



## UW Flexible Option, University of Wisconsin System

**Website:** <https://flex.wisconsin.edu/>

**Summary of Innovation:** The UW Flexible Option is a self-paced, competency-based learning platform that allows busy adult learners to start any month, study at their own pace, and earn credit using their existing knowledge. Several degree programs are available through this flexible format, and more are being developed. UW Flexible Option programs offer a more personalized, convenient, and affordable way for adults and other nontraditional students to earn a degree or certificate while balancing work, family, and other commitments.

Students in UW Flex make progress by demonstrating what they already know, whether that knowledge was gained through prior coursework, military training, on-the-job training, or other learning experiences. By emphasizing *what the student knows* rather than *how much time* is spent learning, the flexible format lets students advance toward a UW degree or certificate at their own unique pace.

Prospective students take a two-part Flex Fit survey to determine program readiness and whether UW Flex suits their needs. If admitted, students are assigned an Academic Success Coach (ASC). The ASC serves to guide, support, and encourage students along academic path.

A range of certificates and degrees are available through UW Flex, including certificates in business & technical communications, project management, substance use disorders and associate of arts & science degrees in business administration, diagnostic imaging, health sciences, information science & technology, and nursing.

This list of degree options was developed to match labor market demand in the state. Through 2024, the top three projected career fields in the state of Wisconsin fall into the sectors of STEM, business and entrepreneurship, and health care.

UW Flex charges a \$50 administrative fee for each student applicant, then charges \$2,250 for a 3-month subscription period covering 'all you can learn.' This option allows students to enroll in an unlimited number of courses in each three-month period. Student may also opt for a single course option costing \$900 for the period.

**Partners:** UW Flex was created in partnership between University of Wisconsin System institutions and UW-Extension, the Higher Learning Commission, and the U.S. Department of Education.<sup>1</sup>

**Targeted Population of Learners:** UW Flex was developed for students who have some college credit but need high-quality degrees or certificates to reach their next educational or career goals. This includes adult learners who didn't have the opportunity to complete a degree earlier in life, adults with work experience who need a degree to advance in their field, adults with full-time jobs, parents, etc.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2014/11/flexible-option-a-directassessment-competencybased-education-model>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://flex.wisconsin.edu/blog/>.

**Bringing the Innovation to Scale:** Starting from its beginnings in August 2012, UW Flex has grown from a two-page concept paper to the reality that 19,000 prospective students began Flex Fit in October 2014.<sup>3</sup>

Three new degree programs are in the pipeline:

- UW-Parkside bachelor's degree in integrative professional studies – a stackable certificate model that gives adult students even greater pathway flexibility. UW Flex students in this program will be able to enroll in one or more competency-based stand-alone certificates or in a competency-based degree program in which individual certificates comprehensively 'stack' together to form the degree. Applications for enrollment in the first two certificates (global skills and sales) opened 2014. Additional certificates — in leadership, project management, professional writing, and public relations — will be rolled out with the Bachelor of Integrative Professional Studies program.
- UW-Madison alcohol and drug counselor certificate – a program driven by the Affordable Care Act, which changed training requirements for reimbursable work in the area of drug and alcohol counseling. (Nov 2014)
- UW-Stevens Point master's degree in geographic information systems. Demand for GIS experts is high, as an estimated 80 percent of all information is connected to a geographic location, and more than a half million professionals in a wide range of occupations use GIS in their work.

**Enrollment and Financial Summary:** Only one program (professional certificate program in substance use disorders) offered through UW Flex netted money this year according to an update prepared for the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents. The Flexible Option program brought in gross revenue of \$2.8 million in fiscal year 2017. University officials project that if current enrollment trends hold, the Flex IT program offered through UW-Milwaukee will generate positive net revenue in 2018, and UWM's nursing program in 2019. The program grew 42 percent in fiscal year 2017, to a total of 1,300 students since its inception, officials reported. Enrollment in the UW-Extension's business administration program, the first bachelor's degree offered by Extension, is small with eight current students, according to the report. University officials attributed that to the fact that the program is not yet accredited. Extension is working on the lengthy process with the Higher Learning Commission, a regional accrediting body. Hopes are for the program to become eligible for federal student aid by 2019, and become accredited in 2021.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://er.educause.edu/articles/2014/11/flexible-option-a-directassessment-competencybased-education-model>.

<sup>4</sup> [http://host.madison.com/ct/news/local/education/university/uw-s-flexible-option-program-growing-but-not-netting-much/article\\_5176ee8d-20d7-5b03-a208-6d63ba927733.html](http://host.madison.com/ct/news/local/education/university/uw-s-flexible-option-program-growing-but-not-netting-much/article_5176ee8d-20d7-5b03-a208-6d63ba927733.html).