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FROM: President Kevin P. Reilly, UW System  
Chancellor Ray Cross, UW-Extension

TO: Faculty Senate Chairs in the UW System  
Provosts

SUBJECT: Nomination of Faculty Members to the UW Flexible Degree Model Faculty Committee



We are in a period of great change in higher education, accompanied by increased demands for accountability and flexibility. Nationally, academic institutions are examining ways to reach a greater number of citizens through the innovative use of technology and curricular redesign. The Flexible Degree Model is one of these innovative approaches.

We write to begin the process of working with faculty on the development of the UW Flexible Degree Model. As our first step, we are asking for your help in nominating a new faculty work group representing each degree-granting UW institution to coordinate the design of the Flexible Degree Model. You have likely read and heard a fair amount about this concept in the media. We believe it holds much promise for students and the University of Wisconsin System as well as other university stakeholders.

The unique nature of the Flexible Degree Model will allow the UW System to lower the net tuition cost to students by offering an affordable online, competency-based model with accelerated time to completion. This model will be coordinated by UW Extension, which has a long history of working with institutions across the UW System on quality educational innovations that expand opportunity and achievement.

While believing that this Flexible Degree Model holds great promise, much of what has been written makes it appear that it is more fully developed than it is. The really difficult work is yet to come. We intend that the faculty committee will help start this process, with two major objectives: to raise questions that need to be addressed and to develop a structure within which the Flexible Degree Model can be developed.

We know that faculty need to build and own this program. That has been the intent from the beginning. We believe that working together we can do this in an exciting, high-quality way, with academic integrity that will serve students well and position the UW as a national leader in academic innovation. We need to have serious, collegial discussions about the need for such a

model, its justifications, and how one might build it with the kind of quality always associated with the University of Wisconsin name.

The process will not be easy or without challenges, but we are asking faculty to take on the task of building a model that they will be proud to support. Indeed, many of the facets of such a program are already in place around the UW System. We have many examples of work related to prior learning assessment, online course delivery, mixed media delivery, challenge exams, definition of learning outcomes, portfolio assessment, and delivery of courses in other than the standard 15-week semester. In every instance, faculty members have led these innovations.

Assuming that together we determine there is a need, a demand, and a justification for bringing all of this to scale (and we can debate that as part of our work together), a major question before us is how we bring it to scale with the kind of quality and educational outcomes that we all want.

In any degree program, the faculty designs the curriculum, defines the learning outcomes, and develops the methods to assess those outcomes. We believe creating this model for competency-based degree programs is an exciting challenge that builds upon our longstanding efforts to demonstrate learning outcomes for our students, ourselves, and our accrediting agencies. Indeed, the work on the Flexible Degree Model holds out the promise of the University of Wisconsin institutions taking more leadership in the learning outcomes movement.

The next step is to assemble a systemwide faculty committee to oversee the basic elements of this Flexible Degree Model, i.e., the broad definition of competencies and assessments used to fulfill them. Each individual degree program offered via this model will be offered by faculty at an institution or institutions in the UW System. The systemwide faculty committee would work with each institution and department that wants to step forward to offer a degree in this format, ensuring that the UW Shared Learning Goals – the attributes of an educated person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – would be part of every degree offered in this format.

Let us emphasize that no institution or department will be required to offer degrees in a flexible format, but we do believe this model can provide huge opportunities for advancing a department and its discipline.

We are asking the Provost and Faculty Senate President to follow their local institutional procedures to nominate a faculty representative to serve on the UW Flexible Degree Model Faculty Committee. We know there are many, many more questions than answers about the Flexible Degree Model at this juncture. We need the help and expertise of faculty colleagues who can articulate the relevant questions and explore the answers together. We are far away from having all those answers now, so people who join in the effort will need a high tolerance for ambiguity! We hope they will also bring a delight in educational experimentation and a fearless commitment to treading new ground – characteristics that have always been the hallmark of our UW faculty.

UW System will cover travel expenses for the faculty committee members. As committee members begin defining the model, and the time requirements become clearer, we will provide funding for the work of the faculty committee members.

We believe that done right – and there are certainly many ways to do it wrong that we'll have to avoid – this Flexible Degree Model can be the 21<sup>st</sup> century face of the Wisconsin Idea. We look forward to working with faculty colleagues who want to shape that idea in new ways in the best traditions of the innovative learning laboratory that is the University of Wisconsin.

Thanks for your help with this. We will be meeting with the Faculty Representatives in Stevens Point on August 28<sup>th</sup>, and would appreciate receiving your nominations at that time. Please feel free to be in contact with either of us should you want to discuss this request further.

Copy: Chancellors  
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Cabinet