

## **Who says higher education can't be agile? The University of Wisconsin System's Flexible Option**

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The development of the University of Wisconsin's Flexible Option is putting to the test the agility and ability of higher education—especially public higher education—to change. Almost a year into the planning of the UW Flexible Option, and as we head towards a late fall launch, we're struck by the magnitude of what we have taken on as a System, as well as by the considerable policy implications of what we are developing: a portfolio of self-paced, competency-based degree and certificate offerings designed to meet the needs of adult students with some college and no degree. Like other UW System initiatives, the UW Flexible Option builds on the System's reputation for quality and innovation, its foundation in the *Wisconsin Idea*, and its ongoing commitment to provide affordable and accessible education to more Wisconsin residents. It is focused on developing programs that serve the public interest, meet student demand, and address areas of economic growth and development in Wisconsin and beyond, making it a critical component of the UW System's strategic plan, the *Growth Agenda for Wisconsin*, and its educational attainment agenda, *More Graduates for Wisconsin*.

But in the decision to jettison seat-time and credits, the UW Flexible Option is unlike any other initiative in which we are engaged as a System, or—to the best of our knowledge—unlike in scale and scope anything being done by any other system in the nation. While a number of other American universities—public, private, non-profit and for-profit—have developed or are working on developing competency-based educational (CBE) programs, the UW System is the only public university developing a CBE program at the system level, involving close collaboration among participating UW institutions. Indeed, the “systemness” of what we are doing separates the UW Flexible Option from other competency-based higher education programs. And we believe the quality of what we are offering will match the distinctiveness.

The model is unusual, involving close collaboration between the System's UW-Extension and the System's degree-granting institutions. The academic development is being done by the UW System's existing—quality—faculty, and the academic degrees and certificates offered through UW Flex will be offered by UW institutions. They will be approved and awarded by the same accreditation and faculty governance policies as all UW degrees, which decree that academic control of a UW Flex program remains under faculty and administrative shared governance within the offering UW institution. Program faculty and staff determine the competencies, assessments, and appropriate levels of mastery for UW Flex programs. But, in removing the classroom, seat time and credits as currency for student learning, the role of faculty in this model

is vastly different from the traditional role, causing some anxiety and lots of excitement for the faculty pioneers who have signed on to the first cohort of Flex offerings.

And so is the operational domain: without credits, every administrative function operates differently, including how students are enrolled, receive financial aid, pay their fees, and are transcribed. UW-Extension is supporting the administration of UW Flex at each institution, housing admissions, registrar, financial aid, and bursar functions, among others. As a cost-recovery unit with expertise in online learning, learning management platforms, and alternative programming, UW-Extension's Division of Continuing Education, Outreach and E-Learning is particularly adept at thinking outside the credit box to envision and build the operational infrastructure necessary to ensure the economy of scale that will make UW Flex financially viable and sustainable. UW institutions and UW-Extension are working collaboratively to ensure that UW Flex students receive the academic and other support they need to help them succeed, and one of the signature features of the model is the role of the Academic Success Coach, who will work closely with each student as he or she navigates through the curriculum and the operational systems.

The first cohort of programs to be launched in November 2013 include:

- The UW Colleges, the System's network of 13 freshman/sophomore campuses, will offer liberal arts, general education courses in the Flexible Option format.
- UW-Milwaukee will offer an R.N. to B.S.N. completion program; a bachelor of science degree in Biomedical Sciences offering degree completion in Diagnostic Imaging; a bachelor of science in Information Science & Technology; and a certificate in Professional and Technical Communication.

For cohort 2, more degree and certificate programs are under development by another four UW institutions. For additional information on the programs to be offered as well as the development process, go to <http://flex.wisconsin.edu/>.

Because UW Flex will be offered in formats that are self-paced, students may pursue program competencies and take assessments according to their own timelines, not traditional academic calendars. Further, students will be able to acquire skill and knowledge from anywhere—from traditional place-based courses, to online material, to work and practical experiences, to structured internships and service projects. By decoupling mastery of competencies from delivery, students will have more flexible pathways by which to achieve their educational goals, according to their prior learning and experiences, their time and effort, and their interests. We are well aware that the stakes are raised for how we assess student learning, and we believe we have the opportunity through UW Flex to develop alternative—and better—metrics, ones that both provide more robust evidence for student learning, and capture the more varied pathways through which adult students demonstrate success. Like other CBE programs, we will have to provide Flex students with traditional transcripts, translating competency mastery into grades and

credits, so students may easily apply to graduate schools and jobs. Yet we are excited by the potential of the additional, competency-based Flex transcript under development, which will describe not only the competencies mastered but also how—with student work as evidence—students achieved mastery.

In the year since UW Flex was announced, much has been done, particularly in the academic and operational domains, but also in terms of developing a strong communications operation and the budgetary model. It won't come as a surprise to anyone that there are immense start-up costs required for educational transformation of this kind, and the UW System is making a significant investment in the UW Flexible Option. In addition, alongside the intense work in the academic, operational, communications, and budgetary domains addressed above, UW Flex requires us to engage much more deliberately with policy at UW institutions, across the System, within the state, and nationally. We are at the forefront of a new higher education policy frontier, in which a challenging and long-overdue reevaluation of the credit hour is taking place. We received approval from the Higher Learning Commission through a pilot CBE process to offer the first cohort of Flex degrees, and we are working closely with the U.S. Department of Education, which has encouraged us to lead the way in developing that new, competency-based set of metrics for student learning. Once again, the “systemness” of the UW Flexible Option makes the policy footprint of our endeavor larger: when the unit of change is an entire system, as opposed to a single university, the potential for transformation is more significant, and the extent to which policy-makers pay attention is also greater.

Let's be clear that UW Flex won't replace the UW System's traditional, credit-based academic offerings, whether in the classroom or online. Rather, UW Flex is designed to meet the needs of a population of students—that new majority of adults who need post-secondary degrees for advancement in the knowledge economy—that numbers in the hundreds of thousands in Wisconsin, and in the millions, nationally. Finally, we believe that the UW Flexible Option will be both refutation of the accusation that higher education isn't agile, and high-quality proof that we can respond nimbly, creatively, and entrepreneurially to meet the needs of the state, the knowledge economy, and the new majority of adult students for whom higher education remains the gateway to professional, civic, and personal advancement.

This article can be found at: <http://www.sheeo.org/resources/state-policy-leadership/university-wisconsin-system%E2%80%99s-flexible-option>