UW Online Strategic Growth

Growth in online learning accelerated during the pandemic as did expectations that online learning and academic and student support online services would continue, improve and expand. In addition to campus-based students' expectations, adult and professional learners increasingly expect online options to meet their educational, reskilling or upskilling needs.

The University of Wisconsin System is committed to making UW institutions the preferred online option for Wisconsin learners, whether the traditional campus-based student, who expects a blended experience of in-person and online, or the adult/professional learner, who is primarily online-only. This charge directs a select group of UW leaders and online experts to determine how UW System and its institutions can enhance and grow UW System's online programs to address current and future state and regional needs.

Public Institution Online Models

Across the country, public institutions' efforts to capture the growing online market can be segmented into at least four models:
1. Creation of a free-standing, independent academic institution either from scratch or by acquisition/merger with an existing online provider;
2. Third-party contracting with an online program manager (OPM) to build programs, market/recruit students, and generate revenues under a revenue-sharing arrangement;
3. State System in-house online program manager that fulfills the same roles as a third-party OPM; or,
4. Semi-decentralized yet coordinated online programs that utilize a mechanism (e.g., an advisory council) to set standards and that provide some centralized services for all institutions within the state System.

For several reasons (acquisition costs, quality concerns, and brand/mission integrity), models 1 and 2 above should not be considered viable options for UW System. More than a year ago, UW System proposed a version of the third option, which was called Project Distance Education (DE) +. After initial review by UW System chancellors and provosts, that model was not supported. UW System institutions have pre-existing online programs that serve tens of thousands of students each year.[1] Building on existing programs and local workforce connections at UW System institutions is important to enhance and grow the UW online market, especially the adult/professional market.

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[1] According to OPAR's online dashboard, unduplicated distance education headcount for all System institutions, including Extended Campus Collaboratives, was 91,533 for 2019-2020 and 170,449 for 2020-2021.

Charge

Develop a strategic plan that builds on UW System's existing strengths, and both enhances existing local online programs and targets adult and professional learners throughout the state, region and beyond. The strategic plan should identify collaborative roles for Extended Campus and each of the UW System institutions to maintain, build and maximize quality programs that are accessible and affordable. The strategic plan should clearly identify and justify the model to be implemented and how that model serves campus-based and collaborative online programs and targeted growth in the adult/professional market. An objective of this strategic plan is to develop a structure and identify targeted investments to increase online enrollments and revenues. An analysis of UW online program business models and finances should be part of the committee's review.

Key Focus Areas

1. *Quality, Access and Affordability:* The committee should articulate UW Systemwide standards for online programs, including key measures of quality (e.g., content, design, and delivery), access and affordability. In doing so, the committee should provide definitions of each. The committee should survey each campus to learn what standards and training are being used at each campus and measures being used to ensure quality online delivery. The committee should recommend a mechanism (e.g., advisory council, provost subgroup) by which standards for quality, access and affordability can be articulated and reviewed. This proposed mechanism would also play a role in fostering program development, identifying opportunities for innovation, and managing the program array to create a collaborative and competitive online environment that does not favor one over another.

2. *Extended Campus*: The Extended Campus currently provides collaborative online program development and delivery, with 31 collaborative programs currently in its portfolio. The committee should consider the future role and funding structure of Extended Campus with an emphasis on determining how Extended Campus expertise and operations (e.g., instructional design, market research, marketing, student support tools and practices, and development of new online pedagogies) can best serve the success of the UW institutions' online array.

3. *Marketing*: The committee should propose a model for marketing all UW System online programs to residents in Wisconsin as well as national and international audiences. Many higher education systems have online portals that promote online learning to multiple audiences, including adult and professional learners. Are there other/additional marketing options that will position UW Online as the first choice for online learning across the state of Wisconsin and region? In addition, the committee should consider adult-friendly marketing, recruitment, and admissions processes in order to capitalize on the adult/professional market.

4. *Workforce Needs*: The committee should investigate the best means for creating a comprehensive list of statewide workforce educational, upskilling and reskilling needs. The purpose of this research, which should be ongoing, is to determine regional workforce needs for adult and professional learners and identify and develop strategies for addressing growth in this market. Workforce needs should be compared with the existing 151 online programs at UW institutions and Extended Campus to identify areas for growth.

5. *Innovations*: The committee should investigate how to leverage and accelerate innovations in "course-to-career" educational packaging and degree completions for the online modality, including in part the use of certificates, microcredentials, stackable degrees, prior learning assessment, and the integration of continuing education noncredit options. Innovations that extend beyond UW System and current capacities should be identified for further consideration and development.

6. *Metrics*: The committee should collect data about current online programs at each campus and within System, including program array, program enrollments and degree completion rates. The committee should develop reasonable growth targets for online enrollments based on current UW campus and Extended campus offerings, especially related to adult/professional learners. These metrics should include assessment areas for determining online program quality, access and affordability. These metrics also should define criteria for success/failure in online program growth by school, region and state, as appropriate.

7. *Ancillary supports*: With the expected increase in students getting their educational needs met through online-only options, there also is a need to provide services to students beyond academics, including career services, mental health services, and other student retention and support services. The committee should investigate options and financial requirements for delivering these additional student support services at scale.

In all of the above focus areas, the committee should consider how best to leverage the expertise of our campuses, Extended Campus, and our partners to serve online learners in the state and beyond. The committee should suggest future areas for investigation, perhaps including a review of UW policies involved in online education and how they aid/hinder collaboration and cooperation. Finally, the committee should strive to provide initial estimates of financial costs for pursuing the various outcomes of this charge.

Process

To pursue this charge, a Taskforce representing leadership and online experts from across UW System and its institutions will be created. The Taskforce will convene in person for a half–day kickoff meeting to discuss the charge and establish key issues to address within that charge. The Taskforce will meet to review Workgroup updates and recommendations as needed. The UW Online Strategic Growth initiative will have a trio of executive sponsors: Johannes Britz, Interim Senior Vice President of the Office of Academic and Student Affairs for UW System,

Mark Mone, Chancellor of UW–Milwaukee, and Renée Wachter, Chancellor of UW–Superior. The Taskforce will be chaired by John Koker, Provost of UW–Oshkosh and Glendalí Rodriguez, Provost of UW–Stout.

Following the kickoff meeting, a smaller Workgroup will convene to work on the details of the charge as directed by the Taskforce. The Workgroup will include online experts from across UW System. The Workgroup will consult with the Taskforce as necessary to gather information and to elicit guidance on questions that might arise. The Workgroup will meet up to two times a week, and it will prepare updates on a weekly basis for the Taskforce. The Workgroup will complete its work by early October for Taskforce, Chancellor, Provost, and external stakeholder review. The Taskforce's final report will be due by the end of October 2022.

Executive Co-Sponsors
   Johannes Britz, UW System
   Mark Mone, UW–Milwaukee
   Renée Wachter, UW–Superior

Taskforce Membership
  Co-Chairs
   John Koker, UW–Oshkosh
   Glendalí Rodriguez, UW–Stout
  Members
   Paul Ambrose, UW–Whitewater
   Aaron Brower, UW Extended Campus
   Brewer Doran, UW Eau Claire
   Robert Ducoffe, UW–Parkside
   Steven Hopper, UW System
   Carrie Keller, UW–Platteville
   Marty Loy, UW–Stevens Point
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   Nick Sloboda, UW–Superior
   David Travis, UW–River Falls
   Sheryl Van Gruensven, UW–Green Bay

Workgroup Membership
   Michael Bartlett (co-lead), UW–Oshkosh
   Laura Pedrick (co-lead), UW–Milwaukee
   Suresh Chalasani, UW–Parkside
   Tracy Davidson, UW System
   Laura King, UW–Stout
   Laura Kite, UW Extended Campus
   George Kroeninger, UW Extended Campus
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