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Meeting the Storm: The University of Wisconsin Flexible Option

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From Information Access to Information Utilization

While education has always been a mix of providing access to information and nurturing the intellectual and analytical tools to work with information, this same mix is no longer relevant. Students now have virtually all the information we have as faculty; little value remains in an education based on providing access to information, per se. We are all, in fact, awash in information, shifting the value from information access to information utilization through analysis and engagement. Education must focus on helping students navigate the sea of information: learning how to distinguish the good from the bad, how to combine and apply information to answer questions about themselves and the world around them and how to develop new information through research and critical examination.

Learning science and educational research has given us two axioms about how people learn:



PHOTO BY FELIX MIZIOZNIKOV

The higher education transformation is pushing institutions to find new ways to meet the changing needs of the ever-changing student population, and Flexible Degrees are the solution the UW-Extension has developed.

1. Different people learn differently, not only in terms of pace but in terms of learning style;
2. All students learn best under conditions in which they actively engage with learning material and when they understand and work towards clear learning outcomes.

Although we have had research evidence for these truisms for several decades or more, it is only recently that current technologies allow us to build effective and scalable models of education around them.

UW Flexible Option: A Competency-Based Approach to Higher Education Delivery

Currently under development, the UW Flexible Option (or UW Flex), is a portfolio of degrees, certificates and courses drawn primarily from the existing program array in the University of Wisconsin System. UW Flex programs will be offered in formats that are self-paced, competency-based and built on learning science and best-practice educational principles. UW Flex targets adult and nontraditional students — individuals who juggle family and work and who are bound by schedules and locations that do not easily adapt to traditional academic parameters.

Rather than taking a set of courses within designated semesters, students

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Article originally posted on The EvoLLLution at http://www.evollution.com/media_resources/meeting-the-storm-the-university-of-wisconsin-flexible-option/

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progress toward degrees by demonstrating mastery over designated learning outcomes — competencies — that define what students need to know and do to qualify for those degrees. UW Flex is defined by these features:

- Learning and demonstration of learning are uncoupled from instructional activities.
- Competencies and student learning assessment are, at the core, guided by UW's liberal education Shared Learning Goals.
- Degree progress is personalized through maximum schedule flexibility, and students can enter programs at levels appropriate to them.
- Students are encouraged to use free and online learning resources (MOOCs, etc.) liberally, while the "curation" and evaluation of these resources remain under the quality oversight of UW faculty.
- Pricing structures are flexible and allow students to pay only for what they use.
- UW Flex programs will be developed in areas that serve the public interest, including areas of strong student demand and areas of economic

growth and development in Wisconsin and beyond.

Obtaining a degree through the Flex Option will not be easier, or "less than," a traditional UW degree. Students will demonstrate mastery over program competencies determined by the same faculty and institutions that grant all other University of Wisconsin degrees.

New Roles — and Old — for Faculty and Staff

UW faculty will develop the competency sets for each UW Flex degree or certificate program and identify appropriate performance standards and the corresponding assessments to test students' competency mastery. Assessments will range from traditional exams to rubric-based evaluations of student work to observational analyses in structured environments. Strong mentoring and tutorial support for students enrolled in UW Flex programs will be provided by both faculty and professional advisors to help students meet their educational goals. A high-

touch, proactive and "wrap around" advising model will be based on educational best practices known to be effective for the types of students that are being targeted. Obtaining a degree through the Flex Option will not be easier, or "less than," a traditional UW degree. Students will demonstrate mastery over program competencies determined by the same faculty and institutions that grant all other University of Wisconsin degrees.

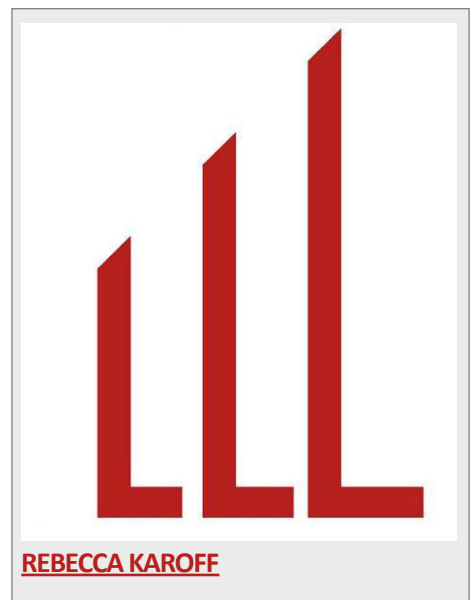
As **these two articles** suggest, the higher education transformation is being driven by a perfect storm. Public higher education has always aspired to provide education for the public good, an education that helps an ever-more diverse range of learners improve their lives and the world around them. Faculty and staff throughout the UW System are meeting this storm and emerging with an educational model that uses learning science and technologies to further realize these aspirations — focusing squarely on cost-effective, personalized student learning and engagement.



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