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Wisconsin seeks competency-based degree program without help of Western Governors

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Bucking a growing trend of state partnerships with Western Governors University, Wisconsin plans to go it alone to develop online competency-based degree programs for its students. Earlier this month, Governor Scott Walker and administrators from the University of Wisconsin system announced their [plans](#) [1] to create flexible degree options for the system, which includes 13 universities and 13 two-year colleges.

Political leaders and university administrators alike have been touting competency-based learning -- and its poster child, Western Governors -- as the way to furnish America's population of working adults who never attended or finished college with the degrees necessary to pursue more advanced jobs. The idea is for students to demonstrate competencies that they've gained from previous coursework or in nontraditional ways -- such as independent study, work or military experience -- and earn credit for meeting certain levels of knowledge, not for completing traditional courses.

Western Governors enrolls students nationwide, and it also has partnerships with Indiana, Texas and Washington offering customized programs for students in those states.

But instead of enlisting Western Governors as a parent institution, the University of Wisconsin system is building its own flexible degree program, which will offer undergraduate and graduate degrees. Administrators expect the first degree opportunities to become available in fall 2013.

"The biggest difference is the name: 'University of Wisconsin,' " said David Giroux, UW-system spokesman. About six or seven months ago, the system began discussing how to create a flexible degree program with Walker's office. "He was very upbeat, very excited about the idea of a Wisconsin solution to a Wisconsin problem," Giroux said. "This is a homegrown solution."

Determining competency

Ray Cross, chancellor of the University of Wisconsin Colleges (the two-year system) and University of Wisconsin-Extension, said Western Governors, along with the growing popularity of massively open online courses (MOOCs) offered by top-tier universities such as Stanford University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, influenced the system's decision to pursue a flexible degree program.

Tuition rates have not been finalized, but as of now, a competency-based course would cost the same as a course in one of the system's online degrees, Cross said. And just taking the competency exam -- not the whole self-paced course -- would be less expensive.

Cross said he expects some students to take advantage of MOOCs, which are free, and then take

one of Wisconsin's competency exams to get credit for the course. "We expect students to take advantage of what's available for free," he said, adding that online tutors will advise students about online options that might prepare them for the competency exams. As MOOCs gain popularity, [questions](#) [2] have been raised about how students could get credit for what they have learned through the non-credit-bearing courses.

Administrators will work with faculty to determine competency levels that match up with colleges' existing courses and how students can demonstrate those competencies, he said.

But not all disciplines will lend themselves nicely to the self-paced, competency-based format, Cross said, adding that the closer a degree is to a professional field, the easier it will be to deliver flexibly. Abstract subjects that involve a lot of discussion -- such as philosophy -- might be more difficult to offer, especially as they become more advanced, he said.

"Our initial effort will be to try to connect directly with the gaps where employers badly need people," he said. "It will probably quickly expand where faculty are interested in working with us."

According to a [publication](#) [3] from Walker's office, the new program will prioritize the courses of study that are most needed to prepare Wisconsin students for relevant and available jobs in fields such as business and management, healthcare, and information technology.

Giroux said the flexible program will be centrally administered, but degrees will be granted from one of the system's 26 institutions. For example, if a student passes competency courses from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, the degree will come from Green Bay, not the flexible degree program itself. He said every campus will have an opportunity to participate from the start.

'Anxious to Learn More'

"The feeling, as best as I can tell, is people seem very anxious to learn more," Giroux said, adding that faculty are wondering who will design and teach the courses -- a daunting task as universities increase faculty workloads and cut funding to cope with budget cuts.

"I think there is a lot of well-warranted suspicion among the faculty," said Sara Goldrick-Rab, an associate professor of educational policy studies and sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, adding that faculty members -- many of whom want to be involved in the program's development -- have received scant details.

Goldrick-Rab said that she and other faculty are concerned about how much the programs will cost -- and who will pay for them. "The question is, where is that money going to come from?" she said. "Because all we're hearing right now is cuts."

Cross said funding sources have not been finalized. "The funding that we need for programs actually should go to the campuses," he said. "Because if we're going to rely on program faculty in a given discipline, then I either need to expand the faculty there or increase the resources for a campus in that discipline."

Goldrick-Rab expressed concern that funding might be shuffled from campuses to pay for the flexible degree program, but Cross said that won't happen, since the program will depend on individual campuses to administer courses and assessments. "If that happens, then the flexible degree can't happen."

Goldrick-Rab also said she hoped the faculty staffing the new degree programs would be tenure-track and tenured faculty, not adjuncts. "If they are going to staff this with adjuncts, then we're going to have a problem," she said. "Faculty are not interested in being a part of the continued move toward adjuncts and away from tenure."

In a [blog post](#) [4], she criticized Walker -- "I have a hard time believing he has the best interests of UW System at heart" -- but said she was glad the state didn't go down the Western Governors route, which she said undermines full-time faculty by bringing in an outside group reliant on adjuncts.

"I think Walker is facing an uphill battle to win the confidence of educators," she said, adding that if the program involves faculty and doesn't threaten tenure or snatch funding from other parts of the system, "Then yeah -- I'm sure he'll win some fans."

[Assessment and Accountability](#) [5]

[Learning Outcomes Measures](#) [6]

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[1] <http://walker.wi.gov/Default.aspx?Page=8657930e-a3ed-49a1-92f4-2b6b4dbb0838>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/06/15/earning-college-credit-moocs-through-prior-learning-assessment>

[3] <http://walker.wi.gov/Images/News/6.19.12%20UW%20Flexible%20Degree%20Proposal%20Packet.pdf>

[4] <http://eduooptimists.blogspot.com/2012/06/uw-systems-online-endeavor.html>

[5] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/assessment_and_accountability

[6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/learning-outcomes-measures>

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