

**Senator Mark Miller**  
**Summary of remarks to the technical college student government convention**  
**February 22, 2010**

The last budget was constructed in the midst of the worst economic recession on a state, national, and global scale since the Great Depression of the 1930's.

The governor puts together his budget proposal to the legislature after collecting the budget requests from all state agencies. Financial experts both inside and outside of government provide estimates of economic activity for the budget period resulting in revenue estimates for state operations.

The revenue estimates are provided in late summer/early fall. By the time the budget was presented to the legislature, the financial crisis on Wall Street had already occurred. The economy was in free fall with real fear that we might be entering a new global depression similar to the great Depression.

The federal government acted swiftly to pump money into the national economy in the hope of avoiding the mistakes of the federal government when responding to the Great Depression. The lessons of the Great Depression were for the government to take swift action, even if it means running a deficit, to create a demand for goods and services, thereby creating jobs to provide those goods and services.

It was this scenario that presented itself to the Legislature's Finance Committee, which I co-chair. In the midst of our budget deliberations, we had to deal with an additional \$1.65 billion dollar loss in state revenue, a loss which compounded the already serious situation caused by the state's structural deficit. This meant going back to the drawing board with the governor and his budget.

The result was a budget that slashed spending and raised taxes. We also made extensive use of federal recovery money to accelerate "shovel-ready" building projects, including road projects, that were in the pipeline.

Cuts were made to almost all programs, but among the areas that received additional funding was student financial aid for technical college students. The governor had recommended increasing financial aid by 1%. The finance committee and the legislature tripled this increase to 3.1%. We recognized that at a time when Wisconsinites were losing jobs, that the technical college system was the primary place for workers to get the additional skills needed to re-enter the workplace.

The Technical Colleges have traditionally been flexible in providing training programs to meet the needs of employers and students. In our judgment, this was a priority investment in education. However, the additional funds came at the expense of funding for students attending four year and two year campuses in Wisconsin.

Wisconsin has a strong post-secondary education system. Combining the four-year campuses, two year campuses, technical college campuses and private college campuses, Wisconsin has 62 campuses offering post-high education. This is almost one campus for every county in the state. Add to this the proprietary schools that offer specialized training for such things as acupuncture, massage, or flight school, Wisconsin offers a multitude of higher education opportunities.

You asked me to talk about how you can be more effective advocating for technical college schools. There are five steps to consider:

1. What do we want to happen?
2. Who can make it happen?
3. What do they need to hear?
4. Who should they hear it from?
5. How can we deliver the message?

The first step, “What do we want to happen?” is the most important because it drives the other considerations. Associations such as yours frequently assemble with a generic list of asks. Usually these lists are for more money. Legislators are bombarded with these kinds of requests. This makes it hard to distinguish between requests and pay attention to your request. Think of it as a job application. You are selling your agenda. Narrow your request to just one item, if possible. This makes it important. If it is a request for more money, be specific. You are not just asking for more money, you are asking for an investment of \$1.2 million to provide student financial aid to an additional 1,350 students that are attending Wisconsin’s technical colleges. (I made up these numbers for the purposes of illustration).

The second step, “Who can make it happen?” is recognizing that the legislature may not be the most effective institution to lobby. It may be the administration. Maybe you can get the administration to include your request in their request submitted to the governor. Maybe the best party to deliver is the school administration or the technical college system. Stopping something from happening is easier than making something happen. There are usually multiple steps to approving something new. Any one of these may be sufficient to stop it. If it is a funding question, who can provide the funding? Will it help to have matching funds? (yes, almost always). In the legislative process, the finance committee is the where the action is to authorize funding if action did not occur at the agency level. If possible, get bipartisan support.

The third consideration, “What do they need to hear?” means framing your proposal in a way that connects to the sensibilities of the person who can make it happen. Will the person be persuaded by a financial argument, a social argument, a fairness argument, an ego argument (your legacy will be assured), a safety argument, a patriotic argument, or a political argument. Most decision makers need to hear an assessment of the benefits. If possible, provide documentation of the benefits. Was this done elsewhere? What were

the results? Will we need to demonstrate our commitment by putting our own skin in the game?

Does he or she need to hear from constituents? From funders? From the general public? From interest groups? From a political supporter? Should there be a press strategy?

The last question, “How can we deliver the message,” is flows directly from the prior two considerations.

Let us consider your agenda for change. I will be critical of your agenda as a way of enhancing your effectiveness and illustrating the points I just made.

Your first item is “Increased State Funding for the Wisconsin technical College System.” This is a generic request that lacks the specificity needed to be taken seriously. A more effective request would identify a specific dollar amount and justify that amount..

Your next item, “Improving Financial Aid for Technical College Students,” has the same shortcomings as the first. How much should financial aid be increased? Why? What are the larger social benefits?

The next two items, “increased credit mobility,” and “clarification of the veteran’s education benefits,” are not properly legislative issues, but rather issues that the technical college administration is the entity that can deliver on these issues.

So, if this is a legislative agenda, it can be shortened by eliminating the last two items. It can be made more effective by adding specifics to the other two requests.

When making your case to decision makers, be sure to point out that technical college students tend to remain in-state. Our investment in technical college education directly benefits Wisconsin workers and employers more directly than traditional academic education where a substantial number of students leave the state to take jobs elsewhere.

You are the student leaders of perhaps the most diverse student population in the state. Your constituency includes high school students, high school drop outs getting their GED, adult students who have families to support but have lost their jobs because it went overseas or their employer laid people off because of the recession. It includes students who are learning specific skills, such as auto mechanics or law enforcement. It includes students who plan to go on to the university or a four year college after establishing their academic credentials.

Wisconsin’s technical colleges are our state’s best tool for retooling for economic recovery. You have an important role in helping to shape and direct this tool.

Good luck and best wishes.