



Chief Operating Officer
WIDA
Madison, WI

THE SEARCH

WIDA, the international leader in the research and development of products and services to support multilingual learners (MLLs) and their educators, seeks a mission-focused and results-oriented strategic leader to serve as the organization's next Chief Operating Officer (COO). WIDA offers a fully integrated, research-based academic language development system, including language standards, assessments, professional learning, and technical assistance, delivered through its unique consortium model currently serving 42 states, territories, and federal agencies. The organization is housed in the Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) at the top-ranked School of Education (SOE) within the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison). Since its founding in 2003, WIDA has experienced impressive growth and currently employs 150 staff members with annual revenues of \$90 million.

Reporting to the Executive Director of WIDA, the Chief Operating Officer will join the organization at a moment of tremendous opportunity. Over the past 21 years, WIDA has evolved from a grant proposal involving three states into the nation's foremost provider of language development resources for MLLs and their educators. WIDA's products are unmatched, as is its commitment to providing world class educational opportunities for MLLs. In recent years, the business landscape of multilingual learning has transformed, leading to greater competition in the language assessment market. The political landscape has similarly evolved, reinforcing the need for WIDA to ensure its educational philosophy is reflected in its products and services.

The Chief Operating Officer will work with Executive Director Jenni Torres and the WIDA senior leadership team on overall strategic planning and execution as well as organization-wide operations and initiatives. In addition to these functions, the COO will oversee finance and contracts, project management, and information technology, and will be charged with bridging WIDA's mission and business needs while operating in the context of the University of Wisconsin system; assessing and strengthening WIDA's technology infrastructure to ensure a competitive edge in the marketplace; and partnering with the Executive Director and other senior leaders to ensure WIDA's products and services continue to meet the needs of clients and educators.

A mission-focused and strategic operations leader, the Chief Operating Officer will bring a deep knowledge of strategic planning, administration processes, information technology, and business operations. The successful candidate will have at least seven years of leadership experience in operations-focused roles and will have a well-developed capacity for systematic analysis, relationship-building, and leading teams of committed mission-driven professionals.

WIDA has retained the national search firm Isaacson, Miller to assist in this important search. Confidential inquiries, nominations, and applications may be directed to the search firm as indicated at the end of this document.

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON, SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

WIDA is the largest education research, assessment, and professional learning organization focused on MLLs that is closely affiliated with a major research university. As part of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, WIDA benefits from the institution's collaborative spirit as well as the material and intellectual resources of the nation's best education school, as named in the 2024 edition of *US News and World Report's* Best Education Schools ranking. The School of Education is one of 13 schools and colleges on the prestigious, 933-acre UW-Madison campus.

Many of the School's programs are widely regarded as being among the very best in the nation. The people and units that make up the School are addressing some of society's most critical needs – from challenges in education at all levels, to issues in health and other human services – while also contributing to quality of life through the arts.

The School is home to ten academic departments, a diverse range of research projects, and an array of outreach efforts. In addition to several core education programs, about half of the School's students are enrolled in fine art, dance, counseling, occupational therapy, and exercise science programs. It also houses several service units that serve the School and the broader community.

As of fall 2023, the School of Education enrolled 2,026 undergraduate and special majors (including second/additional majors) and 1,172 graduate and professional majors (including second/add majors). The School of Education employed 824 faculty and staff as of October 2023.

For more information about the School of Education, please visit: <https://www.education.wisc.edu/>

THE WISCONSIN CENTER FOR EDUCATION RESEARCH (WCER)

The Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Education is one of the most productive and respected education research centers in the world. WCER is a financially self-sustaining research center that is fully supported by revenue generated from indirect cost recovery from both grants and fee-for-service projects. Annually, it supports 150 grant-funded projects and roughly 620 scholars—119 affiliated faculty members from the School of Education and other

units across campus, 288 academic staff, 192 graduate students, and 21 university staff. WCER supports projects ranging from one principal investigator to teams of researchers and hundreds of staff. It covers the full grant and fee-for-service life cycle and offers financial, human resources, technology, contractual, facilities, creative, and communication services, as well as ample opportunities for networking and exchange. Anyone researching education affiliated with any UW–Madison school or college is eligible to work with WCER, pending the approval of the WCER Director.

WCER is also home to a number of projects that produce revenue-generating products and provide services to customers including schools, districts, and educational bodies around the world. WIDA is the largest of these fee-for-service projects. In addition to WIDA, these projects include the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER); the School Mental Health Collaborative (SMHC); the Field Day Lab; the Multilingual Learning Research Center (MLRC); the Rural Education Research and Implementation Center (RERIC); the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN); the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC); and Wisconsin’s Equity and Inclusion Laboratory (WeiLab), which conducts research on how to best promote equitable and inclusive learning and work environments in higher education.

ABOUT WIDA

WIDA is WCER’s largest fee-for-service program. Its mission is to advance academic language development and academic achievement for children and youth who are culturally and linguistically diverse through high-quality standards, assessments, research, and professional learning for educators. WIDA products and services are trusted by 42 U.S. states, territories, and federal agencies.

WIDA’s story begins with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which brought English Language Learners (ELLs) into the national spotlight. In 2003, the Wisconsin Department of Public Education was awarded an Enhanced Assessment Grant and WIDA was created to support it. In 2006, WIDA moved to its current home at WCER at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Today, WIDA offers a comprehensive suite of assessments, each built on a foundation of strong research and anchored in the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) Standards. The ELD Standards represent the social, instructional, and academic language students use to engage with peers, educators, and the curriculum in schools and highlight the language needed to meet academic expectations set by state, college, and career readiness standards, as well as other content standards.

Using the ELD Standards, WIDA assessments identify and place MLLs, and measure and determine progress toward English language development for K-12 learners. The ACCESS for ELLs (ACCESS), begun in 2004, is the collective name for WIDA’s suite of summative English language proficiency assessments. ACCESS is taken annually by more than two million MLLs in Kindergarten through Grade 12 in all 42 WIDA Consortium member states, territories, and federal agencies. Scores measure student learning towards a standard or goal and are used to describe student performance in terms of the WIDA ELD Standards and performance definitions. ACCESS, like other WIDA assessments, is offered online and on paper.

In addition to ACCESS, WIDA offers several other assessments, including WIDA Screener, an English language proficiency assessment given to new students in grades K-12 to help educators identify whether they are English language learners. WIDA also offers an interim assessment through MODEL (Measure of Developing English Language), a suite of English language proficiency assessments for Grades K-12 that can be used to predict student performance on ACCESS for MLLs domestically and internationally as a measure of language development. WIDA also supports Spanish language learners in grades K-12 with WIDA Español.

WIDA provides tools and resources to empower educators and advance the field of language development. The organization's professional learning reaches more than 20,000 educators annually and it hosts the largest conference dedicated to educators of early childhood through Grade 12 multilingual learners, offering nearly 2,000 attendees access to more than 100 educator-developed sessions. Today, most of WIDA's professional learning offerings are entirely digital.

About WIDA's Executive Director

Dr. Jenni Torres is the Executive Director of WIDA and assumed her role in January 2025. Dr. Torres brings more than 25 years of experience in language education, as well as experience in both professional learning and multilingual education. Prior to WIDA, she served as the Executive Vice President and Chief Academic Officer at Waterford.org. She started her career as a language teacher at the elementary and middle school levels before transitioning to work in the education technology space.

Dr. Torres received her EdD in Educational Leadership & Policy from American University and her MEd from Harvard Graduate School of Education in Teaching & Curriculum with a specialty in world languages.

ROLE OF THE CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

The Chief Operating Officer will join WIDA at a moment of organizational transition. Executive Director Jenni Torres joined WIDA in January 2025 as founder Tim Boals transitioned into the role of Founder and Senior Principal Investigator following many years of organizational achievement. Since its founding, WIDA has grown exponentially and carries considerable name recognition in the MLL space.

The Chief Operating Officer will be a critical partner to the Executive Director and will have an opportunity to create new and refine existing processes and systems to ensure subject matter experts across the organization can focus on what they do best. The COO will have four direct reports and oversee strategic planning, finance and contracts, project management, and information technology for the organization. In the near future, WIDA expects to create a new product manager position overseeing the MODEL interim assessment. That role will also report to the COO, with the potential for several more product managers to be recruited over time. In addition, the COO will promote purposeful collaboration and project prioritization, and will contribute to enhancing a culture of trust, equity, and inclusion across the organization.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

The Chief Operating Officer will be expected to address the opportunities listed below:

Bridge WIDA's mission and business needs while operating successfully within the context of the University of Wisconsin system

WIDA is an innovative and mission-driven organization with an entrepreneurial fee-for-service model, residing in a large and complex public university structure that has traditionally focused on external grants as a revenue source. While this configuration has ultimately served to benefit WIDA in myriad ways, the arrangement also presents tensions between mission, business, and university protocol. The Chief Operating Officer, in partnership with WIDA's finance team and the Executive Director, will be responsible for managing the complex finances of the organization, strategizing how to ensure the organization's fiscal autonomy as it relates to revenue generation, spending, and reporting, while operating within the parameters set by the University of Wisconsin and the School of Education. The COO will have experience interpreting and analyzing financial models to recommend strategic business approaches, and will work with other WIDA leaders to track and interpret state and federal policies that could impact business and inform financial projections.

Partner with the Executive Director and other senior leaders to ensure WIDA's products and services continue to meet client and educator expectations

As the market in which WIDA operates becomes more competitive, WIDA's product offerings and strategy will need to evolve for WIDA to remain the leading voice in the multilingual learner educational product space. To this end, the Chief Operating Officer will serve as the connective tissue between senior leaders and across various departments at WIDA to provide an organization-wide view and management of product development and rollout. Product opportunities on the horizon include new and updated assessment tools as well as growth in professional learning resources.

Assess and strengthen WIDA's technology infrastructure to ensure a competitive edge in the marketplace

As the marketplace for multilingual assessment and learning products becomes increasingly competitive, the Chief Operating Officer will work in partnership with the Director of Information Technology to ensure that WIDA's technology infrastructure most effectively supports the organization and its aspirations. Within the organization, the Chief Operating Officer will make certain that systems are in place that enhance WIDA's operational capacity. Externally, the Chief Operating Officer will be attentive and responsive to client and educator needs, including a growing call across the industry for cutting edge data management, privacy, and security. While directors across the organization will oversee the day-to-day execution of vendor contracts, any significant breaches will escalate to the COO to ensure that WIDA consistently delivers a high-quality product, on time and without error, to its clients.

Lead the strategic planning process and manage organization-wide operational initiatives

The Chief Operating Officer will oversee the organization's next strategic planning process and ensure its strategic and operational initiatives move forward as efficiently as possible. As WIDA's operations lead, the COO will monitor evolving organizational priorities and help to clarify roles, responsibilities, and ownership of projects and initiatives, with a particular focus on enhancing communication across functional areas. The Chief Operating Officer will leverage WCER and University of Wisconsin resources, such as their in-house project management professionals, to support the implementation and execution of operational initiatives.

QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

The successful candidate will possess many of the following professional experiences and personal characteristics:

- At least seven years of management experience in an operations-focused role, preferably at a large-scale education-related testing, assessment, or research organization; ability to cite specific examples of having efficiently operationalized organizational strategies;
- Excellence in organizational management and demonstrated ability to coach staff, lead other leaders, and manage and develop high-performance teams;
- Substantive knowledge and understanding of financial management and oversight, and the ability to manage a complex budget;
- A nuanced understanding of the critical role of information technology and office equipment systems in supporting project management, finance, data security, and other critical internal operational functions;
- Strong familiarity with externally facing IT platforms that inform WIDA's product delivery, as well as with matters regarding data security and compliance;
- Broad experience with a wide range of business functions and systems, including strategic development and planning, business analysis, contract management and procurement, and human resources;
- Ability to help others deliver measurable, high-impact, and cost-effective results that make an organization's vision a reality;
- Ability to work within a dynamic, fast-paced, and collaborative environment while driving solutions forward;
- Excellent professional judgment managing change;
- A willingness to engage in and deepen knowledge of WIDA's mission and values.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

WIDA has engaged Isaacson, Miller for this search. Inquiries, nominations, and applications should be sent in strict confidence to: imsearch.com/open-searches/WIDA/chief-operating-officer. Electronic submission of materials is strongly encouraged.

Jeff Kessner, Diana Carmona, and Jenny Rubin
Isaacson, Miller

The University of Wisconsin System will not reveal the identities of applicants who request confidentiality in writing. See Wis. Stat. sec. 19.36(7). Candidates who are selected as finalists will be invited for campus interviews and their names will be announced publicly.

The University of Wisconsin is an Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Employer. We promote excellence through diversity and encourage all qualified individuals to apply.

If you need to request an accommodation because of a disability, you can find information about how to make a request at the following website: <https://oed.wisc.edu/disability-accommodation-information-for-applicants/>

Employment will require a criminal background check. It will also require you and your references to answer questions regarding sexual violence and sexual harassment.

The Annual Security and Fire Safety Report contains current campus safety and disciplinary policies, crime statistics for the previous 3 calendar years, and on-campus student housing fire safety policies and fire statistics for the previous 3 calendar years. UW-Madison will provide a paper copy upon request; please contact the University of Wisconsin Police Department.