

2014 WITC Student Ambassadors

More than 20 years ago, the Wisconsin Technical College System started the Student Ambassador program, a unique initiative that recognizes outstanding student achievement.

WITC's 2014 ambassadors, James Miller, WITC-Ashland; Blake Berger, WITC-New Richmond; Riley Christensen, WITC-Rice Lake; and Ayla Salter, WITC-Superior; have distinguished themselves through community involvement, leadership qualities and a commitment to higher education.

"The Foundation is proud to support the Ambassador program for WITC," says Craig Fowler, vice president, continuing education/executive director, foundation and campus administrator. "The program not only recognizes some of the college's top students, such as these four individuals, but also gives them the opportunity to develop their leadership skills by representing WITC in our communities."

WITC-Ashland James Miller

Story by Jim Biros • Photo by Dee Barabe

Trying before you buy – it's a good thing. But if you think it's a practice just for choosing cars, clothing or frozen pizza, think again.

James Miller admits to not knowing much about WITC-Ashland prior to becoming a student. Sitting in on a program quickly changed that for him.

"When I was looking for a course to take, I was very enticed by technology," says Miller. "I sat in on a course that Paul Gordon taught. He sold me on the college and the course."

Miller has already completed the information technology – network specialist program and will soon graduate with a second degree in business management. Studying a second program has given Miller a different perspective on learning processes.

"Business management is a bit different than IT," he says. "I have more online courses, along with ITV instruction.

These have taught me valuable skills about self-motivation and responsibility."

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Miller was nominated for the Student Ambassador role by economics and social sciences instructor Damian Von Frank.

"James is an ideal student ambassador for WITC because he embodies everything we stand for as an integral component of the Wisconsin Technical College System," says Von Frank. "Throughout his time at WITC, he has been



WITC-New Richmond Blake Berger

Story and photo by Elizabeth Whitchurch

a dedicated and driven student continually achieving academic success. Along with his school work and campus involvement, James is also an extremely hard worker who's never afraid to get his hands dirty. He continually juggles multiple job opportunities with his studies."

The combination of degrees will give Miller a solid background as he looks toward beginning his professional career.

"I wanted a complimentary degree to allow me to do more than just be an IT technician, and have a broader range of abilities," Miller says. "I want to eventually be a manager in an IT or technological field, preferably with WITC at some point. I couldn't ask for a better atmosphere to be a part of, and hopefully can continue in the future having a career with WITC, to show my gratitude as for all the school has provided me with."

That forward thinking will now assist Miller in his new Student Ambassador role.

"I look more at this as what I can give back, rather than what I can take from this experience," says Miller. "This school has provided me with four years of schooling and employment, relationships and amazing life experiences, which I'm just glad I will be able to give a little back to the school."

Introducing Blake Berger, a first-year automated packaging systems technician student at WITC-New Richmond. Interestingly, Berger brings to WITC nearly five years of education from UW-Oshkosh, where he spent his university years playing baseball. "It just didn't work out," he says, referring to his realization that baseball wasn't going to provide the career he expected. So at the tender age of 25, he began to seek another career.



A native of Star Prairie, Wis., Berger graduated high school from New Richmond. He explains that last year when he visited a favorite high school English teacher, he was told he needed to do more with his life. With that prompting, Berger took a more serious look at WITC, his hometown college. There he discovered the automated packaging systems technician program, its excellent job possibilities and earning potential and the likelihood of viable employment after two years.

"As a WITC Ambassador, I look forward to telling others about a technical college education. I hope I can affect others' lives."

"I'm driven to accomplish exactly what I want. I'm focused and it feels good," Berger says. "I realize now my learning style is hands-on, so I plan to work hard to finish the program and get a job in the packaging field. WITC has changed my life. The staff is friendly, and the instructors and program are great."

Berger explains how he's worked since high school with kids through baseball camps and coaching. He loves to meet people and is a good listener – two important skills WITC seeks in its Student Ambassadors.

WITC-Rice Lake Riley Christensen

Story by Deborah Anderson • Photo by Tanner Cernick

Riley Christensen has an eagerness about him that sometimes makes it hard to keep up as he speaks rapidly but clearly. It's obvious that his speech barely keeps up with his thoughts. "I enjoy working the 'muscle' of my mind," Christensen says. "I never stop thinking, breaking things apart mentally – I examine, analyze, come up with ways to fix it. I love physics – how and why things happen in the world."

At Spooner High School, one of his favorite projects was participating in the Rube Goldberg competition. It is an annual contest in which students build a device that will complete a simple task in a minimum of 20 steps – the more the better – in two minutes. A group of fellow physics students designed an apparatus to perform that year's challenge of changing a light bulb. The experience proved invaluable.

Christensen also concentrates on helping his paraplegic father. His father still enjoys hunting, so to get him into the woods to hunt, Riley ordered a crossbow and installed it on a base station.

"I didn't invent it, but would like to come up with other devices for him some day," he says.

Right out of high school, he enrolled in the mechanical design program at WITC-Rice Lake, but soon realized it wasn't exactly what he had in mind. After a break and some research, he decided the telecommunications technologies program – now re-named broadband technologies to reflect the changing industry – was more suited to him and his goals.

"I chose telecommunications because it is broad and well-rounded and will give me the opportunity to get a job and advance," he says. "The hands-on training is very versatile and doesn't limit me to a single job."

In his first year of the two-year program, Christensen has impressed instructor Mark Loehlein. "Riley is very intelligent and is taking certifications in advanced subjects beyond the class material."

After he graduates, Christensen's goal is to continue his education, looking especially at electrical engineering. "I want to develop new technologies and inventions," he says.



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In nominating Christensen to be Student Ambassador for the Rice Lake campus, Loehlein says, "Riley spends much of his free-time studying, or he's helping his classmates."

Even though Christensen is only in the first year of his program, he has already demonstrated a dedication to his education and the WITC-Rice Lake community.

WITC-Superior Ayla Salter

Story and photo by Jena Vogtman

Nursing student Ayla Salter found that WITC is not what she expected.

On most days, you can probably find her buried in medical books and researching terminology. Salter says she's never spent so much time studying. She says she likes it that way, because the reward of that 'A' is so much sweeter.



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“I didn’t expect the program to be so rigorous,” Salter says. “I’ve worked harder in the nursing program than I ever did for my bachelor’s degree.”

If you asked her five years ago if she would be going back to college for a two-year degree, she may not have believed you.

After high school, Salter attended a four-year private college in Minnesota, earning her psychology degree. She later added a couple certificates geared toward her service in non-profits,

including Habitat for Humanity and United Way through AmeriCorps, and also worked in an adult foster care group home. While these experiences harmonized well with her passion for helping people and having a positive impact on the community, she contemplated whether that same passion could be harnessed in another career.

“I have some medical people in my family. I was looking at different options and thought nursing was a better idea. You can better support a family,” states Salter.

She says going to WITC made sense for her dollars and cents when she compared the education and practical experiences offered to other regional nursing programs.

“I chose WITC because I couldn’t see a clear benefit to getting a bachelor’s degree immediately. It made more sense for me to go to WITC and be able to afford it,” Salter says. “After I graduate I’d like to find a job as I’m working to pursue the bachelor’s in nursing. In the longer term, I’d like to get to the master’s or even the doctorate.”

Another unexpected aspect of WITC for Salter was the variety of students and activities. As a 27-year-old, she was surprised by the range of ages in the WITC student body, which made it refreshing to come back to college with others like her. She’s also taken advantage of leadership and volunteer opportunities, which she says gives WITC students a sense of community.

“The options have also surprised me,” she says. “I envisioned technical college as going to class and going home, but there are lot of activities available.”

Besides becoming the WITC-Superior Student Ambassador, Salter has become a peer tutor for the nursing program, is the acting secretary for the Nursing Club and has traveled abroad with Guy Healy-Japan Summer Camp, where she worked as camp counselor helping Japanese children practice English.

“I look forward to meeting new people and being able to talk about things that interests them,” Salter says. “I thought becoming an ambassador looked interesting to advocate for technical education in general, because sometimes it doesn’t have the strongest publicity and is undervalued in society. I thought, ‘oh, I can speak to that.’”