



UW FLEXIBLE DEGREE

Office of Governor Scott Walker
State of Wisconsin
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*A personalized,
quality, affordable,
higher education
model to help get
Wisconsin working*

UW FLEXIBLE DEGREE

The University of Wisconsin System (UW) will develop a new, flexible college option, using online instruction and other innovative methods, to deliver the competencies students need at an affordable UW price. Led by UW-Extension, the program will feature coursework and assessments overseen by UW faculty and academic staff. This will ensure the quality Wisconsinites have come to expect from the UW, tailored to the needs of today's student.



This unique competency-based model will allow students to start classes anytime they like, work at their own pace, and earn credit for what they already know. Students can demonstrate college-level competencies – no matter where they learned the material – as soon as they can prove that they know it. By taking advantage of this high quality, high flexibility model, and by utilizing a variety of resources to help pay for their education, students will have new tools to accelerate their careers. Working together, the UW System, the State of Wisconsin, and other partners can make college significantly more affordable and accessible to substantially more people.



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Introduction

The global economy is changing rapidly and Wisconsin must adapt to thrive. Exciting new technologies and an increasingly globalized society require Wisconsin students to compete with billions of people from emerging economies around the globe. These accelerating changes require Wisconsin workers to learn practical skills leading to family-supporting employment today, while also developing the knowledge and abilities necessary to adapt in a fast-paced society in the future.

Today's economy demands more educated workers at a time when attaining that education is becoming more difficult. Even in Wisconsin, where the UW System has maintained a reputation for affordability, college tuition rates have outpaced inflation in recent decadesⁱ, creating new barriers to college success.

At a time when the pool of younger college-bound students is predicted to shrink, Wisconsin must do more to enroll older students. More than one-fifth of all Wisconsin adults have some higher education credits, but no degreeⁱⁱ.



While many Wisconsin citizens are looking for work, many employers are struggling to find qualified workers with the specific knowledge and skills they need to fill tens of thousands of available positions.

To improve Wisconsin's employment outlook, the University of Wisconsin System, Governor Scott Walker, and others have developed a plan to address these issues. The UW Flexible Degree has the power to transform higher education in our state and beyond by providing a high quality, individualized education from a world-renowned UW System institution at a very affordable price.

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A Personalized Educational Experience

Led by UW-Extension, the UW Flexible Degree will draw upon the expertise of UW faculty members from across the state to develop a new, self-paced online delivery model. This model promises to offer a more personalized college experience to every student in which students can begin and complete courses at any time. Competency exams can be taken from home or work to ensure flexibility and special computer software can be utilized to ensure academic honesty.

One goal is to offer students smaller course segments or “modules.” Rather than molding coursework around a set timeframe, these modules can be designed to contain only the knowledge required within a specific competency. This could benefit working adults who need to start and pause their studies because of work and personal commitments. It could also benefit highly motivated students who are able to move through course materials at a faster pace.

Courses in this new program will be based on competency, not seat time, so students can move on to the next topic when they have mastered the current



material. Students will have broad access to high quality coursework and student services, and they can graduate as soon as they can prove their mastery of the material.

By combining these new learning options with traditional face-to-face courses and online programs already offered by

UW campuses, this model would let students select the right mix of education content and delivery methods that are most appropriate for them.

Shortening Time-to-Completion

The self-paced UW Flexible Degree courses and modules will make use of students' prior learning. For those students who have enrolled in college courses in the past, maximum effort will be made to utilize their existing credits. Students with extensive knowledge from the workplace, free open courseware, or other life experiences will be able to quickly move closer to degree completion by having their knowledge assessed and credited.

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This new program will be especially attractive to adult learners, who will be able to complete their degree without having to set foot on campus. The primary goals of this program are to create greater flexibility for students to study and add to the already broad portfolio of academic options in the UW System while keeping educational costs low.

Growing the Reach of UW System without Duplicating Efforts

No state institution in the country currently offers a competency-based completion program like this. Similar options are available through other institutions outside the state, such as Western Governors University. A few states like Indiana, Texas, and Washington have added Western Governors University satellites to their state programs and created direct competitors for their state university systems.

The UW Flexible Degree will provide a University of Wisconsin solution to expand access and affordability to students across the state and beyond. It will draw on offerings from all of the UW institutions that opt to participate.



This program is designed to substantially expand the market, not to divide the existing market differently. Programs could attract a worldwide audience

seeking self-paced programs of study. Since self-paced, competency-based programs are currently not available in the UW System, it will not take away students already enrolled at other UW campuses.

The real competition for this model comes from out-of-state for-profit providers and some not-for-profit institutions that are increasingly targeting Wisconsin students. While some of these institutions are accredited and have a vital role to play in higher education, others are less credible and take advantage of students and financial aid systems without providing a viable set of skills or credentials. In some cases, these schools are more expensive than UW schools. Self-paced programs will give the University of Wisconsin System much greater capacity to better serve Wisconsin residents who are currently not being served or are not being served well by external providers.

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A Respected Institution

Building Our Legacy by Investing in Wisconsin

The University of Wisconsin System is one of the largest and most widely respected organizations for delivering public higher education in the country. The UW System's roughly 181,000 students are served by about 32,000 faculty and staff located across the stateⁱⁱⁱ. In addition to serving Wisconsin's students at a reasonable price, the system boasts one of the largest public research universities in the world and is a leading innovator in many emerging technologies.



The UW Flexible Degree will strengthen the University of Wisconsin System. The new model will employ top-notch UW faculty to deliver high quality courses to anyone, anywhere, at any time. UW campuses will be invited to partner with UW-Extension to increase their reach and build new revenue streams.

The role of UW-Extension is to put the Wisconsin Idea into practice by working across all UW institutions with counties, local governments, businesses, and Wisconsin residents. This new initiative can further extend the resources of the UW System throughout Wisconsin, the nation, and the world.

Quality Programs to Address Wisconsin's Employment Needs

In prioritizing courses of study for this new program, the UW Flexible Degree will focus on knowledge and competencies that make students employable today and versatile and adaptable to the workforce needs of tomorrow. The University of Wisconsin System will work with faculty, students, and employers to identify the courses of study most needed in Wisconsin. Those discussions are necessary before programs can be definitively identified and developed, but current workforce data identifies strong needs in several areas, including:

- Business & Management
- Healthcare
- Information Technology

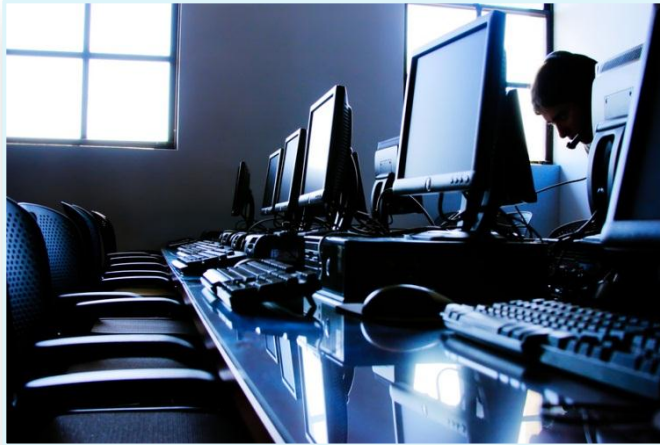
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Increasing Affordability

New Challenges

One of the key challenges for higher education is providing knowledge and competencies at an affordable price. From parents, students, and business leaders to Governor Walker and President Obama, this concern is widely shared. Despite the excellent resources of the University of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Technical College System, and a small set of private colleges, many Wisconsin residents have not completed post-secondary degrees.

Nearly 700,000 Wisconsin adults (about 20%) have some post-secondary credit, but lack complete degrees^{iv}. Many of these adult and nontraditional students now want to complete college degrees they began years ago, and the UW Flexible Degree will give them a greater ability to do so. Wisconsin has the highest high school graduation rate in the nation^v, but 38% of Wisconsin residents have a 2-year degree or higher^{vi}. This is about seven percentage points behind Minnesota^{vii}, placing the state at a disadvantage when competing in areas of new business development and job creation.



This relatively low percentage of degree-holding residents, combined with a growing awareness by job seekers that they must re-tool, is driving students to seek education alternatives. New approaches are coming from well-respected institutions like Harvard, MIT, and Stanford as well as historically small institutions such as the University of Southern New Hampshire or newcomers like Western Governors University. These developments come atop efforts across the private sector to capitalize on the higher education market.

A number of companies have already recognized these opportunities and created for-profit universities that have significantly expanded their reach over the past two decades. While these efforts are changing the education landscape, they also bring to the fore questions of quality, credibility, and value as some of our most vulnerable citizens look to improve their ability to compete for 21st century jobs. Recent data also suggest that students at these for-profit institutions default on their debt at far higher rates than their counterparts at non-profit colleges and universities^{viii}.

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The University of Wisconsin must address these significant changes and increased competition by adopting mechanisms that both serve the residents of Wisconsin and maintain the high quality of the UW.

A Revolution in College Affordability

The UW Flexible Degree will be strongly competitive with emerging online models and far more affordable than its for-profit competitors. In addition, the UW Flexible degree will stand apart from other innovative programs that offer a degree of questionable value or no degree at all. Leaders from across the state have agreed to collaborate to make this model of education as affordable as possible without

sacrificing quality.



In the past couple of decades, financial aid, especially grants, has struggled to keep pace with the cost of a college education. By taking advantage of an array of resources and this model's potential for accelerated time-to-completion, a college education will be more accessible to every Wisconsin citizen working toward a degree or certificate.

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The unique nature of the Flexible Degree will allow the UW to lower the net tuition cost to students in a number of ways.



Achieving this goal will not be easy. It will require broad partnerships that leverage existing and potentially new financial resources. It may require additional state investment in the UW System. State leaders are committed to achieving this goal without drawing aid away from traditional students at UW campuses.

Many students may be eligible for financial aid that will further reduce their out-of-pocket expenses. In addition to traditional federal and state financial aid programs, new employer-based and workforce development-focused grants could be created to further reduce their costs. With this new model, students will be able to make the same financial aid dollar go further. Through increased affordability and accessibility, a top-notch college degree could soon be within reach for many more adult learners across Wisconsin.

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Workforce Development

A major strength of the UW Flexible Degree will be in assessing what students already know and comparing the body of knowledge they have with the body of knowledge they need. This system will not only allow students to be able to earn credit for demonstrated competencies, it will also provide employers with another tool to recruit, retain, and develop talented workers.



These public-private partnerships could allow employers looking for workers to define the competencies they need and identify individuals willing to attain them quickly. Employers may be willing to help pay part of the cost of tuition in the form of grants or loans that could be forgiven once the worker has been successfully employed for a period of time.

Such a partnership could reduce recruitment burdens for the employer and tuition burdens for the student. Input from students, faculty, and employers is vital to the success of such an arrangement, as they work towards quickly reducing student education gaps and worker shortages.



- **The Employer** gains access to highly skilled graduates who can quickly earn the competencies they need.
- **The Student** gains new means to complete a degree and access to better paying jobs.
- **UW System** provides needed online competencies to close a student's education gap.

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Potential Expanded Partnerships

Wisconsin Technical College System

In addition to a high quality two- and four-year college and university system, Wisconsin is also fortunate to have an excellent technical college system. The Wisconsin Technical College System has 16 colleges and over 300 career programs throughout the state^{ix}. Building on existing partnerships between the UW and WTCS would allow students to supplement their online education with high quality hands-on instruction.



Wisconsin Independent Colleges

Wisconsin's private non-profit colleges also offer the potential for new or expanded partnerships. These respected institutions of higher education offer unique approaches and additional programs of study that would give UW Flexible Degree students an even greater number of options for completing their degrees and earning the competencies needed to succeed in the workforce.

Employers

In addition to the outstanding resources available at Wisconsin technical colleges, there is no substitute for authentic work experiences provided by employers. Similar to a partnership with technical colleges, such joint efforts would come with costs. However, because the skills attained would be useful for both students and their future employers, partnerships could be developed to help reduce the financial burden placed on the student. Many students may be eligible for educational assistance from their employers that will further reduce their out of pocket expenses.



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References

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