

University of Wisconsin Flexible Option Status Report – April 2013 Board of Regents

I. Overview

As a self-paced, competency-based model, the UW Flexible Option is a high-profile, bold, and innovative initiative to provide quality educational offerings to returning adult students with some college and no degrees. The Flexible Option will serve as an important contributor to the UW System's goals to help more Wisconsin residents attain college degrees and address the state's workforce needs. 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.

The magnitude and complexity of the endeavor is significant. In CBE, almost every component operates differently from how the UW provides education to students in its traditional programs, including its newer online programs. Where traditional UW degree programs are structured around credits and courses, academic content delivered to students by instructors, and conventional terms or semesters, the UW Flexible Option will operate outside that model. This means that, in addition to very different roles for faculty and instructors, academic and student support services like financial aid, admissions, transcription and student record-keeping, bursar and advising, will all be structured and operate differently. What is being developed is on the scale of the creation of a whole new university, such are the infrastructure requirements and academic and administrative capacity needed to serve students well and ensure the quality of both the UW Flexible Option and existing UW programs.

There are four broad, intersecting domains under development for the launch of Cohort I UW Flexible Option programs, all of which are focused on providing a quality UW educational experience leading to student success:

- Academic Components
- Operations for Academic and Student Support
- Business Model
- Communications

As a point of clarification, the target launch date of fall 2013 does not mean September 1. Because students may enroll in UW Flexible Option programs at the beginning of any month, normal semester or terms dates are not relevant.

The goal is to enroll students in the first cohort of UW Flexible Option by the end of the fall of 2013.

Summarized below are some of the developments and work underway in each of the four domains. This work is built upon collaborative leadership involving UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges faculty and staff with the UW Flex Core team at UW-Extension and UW System. In addition to the working and advisory groups summarized below, both UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges have developed a number of internal functional and cross-functional work groups, convened by the Provosts at each institution, to address the individual areas under development. The new work and time dedicated to moving their UW Flexible Option programs forward by the faculty and staff at UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges represents a remarkable demonstration of leadership and commitment to students and their institutions.

II. Academic Development

The major activity taking place in the academic arena to launch the first cohort of UW Flexible Option programs by the fall of 2013 is summarized below.

Cohort I Program Development

Faculty and others at UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges are working diligently to develop the curricula for the first cohort of UW Flexible Option programs. They are articulating the competencies that will define the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that students will be expected to master, and beginning to identify the assessments and performance standards by which student learning will be measured. The paradigm shift from thinking about course development, to competency development is significant, for instructors and all who are involved in the program development. Attention is being paid to curricular integrity, to ensure that the quality of the degree obtained through a UW Flexible Option program is equal to the existing quality degree offered by UWM and Colleges. Programs faculty and staff are assuring that the totality of competencies and assessment activities under development align with the UW System's Shared Learning Goals and the learning outcomes particular to each UW institution, and will allow for students to be assessed not only on mastery of individual competencies, but also on their abilities to synthesize and apply competencies in their field of study.

In CBE, assessment of student learning is high stakes: students make academic progress only when they demonstrate mastery over individual competencies as defined by program faculty. Assessments under development range from pencil-paper and multiple choice tests, to papers, clinical-like observations and interviews, and student portfolios. A psychometrician is being hired to help plan, coordinate, and execute activities to ensure the accuracy and validity of competency-based assessments and gather data instrumental to improving the assessment process. Faculty are also beginning to think about the kinds of content, i.e., the instructional and learning materials and resources students will use as they move towards readiness for competency assessment, as well as the kinds of strong advising participating students will need (more on advising below). Professional development is being provided, including an assessment workshop planned for June.

UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges are each bringing their UW Flexible Option offerings to governance units, as appropriate and in accordance with institutional and UW System policy on academic program planning and approval. Because all of the UW Flexible Option degree programs being developed in the first cohort are already existing degrees, Regent approval is not required.

UW Flexible Option program development underway at UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges also includes discussions of workload and compensation, since the UW Flexible Option, i.e., competency-based instructional role operates so differently from workload determined by courses and credits.

Accreditation

One of the most significant milestones required to launch UW Flexible Option programs in the fall is approval by the UW System's regional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC). While UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges are each independently fully accredited by the HLC, the move to offer competency-based programs requires additional review. To that end, UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges are working to meet HLC requirements in order to ensure launch-readiness by the fall.

In February 2013, both institutions submitted applications to be part of a pilot project to determine how HLC would accredit institutions offering direct-assessment, competency-based programs outside of traditional credit-based models. On March 15, both institutions were informed that they were accepted into the pilot and needed to submit "Substantive Change" applications by May 15. As the name suggests, this process entails considerable attention and UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges are working diligently to address the 48 areas required by HLC. The crux of the review is focused on the UW Flexible Option as a direct-

assessment, competency-based program outside of the credit model, and with learning activities that do not take place in the traditional classroom. The HLC will decide in July whether the “Substantive Change” applications submitted by UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges will be approved allowing them to offer UW Flexible Option programs. Only then will UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges be able to market their programs and begin recruiting students.

HLC is not the only organization needing to determine new pathways for higher education accountability in the changing landscape of CBE. The HLC review is co-dependent on new guidelines just issued on March 18 by the U.S. Department of Education (DoE) for determining federal aid eligibility to students in competency-based programs (more below). Just as the UW Flexible Option depends on HLC approval before it can begin enrolling students, it will depend on DoE approval before participating students will be eligible for federal financial aid. The Flex Core team has already initiated discussions with DoE, which has committed to assisting the UW Milwaukee and UW Colleges in navigating their new guidelines. In fact, DoE views the UW System as a case study to help the agency develop its new administrative oversight language.

Pilot Independent Learning Courses Underway in Competency-Based Flexible Format

A pilot program offered through UW-Extension’s Independent Learning Program has allowed students to take competency-based courses and in some cases, receive credit for them. The pilot is being conducted in order to test the emerging UW Flexible Option model, the functionality of required infrastructure, and to assess and then refine the processes used. The pilot will be completed by June 30, 2013. As of March 15, there were a total of 88 students in the pilot, including 28 in College Algebra; 34 in Elementary Statistics; and 26 in a certificate program.

UW Flexible Option Faculty/IAS Advisory Group

One of President Reilly’s first steps in planning the UW Flexible Option was to convene a group of UW instructors, to address the concerns and interest expressed by faculty upon the announcement of the UW Flexible Option in June 2012. Composed of faculty and IAS from all 14 of the UW System’s degree-granting institutions, the group was convened to develop a consensus understanding of what the UW Flexible Option is and should be, including a set of core values and principles covering, among other things: the role faculty will play in the development and offering of participating programs; adherence to shared governance; adherence to accreditation standards and requirements; assurance of quality and rigor in competency-based curricula and assessments; competency mastery; and a strong focus on student learning and success. The Faculty/IAS Advisory Group began meeting in late October, 2012, and completed its work in late January, 2013. The group’s work is represented in two documents that have been widely disseminated across the UW System:

- 1) What, Why, Who, When & Where of the UW Flexible Option;
- 2) Statement of Principles to Guide Development and Implementation of the UW Flex Option.

Cohort II Program Development

Cohort II planning and conversations are also underway at UW-Parkside and a number of other UW institutions.

III. Operations Development for Academic and Student Support Services

It is in the operational domain that the dissimilarities of the competency-based UW Flexible Option model compared to the traditional model become most apparent. To accommodate these differences, countless decisions need to be made, and practices need to be adapted or created in order to establish the administrative and operational capacity necessary to serve students in the first cohort, and beyond, of the UW Flexible Option. In some instances, both short-term and long-term solutions are being developed: short-term so that students may enroll in fall; long-term so that the capacity is built with an infrastructure that is efficient and effective for students and participating institutions into the future.

UW Flex Operations Advisory Group for Academic and Student Support

Composed of staff who work in the academic and student support service areas that need to be reevaluated within the UW Flexible Option model, the UW Flexible Option Operations Advisory Group was convened in January, 2013. The Operations Group held a two-day retreat in early February, including 35 people from 9 UW institutions and staff from UW System Administration. Because of their lead roles, UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges staff made up the majority of the participants. The group conducted a kind of environmental scan identifying a comprehensive list of operational functions and practices that would need to be in place for students to enroll and make progress in UW Flexible Option programs. Retreat participants divided themselves into subgroups organized around the major functional areas: Admissions, Registrar, Financial Aid, Bursar, Advising, and one focused on other kinds of student services that would be needed.

There was broad consensus that a more centralized, rather than an institution-based approach to these functions would produce the consistency, uniformity, and economy of scale needed for the UW Flexible Option to sustain itself and serve students most efficiently. At the same time, authority over decisions remains with the programs and within institutions. For example, UW-Milwaukee's nursing program sets admissions criteria and oversees admissions standards, but the administrative functions can be handled by UW-Extension.

This will require a strong student information system (SIS) and identifying what system to use (changing the existing Peoplesoft systems, or choose an entirely different system) is a complex decision-making process, and one with enormous workload and resource implications. The SIS for the initiative will have to accommodate competency-based, self-paced programs, in which students enroll at almost any time, work at their own pace, and are not subject to traditional academic calendars. This means that students must be able to access content and complete assessments whenever they are ready to do so, and that proper recording of their progress must be made. Whatever SIS is purchased or built, it is imperative that it is able to accommodate this level of schedule flexibility, along with tracking individual students' assessments, payments, financial aid awards, admissions and provisional admissions, etc. Hence this decision impacts all the work of the functional areas described below.

Since the retreat, the Operations Group has continued to convene, with bi-weekly full-group meetings accompanied by bi-weekly functional sub-group meetings. The collective expertise of this group is remarkable and, although the membership is comprised largely of UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges staff, each of the functional areas meet regularly with their counterparts throughout the UW System so that the UW Flexible Option development and decision-making underway are being shared at other UW institutions. While much remains to be resolved, a partial survey of the issues these groups are tackling follows.

- **Admissions:** A centralized model is being developed with a two-pronged approach admitting students first to the UW Flexible Option delivery model, and then to the specific UW Flexible Degree academic program. The following processes and programs are under construction: a pre-assessment tool to determine the “fit” of an applicant to the competency-based model; pre-enrollment advising procedures; admissions criteria, application, and fee assessment; and a web portal for students so they can access and enter the UW Flexible Option admissions process. Other decisions to be made include at what point UW Flexible Options students will be transitioned from the more centralized admissions process to the program-specific one.
- **Enrollment/Registration:** The registrar role is multi-faceted and—because of its student records function—interfaces extensively with the admissions, financial aid, and bursar roles. The primary questions being addressed by the registrars are: how to calculate enrollment in a competency-based model; how to categorize students; how to transcript competencies and other aspects of students' UW Flexible Option educational experiences; how to convert competencies to credits (for transfer and other purposes); how to track degree progress; how to determine faculty workload, which is tied to students served; where and how student account provisioning will take place. There are also

federal and UW System reporting requirements that need to be taken into consideration as the processes to address the questions above are created. For the Fall 2013 launch, UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges are in the process of locally designing processes and procedures to resolve each of these questions.

- **Bursar Responsibilities:** To a certain extent, the decisions being made for the bursar function are being driven by the admissions, registrar and financial aid functions. In alignment with these other areas, processes are being developed for: student billing and collections, with solutions needed to accommodate the different tuition pricing options proposed for UW Flexible Option programs; loan counseling; deferments, waivers and appeals; tuition refunds (including an amendment to Regent policy); and financial aid disbursement. There is a whole subset of related issues for how the bursar functions for veterans will be handled in a competency-based model, in the context of federal and Wisconsin GI benefits. The bursar working group is also exploring issues related to the program integrity requirements of the Higher Education Reauthorization Act, as well as state regulations.
- **Financial Aid:** Financial Aid is complicated and how it works at UW institutions is determined entirely in compliance with U.S. Department of Education (DoE) Rules. As mentioned above, on March 18, DoE issued new guidelines for determining federal aid eligibility to students in competency-based programs. This is timely and good news for the UW Flexible Option. However, the new guidelines require in-depth study by institutional and UW System financial aid experts, along with guidance from DoE on how to seek approval for the initiative's CBE programs in accordance with the new rules. UW-Extension Chancellor Ray Cross and Interim Provost Aaron Brower visited officials at the DoE on March 20-21 and have shared the results of that visit with members of the Operations Group.

Some of the major issues being worked through by the UW Flexible Option Financial Aid Directors and others include: how to award financial aid to participating students; how to calculate satisfactory academic progress in a competency-based model, including how grading will be done; how to determine residency requirements, as mandated by state law for students receiving financial aid; defining start-up dates for academic terms; defining enrollment and full-time status; how to handle award dispersal; and how state financial aid eligibility will be determined for UW Flexible Option students and then state aid awarded. While some decisions have been made, the context has now shifted given DoE's newly issued guidelines.

- **Advising:** One of the signature components of the UW Flexible Option will be the strong, integrated, and proactive advising model under development. Essential for the success of UW Flexible Option students, the model envisioned entails an innovative blend of academic and student support roles, tentatively called the Academic Success Coach. The advising subgroup is focusing on the "student life-cycle" and what needs to be in place for UW Flexible Option students to succeed from pre-assessment to program completion. In consultation with other functional areas, as needed, the advising sub-group is working its way through elements like: developing the pre-enrollment advising tool and process mentioned above; how and where the "hand-off" will occur from centralized, pre-enrollment advising to the program-specific institutional advising; content tutoring and assessment readiness; defining roles for faculty and professional advisors; overall staffing needs and appropriate student to advisor ratios; and career counseling, among others.
- **Other:** There is a whole list of other topics that are under consideration by the Operations Group members, including: overall staffing issues for each of the areas above; reliable assessment proctoring and student identity verification; access to library resources; access to IT resources; student mental health support; segregated fees; and accessibility for students with disabilities.

- **Infrastructure:** In addition to resolving the Student Information System needs described above in collaboration with UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges, UW-Extension is also exploring the purchase of a customer relationship management (CRM) system. A CRM system is required to help profile prospective adult and nontraditional learners, understand their educational needs, and build relationships with them. Procurement policies for the UW System and the state will be followed as these two decisions move forward.

IV. Business Model Development

The academic and operational work described above, directed towards the launch of the Cohort I UW Flexible Option programs and beyond, requires significant investments, not only of personnel, but also of start-up capital. From the outset, the UW Flexible Option has relied on a shared funding model, with contributions from the state, the UW System, and UW-Extension. While it is anticipated that the individual Flexible Option programs will generate revenue sometime around their fifth year of enrolling students, until that time more investment is needed to fund, among other things, the work of the faculty developing competency-based programs, the operations work in the academic and student services arenas, and procurement of a Customer Relations Management System and a Student Information Systems (both of which entail significant start-up costs).

Led by Chancellor Cross, significant work has been done by the Flex Core team to develop a business plan that positions the UW Flexible Option to be: affordable for students and enables them to meet their educational and career goals in a timely fashion; fiscally responsible and responsive to UW institutions, the UW System, and the state of Wisconsin and its taxpayers; and financially and operationally viable and self-sustaining into the future. The business plan is a living document in which the assumptions for various projections and models are explained, with questions that remain to be answered as additional information becomes available. There are a number of questions—academic, budgetary, and operational—for which answers will be unavailable until individual UW Flexible Option programs are developed and offered to students.

UW Flex Administrative Advisory Group

In November, 2012, President Reilly convened the UW Flexible Option Administrative Advisory Group to advise in the development of the initiative's business model, with particular attention paid to tuition pricing, enrollment and revenue projections, revenue-sharing, and infrastructure needs. The Administrative Advisory Group has met regularly since late November to review the business plan under development by UW-Extension, including descriptions of the roles, functions, and personnel required to ensure the efficiency, effectiveness, financial solvency, and—above all—the quality of UW Flexible Option programs and the success of the adult students who enroll in them. The business plan is also serving as a blueprint to the UW institutions developing the Cohort I of the UW Flexible Option, as well as to the Operational Advisory Group as it works to put in place the operational capacity and support needed to allow students to enroll and progress in these programs.

The Administrative Advisory Group is winding up its deliberations on the business plan. At its March 19 meeting, the group endorsed the proposed tuition pricing and term length, upon which the revenue model rests. The group also reviewed the key findings of a report prepared by Huron Consulting Group. Huron was engaged by UW-Extension to develop a more agnostic examination of the organization and capabilities needed to launch the UW Flexible Option, based on peer analysis and interviews with UW Flexible Option partner institutions.

The Administrative Advisory Group accepted Huron's recommendation, with assurances that the collaborative model between UW-Extension and UW institutions in developing and then offering UW Flexible Option programs would continue. In addition, group members asked that decision rights, with clear roles and responsibilities for UW-Extension and the participating institutions, be more clearly spelled out in

the business plan, in particular the advising model. The Administrative Advisory Group will hold additional meetings to further review the business plan, including the amended advising and the proposed revenue sharing models.

In the next few months, the business plan will be vetted with Regents, chancellors, provosts, and others.

Board of Regents Consideration of UW Flexible Option Tuition Pricing

In June, at the recommendation of President Reilly, UW-Extension will bring to the Board of Regents for its review of the UW Flexible Option proposed tuition pricing and term length, along with the rationale and market research by which the pricing and term length were determined. Other aspects of the business plan will also be discussed at that time.

Memoranda of Understanding

Discussion is underway on developing clear and comprehensive memoranda of understanding for all UW institutions involved in offering Flexible Option programs. UW-Milwaukee, UW Colleges, UW-Extension, and UW System Administration are collaborating on this task.

Identification of Additional Funding Sources

Given that the UW Flexible Option will be operating at a deficit until enrollments grow, additional funding is needed to provide the start-up costs and other resources needed. Discussions are underway between UW-Extension and UW System Administration regarding how best to provide this financial investment. In addition, members of the Flex Core team have been in conversation with a number of foundations.

V. Communications Development

The Flex Core team at UW-Extension and UW System has heard from many quarters, including the Board of Regents and UW institutions, that the UW Flexible Option requires an effective communications plan, one that will strategically target the various audiences and stakeholders who are paying close attention to the development of the UW Flexible Option initiative.

Prospective students are a primary audience, as are internal stakeholders (Regents, UW Institutions, Faculty and other Shared Governance Groups), and external stakeholders (Governor, Legislators, Wisconsin's Congressional Delegation, the business community, Wisconsin residents). These audiences need different kinds of communication and outreach. Given the intense interest the UW Flexible Option has generated nationally, effective communication is also needed with other higher education institutions across the country, federal regulators and regional accreditors, funders, and the media, among others.

Some of the key communications activities underway include:

- **Establishing a Web Presence:** While the UW Flexible Option initiative already has a web presence on the UW System's eCampus site, housed at UW-Extension, a more comprehensive web portal is being developed that will direct users to additional information. The new site is being designed to bring in and accommodate the needs of prospective students, as well as those seeking more general information on the Flex model and options. An entirely separate web portal for enrolled UW Flexible Option students is also moving forward.
- **Marketing:** UW-Extension is developing a detailed marketing plan to be launched in collaboration with Cohort I institutions in spring 2013. The plan will focus on branding, ongoing market research into student and workforce demand for UW Flexible Option programs, and outreach to prospective students through the targeting of marketing investments and messages at segments of the market most likely to convert to enrollment.

- **Federal Strategy:** President Reilly, Chancellor Cross, and Chancellor Lovell are taking the lead on developing a strategy that will:
 - develop a plan for working with the U.S. Department of Education to ensure that UW Flexible Option students will be eligible for federal financial aid;
 - reach out to Wisconsin's State and Federal Congressional Delegations, as appropriate, to play an advocacy role for the UW Flexible Option.
- **State and National Meetings:** Since Fall 2012, requests to serve on panels and give presentations on the UW Flexible Option have been growing. President Reilly, Senior Vice President Nook, UW-Extension Chancellor Cross and Interim Provost Brower, and others working on the initiative have given presentations in a variety of settings and spoken to multiple audiences, both in Wisconsin and nationally. These include higher education organizations, policy-makers, foundations, and others.
- **LEAP 2.0 Conference:** On May 30-31, the UW System will sponsor the conference, *LEAP 2.0: Integrating Liberal Education into a Changing Landscape*. Day 1 of the conference will showcase the work taking place at UW System institutions around LEAP; Day 2 will focus on the UW Flexible Option initiative, including the programs being developed by UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges, as well as discussion of some of the larger questions raised by the move to a competency-based educational model. More information, including a link to registration for the conference, is available at: <http://liberaleducation.uwsa.edu/index.htm>.
- **Publications:** UW-Extension is publishing a *UW Flexible Option eNewsletter*, and members of the Flex Core team have written several articles at the request of national and international e-publications. The Flex Core team and the UW System Office of Communications and External Relations are working with UW-Milwaukee, UW Colleges and UW-Extension to respond to the numerous media requests for information on the UW Flexible Option, in Wisconsin and national journals and newspapers.

FLEX LEX

An Emerging Lexicon of Terms and Language for the UW Flexible Option

The UW Flexible Option is a competency-based approach to education, which starts with student learning outcomes, and puts them squarely at the center of our engagement with students. Because the UW Flexible Option is competency- and not course-based, the following language and terminology are being used by those working to develop the first cohort of UW Flexible Option programs.

1. The *Program* refers to the degree or certificate that students will work towards (a BS in Nursing, a certificate in professional communications, the Associate of Arts and Science or AAS degree, etc.).
2. The *Curricular Areas* are the broad areas that make up the program (for the UW-Milwaukee BS in Nursing, these may be Liberal Learning or Gen Ed, Lifelong Learning, Focus Areas; for the UW Colleges' AAS, breadth areas are Math/Natural Sciences, Fine Arts/Humanities, Application and Performance, etc.). In some cases, the UW Flexible Option programs will have curricular areas and sub-curricular areas.
3. The *Competency Cluster* is the natural grouping of competencies that hang together to define the skills and knowledge of curricular areas. In Nursing's general education area, these may be quantitative skills, literacy/communication skills, and knowledge areas in natural and social sciences, and in arts & humanities. In a traditional curricular model, these clusters could be used to create courses.
4. *Competencies* define the skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviors that students will be expected to master. In other words, competencies define the *learning outcomes* expected of students. A competency may consist of several elements, however, as a rule, each competency is assessed with one assessment activities. There may be exceptions to this rule.
5. *Assessment Activities* define the activities that we expect students to engage in to demonstrate their learning and be evaluated. These activities may include formats like writing a paper, taking a paper-pencil exam, conducting a role-play interview, and being observed in a clinical setting and will take place in specified settings like online or in person. These activities will be evaluated using the method that is the most appropriate (grading the exam, using a rubric to evaluate a paper or clinical observation, etc.).
6. *Performance Standards* address the question of the particular level of proficiency necessary for the student to have mastered the competency (and thereby receive credit). Performance standards need to be agreed upon by all program faculty, staff, and/or department members.
7. *Curated Content* includes the instructional and learning materials and resources students will use as they move towards readiness for competency assessment. All UW Flexible Options will provide a repository of content appropriate to the student's program of study. Faculty mentors and academic success coaches will guide students in choosing which materials and resources are most relevant for any given competency. Examples of content include published books and articles, MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courseware) and other online resources. Students might also learn and gain knowledge from credit-based courses, structured internships, service projects, and work and practical experiences.