/westerntcalumni)



Congratulations, Zander Barr

Zander Barr is Western's new Student Ambassador—an official representative of Western and the entire Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS). As Student Ambassador, a role for which Barr is well-suited, he has opportunities to engage with potential students, community leaders and groups, stakeholders and more, as he highlights the important role that technical education contributes to our local economy and community. Additionally, he represents Western at the

state level through his work with other student ambassadors throughout the WTCS.

Barr is a second year Digital Media Production student. He chose Western because of the program selection, affordability, and location. He attests to the quality instruction of instruction and sees the individualized support instructors instinctively give helps lead to successful outcomes for all students. "Western has amazing staff and students," says Barr.



"I want to surround myself with that positivity to help me push forward in my endeavors. They always want to see you grow and push yourself to success."

Barr is close and active with his family, who work with foster children in the Mauston region. He's open with his struggle balancing his family and college coursework and says Western's instructors have gone above and beyond helping him stay on track. "I did not think I deserved good grades because I missed class due to personal and family issues," said Barr. "My instructor said he understood and helped me catch up in class. It was a huge weight off my shoulders. I felt like I could breathe again. I felt like I had someone who I could talk to when things were going wrong."

"Zander shines when he works with his peers. He naturally lifts them up and encourages them to do their best work as he's learning too," said James Bushman, Digital Media Production instructor at Western who nominated Barr for this honor. Bushman also describes Barr as a joy to have in class. His positive attitude, infectious personality, and contagious smile make the learning environment a better space for everyone, all communication traits of an exceptional ambassador.

"Western has amazing staff and students"
— Zander Barr

Barr is using this opportunity to hone his already developed leadership and speaking skills. He travels the state to present about the importance and benefits of technical education, especially the quality, affordability, and accessibility. Barr plans to enter the workforce as a photographer post graduation and working toward a career in video production. He spends his free time powerlifting, photographing nature, and volunteering within his community.

A new vice president of learning

Western Technical College welcomes **Dr. Rebecca Hopkins** as the college's vice president of learning. With years of academic experience behind her, Hopkins has much to look forward to at Western. She most recently served as Western's dean of academic excellence, education, and human services, a role she held since 2022. Additionally, she previously served as the associate dean for the Learner Support and Transition division, as well as serving 12 years as the dean of education at Saint Mary's University in Minnesota. She began her new role with Western in May.

"Rebecca's passion for education, student success, and Western's mission really came through in the selection process," said Western President Roger Stanford. "After a national search, which included input from administrators, faculty, and staff members, Rebecca rose to the top based on her extensive experience in both teaching and learning."

Since joining Western in 2019, Hopkins is a strong advocate for educational justice and social equity, helping establish the educational justice framework within the Learner Support and Transition Division. She also led the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) Leadership grant, which helped provide instruction of English language, American culture, and community navigation for Afghan refugees at Ft. McCoy in 2022.

Hopkins received her doctorate in educational leadership from Saint Mary's University of Minnesota, where she also holds a master's degree in Instruction with an emphasis on K-8 Education and a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. "I am thrilled to continue serving the students, faculty, staff, and communities of Western Technical College in this new role," said Hopkins. "I am committed to our open access mission, meaningful partnerships, and community growth."



In Memoriam

Rhoda L. Alexander 7/15/23
1977 Ward Clerk

Kent R. Anderson 2/25/23
1967 Machine Shop

Theron A. Ask 7/18/23
1977 Farm Business Management

Deborah J. Atchison 4/28/23
1971 Ward Clerk

Donald A. Bahr 4/9/23
1979 Finance

Bryan J. Bahr 4/21/23
1977 Chemicals & Fertilizers

Janet M. (Wehrle) Beffa 5/14/23
1998 CIS Microcomputer Specialist

Arvilla J. Beranek 2/20/23
1967 Practical Nursing

Richard Berendes 4/12/23
1968 Practical Nursing

Miles Bohland 5/23/23
1974

Nancy L. Brewer 5/20/23
1969 Marketing - Retailing

Sue (Erickson) Brye 5/16/23
1972 Medical Assistant

Richard D. Burns 2/21/23
1972 Machine Tool Operation

Jeanette F. Cox 3/24/23
1977 Nursing - Technical

Christina E. Farrell 3/13/23
2002 Radiography

Lois A. Fellenz 7/15/23
1970 Practical Nursing

Merrill Gardner 2/19/23
1963 Electronic Servicing

Verda J. Goetzman 3/28/23
1940 Commercial Courses

Eugene Greco 2/16/23
1989 Welding

Marlene T. (Bott) Grosch 2/25/23
1988 Dental Assistant

Bonnie M. Guenther 2/7/23
1985 Practical Nursing

Stephen C. Ikert 6/4/23
1991 Radiography

Katherine A. Johnson 1/14/23
1999 Food Production Specialist

Jeffrey A. Johnson 2/6/23
1997 Interior Design

Eugene W. Johnson 6/15/23
1981 Industrial Engineering Technician

Ann A. (Austin) Johnson 7/6/23
2002 Accounting

Verlyn H. Kimpton 6/6/23
1974 Diesel & Heavy Equipment Technician

Carl A. Kirschner 5/21/23
1976 Marketing

Cheryl L. Larson 4/22/23
1982 Legal Secretary

Alice H. (Slindee) Lehrke 2/12/23
1985 Medical Record Technician

Christian M. Lunde 2/6/23
2018 Emergency Medical Technician - Basic

Kathleen A. (Sheetz) Mahlke 6/2/23
1973 Practical Nursing

Julia C. (Compton) Martell 7/5/23
2001 CIS Programmer/Analyst

Dennis E. McCarty 5/24/23
1998 Farm, Business & Production Management

Nick M. Pientok 5/24/23
1973 Refrigeration Servicing

James J. Purvis 5/28/23
1967 Auto Mechanics

Patrick Reardon 6/24/23
1976 Automotive Servicing Mechanic

Marisa D. Reese Thorud 6/25/23
2003 Medical Assistant

Jeff A. Rugg 5/13/23
1977 Welding

Laurie A. (Inglett) Sholes 6/25/23
1981 Medical Record Technician

Diane J. Stone 4/14/23
2004 Nursing Assistant - Certificate

David J. Strasser 4/12/23
2004 Accounting

Nancy A. Swanson 4/3/23
1979 CETA Clerk Typist

LeRoy J. Wilder 1/27/23
1981 Environmental Health and Safety Technician

Gary A. Willinger 2/14/23
1977 Diesel & Heavy Equipment Technician

Jill C. Zuberbier 5/6/23
1976 Practical Nursing

Western Staff

Kristin Bernacki 6/19/23

Raymond M. Michalko 3/1/23
Laverne Ness 6/5/23

Fall Open House

Wednesday, October 11 | 4–7 p.m.

Design your future on your terms—check out all things Western at the annual open house. Explore the campus, learn about academic programs and financial aid assistance, scholarships, refreshments, and get a jump on the application process.

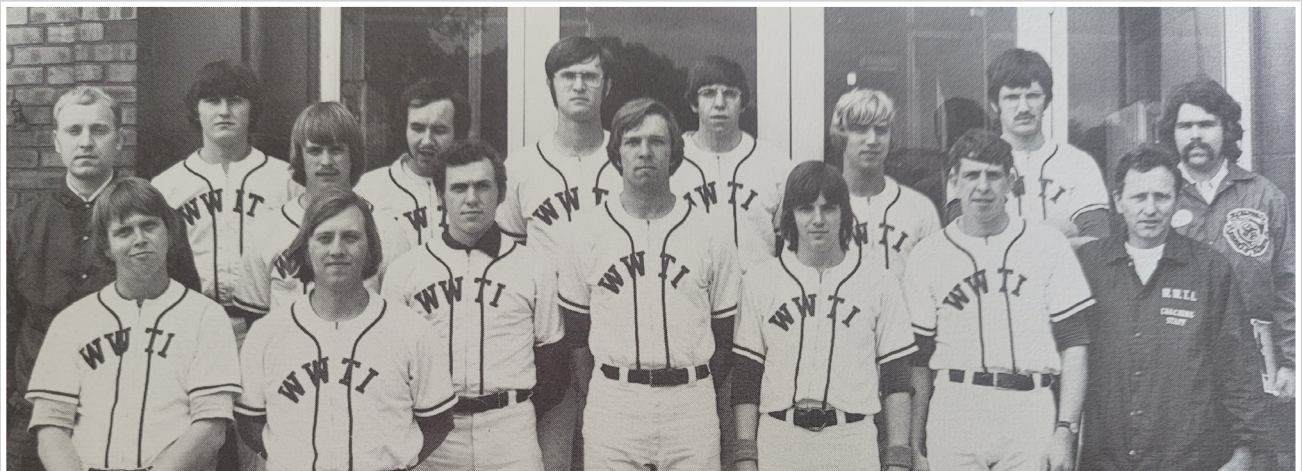
Stop by any time; join us at any of our locations:
La Crosse, Black River Falls, Independence, Mauston, Tomah, and Viroqua.

For more info, go to: WesternTC.edu/OpenHouse

Apply during the open house
and the application fee is
waived!

Remember When...

Do you recognize anyone from this photo of the 1973 Western Baseball team?
We would love to hear from you!



Do you have a photo to share?
Contact the Alumni Office at 608-789-6083 or alumni@westernnc.edu