Looking to shrink student debt
Evers describes special task force while at WCTC

By Jake Ekdahl
Jekdahl@conleyetnet.com
262-513-2657

PEWAUKEE — Student debt is on many minds, especially for Maricha Harris, who at one point had to choose between her housing arrangement and her car. She chose the car so she could continue working — and paying back her loans.

Harris, a Milwaukee native and college graduate, spoke at Waukesha County Technical College Wednesday to share her experience with college debt. She said tumultuous life events jeopardized her ability to make payments on time, and the consequences were dire for her finances.

With a son born two weeks after graduation and other life expenses complicating her situation, Harris struggled. But she remains optimistic about how education can improve lives.

“I knew that education was going to change the trajectory of my life,” she said. “Student loans became the necessary means for funding my dream.”

Governor Tony Evers agrees with that view. He said he believes economic development starts with education, and that student debt is ultimately holding back the state and economy.

Evers joined Harris, Department of Financial Institutions Secretary Kathy Blumenfeld and others at WCTC to discuss the establishment of a task force on student debt.

See DEBT, PAGE 8A

Debt
From Page 1A

Evers mentioned the task force in his State of the State Address last Thursday. At WCTC, he signed an executive order to create it.

“It’s time to take action,” said Evers. “And ensure a great education doesn’t come at the cost of decades of burdening debt.”

The task force will assess the causes of student debt and the associated challenges for Wisconsinites and the state economy, research best practices and evaluate the effectiveness of current policies.

The task force will provide a future recommendation on how the state can address student loans. Evers did not offer a timeline on implementing potential solutions.

Two members of the new task force were present at the event: Connie Hutchison and Lara Sutherlin.

Hutchison emphasized the importance of helping those already in debt but also helping prepare prospective college students so they don’t take out more loans than necessary.

Sutherlin, a consumer protection attorney, said it is important to address organizations seeking to take advantage of student debt holders. “There’s such a mountain of debt out there, and with that is a lot of predatory practices for how to address your debt,” Sutherlin said. “We want to understand the challenges that we have in terms of predatory fraud and lending.”

By the numbers
According to the Institute for College Access & Success, the average student debt in Wisconsin is $31,705, about 8.8% higher than the national average of $29,117.

Wisconsin is ranked 13th in the U.S. for highest levels of debt per state in the country, though complete data was not available for North Dakota, Alaska and Arizona.

Wisconsin ranks higher, at seventh in the U.S., on the percentage of graduates with debt; about 64% of graduates in Wisconsin have debt. Wyoming ranks first with 100% of graduates with debt.

Life with loans
Blumenfeld said many students expressed concern over student debt during listening sessions held over the summer.

“Many spoke of being saddled with large debt burdens and said they’re only able to pay the minimum amount required to avoid default, which often leads to significantly more than their original loan balance down the road,” she said.

Evers said he believes there is bipartisan potential for a student debt solution in the Wisconsin Legislature. When asked if he’s met with Republican leaders to discuss the issue, Evers said he’s sure they’ve discussed it at some point.

State Rep. Scott Allen, R-Waukesha, said considering all majors equal in terms of risk is not ideal.

“Right now we subsidize all areas of study, but not all majors carry the same level of risk,” Allen said. “Engineering, nursing, and computer science have less risk than degrees in sociology or anthropology. No properly run financial institution would give a $100,000 loan for a degree in Comparative Literature and Folklore Studies, but Congress does.”

Allen’s had his own experience with college debt.

“I worked my way through school for my undergraduate degree, and most of my student debt resulted from my master’s degrees,” he said. “It took about eight years to get out of debt after graduate school. Honestly, I believe I invested too much in my education based on the return on investment.”

Wednesday’s event was Evers’ first official visit to WCTC as governor. But Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes and Blumenfeld have visited before.

“We’re very proud and grateful that Governor Evers saw WCTC as a place he wanted to do this signing,” said Waukesha County Technical College President Kaylen Betzg. “It’s a great honor to be able to have this (here) with the technical colleges as part of the mix.”

WCTC students sat in the front row as Evers spoke.

One of those students was Jazzton Dbinsky, who is a dual enrollment student at WCTC pursuing college credits while completing high school at Menomonee Falls. He’s currently taking automation technician courses.

Another student, Hauken Johnsen, said he plans to continue studying at WCTC and complete his associate’s degree. “It’s just a really fun program,” he said of the automation courses he’s taking.

Dbinsky’s planning to work and go to school simultaneously after graduation. “The less I’d have to pay in the future, the better off I’d be later,” he said.