

The Official Magazine of Western Nebraska Community College

# WESTERN

SPRING 2022

**Building a  
Bright Future**





I am incredibly thankful that the Board of Governors has entrusted me with the task of leading this great institution into its next chapter. Although I didn't miss putting on a tie every day, I did miss seeing the many friendly and familiar faces here at Western Nebraska Community College and watching our students succeed.

As we look to WNCC's future, it is our duty to ask "How can we better serve our Panhandle and evolve with the ever changing world around us to meet the needs of our constituents?" We are the community's college, and we must strive to help in every way we can, from filling crucial business and industry needs, to teaching the next generation of leaders.

Throughout this magazine, you will see just a few examples of the great work being done by our students, faculty, and staff; our CDL program graduating more than 20 students since the fall of 2020, and our CollegeNOW! program helping high school students find their passion. I take great pride knowing that our work is creating a tremendous impact to our students and our community members.

I'm excited about the work being done at WNCC and look forward to finding additional ways that we can better serve our students and communities.

Sincerely,  
John Marrin, *Interim President*

## COMMUNITY LISTENING TOURS

Over the past few months, myself and other members of WNCC have been traveling to communities in our 12 ½ county service area to conduct listening sessions and hear from you – community members, business owners, and educators – to discover ways that we can better serve the entire Panhandle.

I've enjoyed visiting the counties and meeting with many community members throughout the tour. There are several

more scheduled listening sessions and I encourage everyone to attend and be a voice for their community. The listening sessions are vital to constructing WNCC's core values and focus areas for our next Strategic Master Plan.

Developing a new Strategic Master Plan is one of the largest projects that will be completed over the next year. The plan will serve as an on-going commitment between WNCC, our students and communities. It will be the guide for WNCC decision making as we move forward.

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Western Nebraska  
Community College

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## OUR MISSION

WNCC assures learning  
opportunities for all — **enriching lives,**  
**invigorating communities, creating futures**

WESTERN is published by Western Nebraska Community College to encourage residents in our 12½-county region to think seriously about the difference education can make in their lives and careers, to promote business and community education, and to inform the community about WNCC's programs of study.

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[wncc.edu](http://wncc.edu)



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# WNCC CDL PROGRAM PUTTING STUDENTS ON FAST TRACK TO JOB OPPORTUNITIES

BY DOUG MADER, WNCC WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR



Western Nebraska Community College's revamped Commercial Driver's License (CDL) program is successfully producing licensed drivers to help fill the abundant need in the state since the Fall 2020 semester.

Currently, heavy and tractor-trailer truck drivers are the top-ranked occupation by demand in the state of Nebraska according to the Department of Labor, Education & Economic Development. As of March 2022, WNCC reached the mark of 23 graduates and has recently added more classes to keep up with increasing demand.

The program has helped students like Nathan Ulander of Bayard find a stable job to provide for his family. Ulander and his family moved to the area in 2020 with the dream to rebuild a bed & breakfast, but he realized he needed a job to provide health insurance for himself and his family. After hearing about the shortage of commercial drivers in the nation, he decided to enroll in the CDL program.

**"The instructors were incredible," Ulander said. "They were able to answer any and all of my questions and when teaching they helped everything make sense. After finishing the class, getting a job with the state with insurance was made possible."**

After obtaining his Class A CDL, Ulander accepted a job and is currently employed with the Nebraska Department of Transportation.

WNCC's CDL program recently updated its Entry Level Driver Training (ELDT) program pursuant to the new Department of Transportation regulations, which took effect in February 2022.

For more information about WNCC's Class A CDL program, including the cost of the program, class dates, and career opportunities, visit [go.wncc.edu/CDL](http://go.wncc.edu/CDL) or contact Deb Davis, Workforce Training Coordinator at [davisd10@wncc.edu](mailto:davisd10@wncc.edu) or 308.635.6335.



# ESPORTS COMES TO SCOTTSBLUFF CAMPUS

BY RYAN BURGNER,  
WNCC ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

WNCC has brought the world's fastest growing competition to the Scottsbluff Campus: Esports.

Esports is the world of competitive, organized video gaming. WNCC introduced the new Esports team in the Fall 2021 semester, and will participate in the National Junior College Athletics Association Esports (NJCAA) Intramural organization starting in the Fall 2022 semester.

The Cougar Esports team operates similar to any other athletic team. They practice daily, enter different seasons where different games are played, have team captains, and have competitions against other schools around the country.

"We are all incredibly excited about the future of Esports at WNCC," Cy McKim, WNCC Esports coach said. "Esports is one of the fastest growing industries in the world, and I believe it is only a matter of time before it is a household term, even in Western Nebraska."

The team currently has eight student-gamers that practice 10 hours a week for three different games: *Halo Infinite*, *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, and *League of Legends*.

The Esports room is equipped with high-end computers with NVIDIA RTX 3070 graphics cards, 25-inch UHD monitors, top of the line keyboards, mice, and headsets, as well as a 65-inch 4k UHD TV to play console games on.

Currently, Coach McKim is focused on spreading the word about the program and recruiting new students. When the team begins play in the NJCAA next fall, the Cougar Esports team will have 12 scholarships to offer.

To learn more about WNCC's Esports team, visit [wnccathletics.com/Esports](http://wnccathletics.com/Esports) or contact McKim at [esports@wncc.edu](mailto:esports@wncc.edu) or 308.635.6373.






“I NOTICED IT CAME TO ME  
NATURALLY AND I REALLY  
ENJOYED IT.”

—GUADALUPE SIERRA  
WNCC COLLEGENOW! STUDENT





# COLLEGENOW! PROGRAM HELPS LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT FIND PASSION FOR WELDING

BY MAI LEE OLSEN, WNCC COLLEGENOW! DIRECTOR

Guadalupe Sierra, a senior at Scottsbluff High School, discovered that she had a natural knack for welding when she was a sophomore.

“I noticed it came to me naturally and I really enjoyed it since it made me relax and get lost in my own world,” she said.

Her first welding class let her explore several different categories in welding, and it inspired her to reach out to her school’s guidance counselor and ask how she could do more. She was pointed in the direction of WNCC and the CollegeNOW! dual-credit program.

As a junior in high school, she first started in WNCC’s Collision Repair & Refinish program, learning the skills to work in the collision repair field. This year, as a senior, she went into the Welding Technology program to pursue an advanced welding certificate with the hope of eventually earning a degree.

“I’ve come a long way from where I started with the help of both of my instructors Corey Batt (Collision Repair & Refinish) and Russell Pontarolo (Welding Technology),” Sierra said. “They have always been supportive since the beginning, pushing me to do my best in both careers.”

The CollegeNOW! program allowed Guadalupe to explore different career paths and helped her get closer to accomplishing her career goals.

“CollegeNOW! has helped me in a way that is really convenient to me allowing me to take dual-credit classes and other students as well,” she said. “I would highly recommend this program to other high school students. It is a big opportunity since you can get ahead of your dream career in a shorter period of time.”

The CollegeNOW! program has partnerships with 25 high schools in the Panhandle and allows area juniors and seniors to earn college credit while still in high school. To learn more about the WNCC CollegeNOW! program visit [wncc.edu](http://wncc.edu) or contact Mai Lee Olsen, CollegeNOW! Director, at [olsenm12@wncc.edu](mailto:olsenm12@wncc.edu) or 308.635.6715.



## DIESEL TECH PROGRAM HITS GROUND RUNNING

BY CHARLIE GREGORY, *DEAN OF INSTRUCTION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT*

WNCC's newest program, the Diesel, Truck & Heavy Equipment Technology program, was developed in the Fall of 2020 and quickly filled its first cohort of students for a Fall 2021 start.

John Sweeney, from Brush, Colorado, joined the program in its first semester to get hands-on experience working on diesel equipment.

"I always wanted to work on heavy equipment so I started looking for a school," he said. "I saw WNCC was starting a program that would be affordable. I like the program because it isn't just classroom time, we are actually out in the shop working on fun things, not just reading out of a book."

The program is designed to prepare students to enter the field of diesel, truck and heavy agriculture equipment maintenance and repair, helping fill crucial job openings in the Panhandle. The curriculum includes diagnostic, maintenance, and repair courses in areas like diesel engine, powertrain, electrical and electronics, and heating-ventilation-air conditioning (HVAC).

Students in the Diesel Tech program can pursue a diploma; a certificate in advanced electrical/mechanical or certificate in engine and powertrain; or an associate in applied sciences. The program's certificates are also stackable toward a diploma or AAS degree. Classes in the program are also available to high school students through WNCC's CollegeNOW! program.

In addition, the program also features a scholarship program sponsored by Nebraska Machinery Company and the Caterpillar Foundation, that includes two years of paid tuition, books, fees, a complete toolbox and tool set, personalized mentorship and guidance over the course of the program, paid internship(s) with hands-on experience, and employment and career progression opportunities with NMC.

To learn more about the Diesel, Truck & Heavy Equipment Technology program, visit [go.wncc.edu/Diesel](https://go.wncc.edu/Diesel) or contact the WNCC admissions team at [admissions@wncc.edu](mailto:admissions@wncc.edu) or 308.635.6010.





**“I LIKE THE PROGRAM BECAUSE IT ISN’T JUST CLASSROOM TIME, WE ARE ACTUALLY OUT IN THE SHOP WORKING ON FUN THINGS, NOT JUST READING OUT OF A BOOK.”**

**—JOHN SWEENEY  
WNCC STUDENT**

# MARRIN SELECTED TO SERVE AS INTERIM PRESIDENT THROUGH JUNE 2023

BY LYNNE KLEMKE,  
WCCA BOARD CHAIR

The Western Community College Area Board of Governors owes a debt of gratitude to Mr. John Marrin for not only coming out of retirement to serve as the interim president, but to accept an extension through June 2023.

Marrin has a vast knowledge of our institution and higher education, with more than 20 years of experience at WNCC, and more than 30 in higher education. WNCC is in great hands!

One of the main focuses over the next year is to establish a strategic plan that helps guide WNCC into the future, but also serves the needs of our communities. John was the clear choice to lead that effort and allow us to gain stability before we begin the process of finding a president that is best suited for our institution.

I want to personally thank Mr. Marrin for agreeing to lead us as we embark on this process. The Board tentatively plans to initiate the formal process of a presidential search in January 2023.



Ryan Burgner, WNCC Athletic Director, and Bernard Garner, pose with Buddy the Cougar at the second WNCC Athletics Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony in January. Garner attended WNCC from 1993-1995 and is WNCC's all-time leading scorer with 1,304 career points.



Spencer Blomenkamp, right, and siblings Brooke (Blomenkamp) Samuelson, and Tanner Blomenkamp accepted the induction into the Athletics Hall of Fame on behalf of their parents, Neal and Lora Blomenkamp and Runza® Restaurants.



# WNCC ATHLETICS HALL OF FAME INDUCTS SECOND CLASS

BY RYAN BURGNER, WNCC ATHLETIC DIRECTOR

Bernard Garner, WNCC men's basketball all-time leading scorer, and Neal and Lora Blomenkamp, owners of Runza® Restaurants in Scottsbluff, Gering, Chadron, and Alliance, were inducted into the second class of the WNCC Athletics Hall of Fame in January.

"This is a great honor to be inducted to the Hall of Fame here at WNCC," Garner said. "It lets me know the college appreciated the things I did for the school and what they did for me. It feels great."

Garner holds many accolades from his time in the blue and gold. He holds the all-time scoring record with 1,304 points, helped lead the Cougars to a third place finish at the NJCAA national tournament in 1995, and was named the NJCAA Player of the Year as a sophomore, before finishing his collegiate career at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he finished as the eighth-highest scorer in program history among two-year players.

The Blomenkamp family and Runza® Restaurants have been synonymous with Cougar Athletics since the early 1990s. Working with legendary Cougar coach Dave "Soupy" Campbell, the Blomenkamps sponsored countless promotions from free Runza® sandwiches when the Cougar scored 90 points, to sponsoring the scoreboard and scorer's table. The partnership quickly expanded to all sports including the Cougar Classic golf tournament in the summer.

Two of the Blomenkamp's three children, Brooke and Tanner, attended WNCC. Brooke was a member of the Cougar volleyball team from 2008-2010.

"It was a big surprise and a great honor to be inducted into the hall of fame," Neal Blomenkamp said. "There are so many deserving individuals of this award. So many wonderful memories have been made. We have very much appreciated the opportunity to be involved with the athletic program."

To learn more about Cougar Athletics, visit [wnccathletics.com](http://wnccathletics.com).



# NASA PARTNERSHIPS ALLOWS WNCC STUDENTS TO REACH THE STARS

BY BILL LORING AND PROFESSOR EMERITUS DR. BILL SPURGEON

Since 2008, Western Nebraska Community College has partnered with NASA and the Nebraska Space Grant to offer a fellowship program for current students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.

The grant program has allowed students to engage in research and education related to aeronautics, aerospace, and technology. WNCC Information Technology instructor Bill Loring encourages several students to apply every year. Not only does the program provide hands-on experience, but it also allows instructors to keep their curriculum up to date.

“The relationship WNCC has with the NASA Nebraska Space Grant has improved courses, kept faculty and labs up to date, and has given students an opportunity to get hands-on research experience early in their academic career,” Loring said.

Joann Jones and Shelby James are both second-year Computer Science students at WNCC and will complete their fellowship with NASA this spring. Students in the NASA fellowship are allowed to select projects that are relevant to NASA mission directorates, so both Jones and James chose projects based on robotics.

Using GoPiGo robots purchased with the grant funds, Jones and James have developed research projects, submitted data and progress reports throughout the year, and will give a presentation at the spring meeting of the Nebraska Academy of Sciences in late April.

“This NASA fellowship was a step up from our Intro to Robotics class, where I could do much more with the GoPiGo robot versus the M-Bot and now I can use sensors to gather a ton of different data much like the Mars Rovers do,” James said.

**“I highly recommend for anyone interested in NASA, robotics, programming of any kind to apply for this fellowship.”**

**—Shelby James,  
WNCC student**

The NASA fellowship program is just one of several partnerships that WNCC has that allows students more access to experience, knowledge, and career growth. For more information about WNCC’s STEM programs, visit [wncc.edu](http://wncc.edu).

Joann Jones, left, and Shelby James, right, work with WNCC IT Instructor Bill Loring on their GoPiGo robots for their NASA fellowship project.



# CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SUPPORTING WNCC

BY JENNIFER REISIG, WNCC FOUNDATION EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The WNCC Foundation is 50 years old. That milestone was marked with a celebration on March 24, 2022, exactly 50 years after receiving the non-profit status that allowed the Foundation to receive tax deductible gifts on behalf of the college.

For 50 years, the Foundation has served its mission of supporting WNCC while enhancing the lives of community members, the quality of the college, and the communities it serves.

Today, more than 70 named, donor-funded scholarships are administered by the Foundation each year, helping students from all walks of life receive an education. Nearly \$750,000 is awarded through the Foundation each year.

One of the best ways that we continue to support the efforts of WNCC, is backing programs of study that train tomorrow's workforce. From programs of study, like the Powerline Construction & Maintenance

program in Alliance or the new Diesel, Truck & Heavy Equipment program, to new ways to support students in finding their true calling with our Career Pathways & Advising department, we are constantly finding and launching new efforts to meet the needs of our area.

To meet changing and emergent needs of students, a Student Emergency Fund was established in 2014. This fund helps any WNCC student with immediate financial assistance. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the Student Emergency Fund expanded more than five times to respond to current needs. Many students credited this fund as helping them be able to stay in school during the pandemic.

The WNCC Foundation could not support the needs of the Panhandle and WNCC students without your donations. To learn more about how you can give to support a WNCC student, visit [wnccfoundation.org](http://wnccfoundation.org) or call us at 308.630.6550.



**OCTOBER 11, 1971**

Foundation Board of Directors named and voted on by Nebraska Western College Board of Governors.

**DECEMBER 8, 1971**

First meeting held and first officers elected.

**OCTOBER 19, 1971**

Incorporated as the Nebraska Western College Foundation.

**MARCH 24, 1972**

NWC Foundation Receives non-profit 501(c)(3) status.



## MAJOR INITIATIVES

From scholarships, to program support, and to major campaigns and initiatives, the WNCC Foundation offers a variety of opportunities, services, and events to ensure that WNCC students are well-equipped to reach their full potential. Here are a few of the major initiatives that the Foundation has helped fundraise for:

- 1999 – Creation of a Planned Giving Program
- 2005 – Renovation of the current John N. Harms Center
- 2006 – Creation of the Powerline Construction & Maintenance program
- 2012- Creation of the Platte Valley Companies Monument Marathon to raise funds in support of student scholarships
- 2015 – First comprehensive campaign is launched
- 2018 – Construction of the Innovation & Entrepreneurship Center in Sidney and the Indoor Powerline Construction & Maintenance Facility in Alliance
- 2019 – Construction of the Platte Valley Companies Performing Arts Center, and renovations to the Scottsbluff Campus Main Building
- 2021 – Creation of the Diesel Truck & Heavy Equipment Technology program

**JULY 1, 1988**

Name changed to Western Nebraska Community College Foundation to reflect the name change of the college.

**2008**

A full-time Executive Director and Executive Secretary are hired to manage day to day operations of the Foundation.

**MARCH 24, 2022**

WNCC Foundation celebrates its 50th Anniversary.

**FEBRUARY 2, 2011**

WNCC Foundation Board of Directors creates the WNCC Alumni Association, providing opportunities for alumni to build relationships with and support the college.



Scan to see an expanded timeline and impact stories.



# SIMIANER HELPS TO MAKE THE MODERN WORKFORCE ACCESSIBLE

BY MARY SHEFFIELD, WNCC ALUMNI RELATIONS & STEWARDSHIP DIRECTOR

Lukas Simianer took several paths before finding his true calling. Originally from the Scottsbluff area, he enlisted in the Army at 17, was deployed to Afghanistan at 18, returned home at 19 with a Purple Heart, and was left thinking “now what.”

That’s when he found Western Nebraska Community College. Starting with a few classes and joining the student veteran organization – TRIO Veterans Upward Bound, Simianer was able to explore different areas of study. He attended WNCC from 2015 to 2017, before transferring to the University of Nebraska Medical Center. But after realizing a career in nursing wasn’t for him after all, he wanted to get in on the booming industry of software engineering and development.

He moved to Austin, Texas, to learn the ropes and before long, he found himself at a company in the middle of a non-ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant lawsuit. Simianer had the idea to hire his visually-impaired step-dad to help him work through the company’s website, and ensure it was ADA compliant. This sparked a new idea in Simianer and set him down the path of making the American Dream accessible to those left in the dark.

In 2020, Simianer founded Clusiv, Inc., the worlds first e-learning platform for the blind and visually impaired. The company is a

training platform for individuals with visual impairments, helping them learn computer skills and connect them with employers. The company also helps other companies create processes for their disabled employees, allowing them to learn programs and skills to be successful in the workplace.

“I found something that I cared about and I went all in on that,” Simianer said. “It’s where I can make a difference.”

Simianer’s work with Clusiv has won several pitch competitions that help generate funds for his company including the Warrior Rising Veteran Pitch Battle, Bob Evans’ Heroes to CEOs grant contest, and the company was named one of the top five of tech start-ups in Austin.

Simianer said that WNCC was the perfect place for him to start his journey.

**“WNCC is an amazing starting point. From the instructors to the support, it’s hard to replicate this anywhere else, you can’t get what you have here in other places. The best experiences I have had with learning were at WNCC.”**



8 May

### Jump, Jive, & Swing

Join the Monumental Rock Combo, Fire in the Pan Swingers, and the WNCC Jazz Combo for a fun night of dancing and great music! Contact the WNCC Foundation at **308.635.6550** for more information.



9-13 May

### Finals Week

14 May

### Spring 2022 Commencement Ceremony



30 May

### Memorial Day, All Campuses Closed

31 May

### Summer Classes Begin

Looking to explore a new path? Register today for our Summer 2022 semester at [wncc.edu](http://wncc.edu).

11 June

### Cougar Golf Classic



4 July

### Independence Day, All Campuses Closed

21-26 August

### Week of Welcome!

Celebrate the start of fall classes with a fun week full of activities!



5 September

### Labor Day, All Campuses Closed

24 September

### Monument Marathon

Come experience Nebraska like you've never seen it at the 11th annual Monument Marathon. Learn more at [monumentmarathon.com](http://monumentmarathon.com).



# WNCC AWARDED GRANT FUNDS TO PURCHASE NURSING SIMULATORS

BY REBECCA KAUTZ, WNCC NURSING PROGRAM DIRECTOR



Western Nebraska Community College's nursing program purchased two "Nurse Anne" Simulators for the Alliance and Sidney campuses in the Fall 2021 semester with funds from the reVISION Action Grant.

The manikins create a life-like experience for nursing students to practice common diagnostic and aid procedures in a safe environment. The simulators can be programmed to display symptoms of common illnesses as well as allow students to practice general diagnostics. It features realistic skin, a heartbeat, breathing, in addition to fully-articulated arms and legs. Amber Jacoby, a WNCC nursing instructor, runs the simulations for students and can customize the program to allow students to practice a wide variety of skills and procedures.

"We can create a patient experience for our students in a simulated environment," Jacoby said. "It's a very safe place for students to learn bridging their theory to practice. The manikins have potential for a lot of different engagements related to clinical practices."

The reVISION Action Grant is intended to improve, modernize, and

expand career and technical education (CTE) programs to align with Nebraska's economic priorities and workforce demands. WNCC was awarded \$77,628. More than \$1.3 million was awarded to 17 public schools and community colleges across the state.

The two new simulators on the Alliance and Sidney campuses will allow all WNCC nursing students more access to hands-on training.

To learn more about the WNCC Nursing program, visit [wncc.edu](http://wncc.edu).

**"We can create a patient experience for our students in a simulated environment."**

—Becky Kautz,  
WNCC Nursing Program Director

EXPLORE  
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At Western Nebraska Community College, we strive to help our students and our community members build the bridge to their future. Students can explore new careers, discover their passion, and create new connections that will stay with them throughout their lives. From nursing programs and information technology to welding and truck drivers, WNCC is dedicated to being an education hub for our students and our communities. WNCC is the place to pursue your dreams.



To learn more, visit [wncc.edu](http://wncc.edu) or contact us at 308.635.6010.





# EXPLORE



**Register Today! | [wncc.edu](http://wncc.edu)**