

University of Wisconsin Flexible Option FAQs

FAQs

What is the UW Flexible Option?

The UW Flexible Option is an innovative way to make UW degree and certificate programs more accessible, convenient and affordable for adult and nontraditional students. Built on the long-standing foundation of high-quality UW degree programs, the new UW Flexible Option will include self-paced, competency-based degree and certificate programs that allow students to earn credit by demonstrating knowledge they have acquired through prior coursework, military training, on-the-job training, and other learning experiences.

UW faculty will determine what students should know and be able to do (knowledge and skills) in order to earn their college degree. Students enrolled in UW Flex programs will make progress towards a degree by passing a series of assessments that demonstrate mastery over competencies (knowledge and skills). Students in a Flex Option program may use the knowledge they have acquired through prior coursework, military and on-the-job training, and other learning experiences, and take assessments wherever and whenever they are ready. As they prepare for those assessments, students acquire knowledge and instruction from a wide variety of sources, working with a UW advisor and progressing at their own pace.

Which UW degrees will be offered with the new UW Flexible Option?

The first cohort of Flexible Option programs, planned for Fall 2013, includes:

- **UW-Milwaukee will offer four degree programs and one certificate program:**
 - The College of Nursing will offer both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree option for Registered Nurses who seek higher credentials (**R.N. to B.S.N.** and **R.N. to M.N.**).
 - The College of Health Sciences will develop a **degree completion in Diagnostic Imaging** targeted toward bachelor's degree-attainment for certified diagnostic imaging professionals.
 - The School of Information Studies will offer a **B.S. in Information Science & Technology**, preparing students for a host of jobs in an increasingly digital culture and economy.
 - The College of Letters & Science will offer a **Certificate in Professional and Technical Communication**, providing students with the essential written and oral communication skills needed in the workplace.

- **UW Colleges will offer liberal arts, general education courses in the flexible degree format.**

- The University of Wisconsin Colleges is the UW System's network of 13 freshman/sophomore campuses. Through traditional instruction and the UW Colleges Online, students can earn an Associate of Arts and Science degree and transfer to any baccalaureate and professional program at a four-year UW campus.
- For students who wish to be engaged in Flexible Option degree programs, the UW Colleges will provide general education, liberal arts freshman and sophomore level offerings that will be available in a competency-based, self-paced format as early as fall 2013. Students will be able to complete competencies and assessments in biology, chemistry, mathematics, computer science, engineering, physics, psychology, health, exercise science and athletics, women's studies, business, political science, English, Spanish, geography, anthropology and sociology, history, art, and music. The UW Colleges will work to provide the Associate of Arts and Science degree via the UW Flexible Option.
- **Several other UW System institutions, including UW-Parkside, are working to determine how to develop Flexible Options for their degree programs, and additional offerings should be ready by Fall 2014.**

Are there UW Flexible Options available today?

As a first step in the introduction of the UW Flexible Option, several offerings will be introduced through a pilot program developed by **UW Independent Learning**, including 110 College Algebra, 117 Elementary Statistics, and a non-credit Business Mathematics and Personal Finance Certificate. For more information about the pilot or to register, please visit <http://il.wisconsin.edu/flex>. Additional Flexible Options will be added later.

How will the UW Flexible Option degree programs be developed?

To maintain the UW System's rigorous academic standards, UW faculty continue to maintain oversight over all aspects of the academic program. UW faculty members will identify the competencies required for the UW courses, certificate programs, and degree programs offered through the Flex Option. They will also determine the assessments that will be used by students to demonstrate their mastery over those competencies. Since the degrees and certificates are granted by the accredited institutions already offering them via traditional teaching formats, the UW Flex Option provides a new way for students to receive credentials from top-notch UW institutions.

What are assessments and how will they work?

The UW Flexible Option is a new approach to getting a degree that helps bridge the gap between what students already know and what they need to learn to complete the degree. Assessments will be thoughtfully developed by faculty, with input from

employers and industry experts, to best capture the competencies that define the valued UW degrees. Some assessments will be based on traditional tests currently used by students to “test out” of introductory-level courses. Others may require a thesis paper or a portfolio assessment. Still others may require observations of actual experiences. As a result of the assessments, students will be able to directly and reliably demonstrate what they know to employers and others seeking their skills.

How is the Flexible Option different from traditional UW degree programs?

The UW Flexible Option offers a new way to progress towards a college degree, different from traditional course-based instruction, whether that traditional instruction is delivered in face-to-face classroom settings or using online formats.

In a UW Flex Option program, students will:

- Start and complete assessments, progressing toward a degree, at any time, in contrast to a traditional semester- or term-based schedule.
- Determine the pace of their learning. Progress through the chosen degree program is based on assessments of essential competencies determined by UW faculty, versus seat time in a classroom. When the student demonstrates mastery of a subject, he or she moves on to new material right away.
- Get credit for what they know. The Flexible Option helps students to shorten the time required to complete a degree by assessing and crediting knowledge acquired in the workplace, from free open educational resources, or from other experiences.

How will students benefit from the UW Flexible Option?

The UW Flexible Option is designed to make higher education more accessible and affordable while maintaining the same high standards as degrees earned through traditional classroom learning or online instruction. Students will be able to take full advantage of free educational resources available online and elsewhere. They will demonstrate their knowledge through robust, reliable assessments. Students will be held to the same rigorous standards for all UW degrees. Best of all, students will be able to graduate with a degree from a UW institution that employers will recognize and respect.

Who should choose the UW Flexible Option right now?

The UW Flexible Option is especially suited for adult students ages 25 and up, who want their previous schooling, work skills, and prior knowledge to apply toward a new degree or certificate offered via the new Flexible Option format. The competency-based and self-paced approach of the UW Flexible Option will fit the demanding schedules of students who must balance work and family responsibilities with their educational goals.

The ability to choose from many online options gives students the opportunity to learn in the setting most suitable for them – even if they’re located far from a UW campus.

How much will it cost?

Several models are being explored that will make a college education more affordable. Given that the cost of earning a traditional UW undergraduate degree is only about one-third as much as the price of a degree from a for-profit institution, students can expect the new UW Flexible Option to be an exceptional value. The intent of this new program is to let students pay for only what they need. Students with prior learning, or those who can move through the material quickly, should be able to save time and money.

If students are not in classes with other students and professors, what kinds of support can they expect to help them succeed?

An essential component of the UW Flexible Option is that mentoring and advising will also be individualized to students. Once enrolled, students will be assigned an adviser/mentor who will work with students to customize their learning plans, develop strategies for successful completion of assessments, and point students to learning materials and other resources as needed.

Will work experience count for credit?

The knowledge that students gain from their work experience is valuable. Students will be able to apply that knowledge to assessments in their curricula. If students pass assessments based on the knowledge they gained from their work experiences, then they will be able to test out of competencies on their way to earning their degrees.

What does “self-paced” mean?

Self-paced means students can start and complete assessments whenever they want. The competency-based model will allow students to choose a schedule that works for their lives. Students will not have to wait for the beginning of a traditional semester, and can complete assessments any time they are ready and at whatever pace they are ready.

Can students transfer their progress under the UW Flexible Option to other universities?

It is expected that UW Flexible Option competencies will have the same level of “transferability” as other courses, but it is important to understand that the receiving institution determines which credits transfer, and which may count toward a specific degree program. UW Flexible Option advisers will work with other institutions on transfer issues. In any situation where students plan to transfer credits from one

university to another, it's a good idea to check with the receiving institution first, to get guidance about degree requirements and transfer policies.

Will employers value degrees obtained through the UW Flexible Option?

Yes, UW faculty will engage with business leaders and the professions to help identify competencies and assessments. This collaboration will ensure that Flexible Option degrees accurately evaluate the knowledge and skills most valued by employers. As a result, students can be assured that they will get an education that provides them with the skills and knowledge that potential employers seek. In addition, the combination of UW faculty oversight, with input from industry and the professions, assures prospective employers that Flexible Option degree-holders are equipped with the competencies needed to enter the workforce.

Will open courses from other universities be eligible to help students master content?

Yes. With the UW Flexible Option, students may move ahead as soon as they can prove content mastery, whether that mastery is gained through free educational resources from other universities, or knowledge obtained online, on the job or anywhere else. A unique feature of the UW Flexible Option is the opportunity to use current knowledge to quickly test out of one or more competencies.

Where can students find more information about the UW Flexible Option?

Students interested to learn more about the UW Flexible Option can visit www.flex.wisconsin.edu and sign up for the UW Flexible Option email, or call 888-526-2626 to speak with a Student Services Specialist.