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STATE SENATOR • SENATE DISTRICT 18

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Sen. Dassler-Alfheim authors bills to improve college access and affordability

Legislation aims to lower costs, increase student success to meet Wisconsin's workforce needs

MADISON, WI – Today, Senator Kristin Dassler-Alfheim (D-Appleton) authored four bills to keep higher education affordable and accessible for Wisconsin families. The legislation aims to ensure students are able to complete their degree on time and join the workforce, which leads to lower student debt and higher lifetime earnings.

“Our economic future is reliant on the success of our students. The overwhelming majority of Wisconsin students who graduate from UWO and FVTC find jobs and settle down right here in Wisconsin, helping us fill urgent staffing shortages in critical industries like healthcare and business management. It is absolutely essential for the future of our local economies that we keep pathways to higher education open for our students,” said Senator Dassler-Alfheim.

Three of the bills directly target affordability. LRB-4919, the Wisconsin Tuition Promise, removes financial barriers for students coming from households with an AGI of \$71,000 or less by covering their “last dollar” tuition cost, or the remaining cost of tuition once federal aid and external scholarships have been applied. The promise only applies to Wisconsin students attending a University of Wisconsin four-year school other than the University of Wisconsin-Madison, which independently funds its own successful tuition promise program.

“Rising costs have students second-guessing pursuing a degree, leaving them at a severe disadvantage in the job market and contributing to long-term worker shortages. By covering the last dollar tuition cost, we can ensure that our best and brightest aren’t being held back by financial constraints,” said the Senator.

LRB-4388 is a commitment to fund the Wisconsin GI Bill, which covers tuition and fees for veterans, spouses, and their children who attend one of Wisconsin’s public universities or technical colleges. While eligibility for this program has been significantly expanded over the past two decades, state funding has not kept up. In 2024, the state covered only 15% of the total costs for those attending a tech school and even less for those attending a public four-year

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university. This bill changes the funding mechanism for the Wisconsin GI Bill from a sum certain to a sum sufficient amount, ensuring that the state of Wisconsin is fulfilling their obligations by fully funding all Wisconsin GI Bill costs for the Universities of Wisconsin and Wisconsin Technical Colleges.

“The Wisconsin GI Bill was passed over a decade ago to ensure our veterans and their families are able to access higher education, and in that it’s been wildly successful. Our public universities and tech colleges score high on ‘military friendly’ and ‘best for vets,’ but in order to preserve this position, we must commit to fully funding the program. The state has to start pulling its weight,” said the Senator.

LRB-1242, the College Savings Fairness Act, supports all paths to a higher education by creating a new individual income tax deduction for both principal and interest paid on qualifying student loans. This aligns with the existing annual income tax deduction that allows families to save for college through the Edvest 529 college savings plan (Edvest). As the claimant’s income rises to the annual income limit set under federal law, the maximum deduction amount is phased down to zero.

“Student loan debt has gotten out of control. Add that to inflation, tariffs, and rising grocery prices, and you have recent graduates unable to reach important milestones like buying a house, starting a family, or launching a new business. This bill gives them some breathing room and puts those milestones back within reach,” said Senator Dassler-Alfheim.

The fourth bill, LRB-4778, the Student Success, Workforce Gains bill, improves retention and graduation rates by allocating \$40 million over the 2025-27 biennium for the Universities of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Technical College System to invest in programs that provide academic and career advising and other forms of direct student support.

“We need college graduates to replenish our aging workforce, and this bill package ensures that Wisconsin’s universities and technical colleges are affordable, that students are completing their degrees on-time, and that Wisconsin itself remains an attractive option to settle down and start a family or business after graduation. This package is an investment not just in student success, but in the future economic prosperity of our communities as a whole,” concluded the Senator.

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