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Aaron Washington
US Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave. SW, Room 294-12
Washington, DC 20202

RE: Testimony on Docket ID ED-2018-OPE-0076
Presented: Laura Kite, Assistant Dean for Student Services for University of Wisconsin Extension Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning
On behalf of University of Wisconsin System President Ray Cross

My name is Laura Kite, and I am the Assistant Dean for student services for University of Wisconsin (UW) Extension Continuing Education, Outreach, and E-Learning. I am here today to represent UW System President Ray Cross.

The UW System is one of the largest systems of public higher education in the country, serving more than 170,000 students each year and employing approximately 39,000 faculty and staff statewide. The UW System is made up of 13 four-year universities, including our two doctoral campuses at UW-Madison and UW-Milwaukee, and 13 two-year branch campuses affiliated with seven of the four-year institutions. The UW System contributes \$24 billion to Wisconsin's economy each year with a 23-1 economic return on investment, and it is a major source of research and innovation, with more than \$1 billion of sponsored research activity each year.

On behalf of the UW System, we are honored you chose our State as the location for one of only three public hearings across the country. I also want to thank our partner, Gateway Technical College, for hosting this hearing.

We support the Department's effort to modernize existing higher education regulations to promote greater access for students to high-quality, innovative programs. We are pleased to have this opportunity to discuss specific regulations we believe need to be updated to achieve this goal.

We believe to be successful, we must be innovators.

To be innovators, we need our partners, like the U.S. Department of Education, to remove rules and regulatory barriers to innovation.

In that spirit, the UW System supports the Department's inclusion of direct assessment/competency-based education (CBE) in the proposed agenda for negotiated rulemaking and committing a separate subcommittee to focus on this critical issue. Similarly, we support the related proposed agenda items, including rethinking the definitions of "credit hour" and "regular and substantive interaction" as they pertain to expanding opportunities for direct-assessment competency-based education and finally, examining ways to provide more flexibility to accreditors to support direct-assessment CBE.

Our experience in CBE provides us firsthand knowledge of why addressing these specific regulations is critical to the goal of providing students greater access to high-quality, innovative programs.

In 2014, the UW System began enrolling students into the nation's first public system of higher education's direct-assessment CBE program, which we call the UW Flexible Option. At the time it was created, an estimated 700,000 to 1 million residents, or about one in five working-age adults in Wisconsin, had some college credit, but no degree.

Wisconsin is also experiencing a workforce shortage, which is why the UW System and our partners at the Technical Colleges and Private Universities set a postsecondary attainment goal of 60% by 2027 to meet workforce demands.

To achieve this goal, we built programs like the UW Flexible Option to specifically provide access to adult and other returning students who want a quality degree, but their "full time lives" make it difficult for them to go through the traditional educational system.

Since the Flexible Option's inception just a few years ago, I'm proud to say the program offers nine degrees and certificates, serving almost 1800 students with about 300 students having already graduated.

The UW Flexible Option is transforming the delivery of higher education: students progress to their degree by mastering competencies rather than accumulating credit hours. With CBE, self-motivated and self-directed students receive a high-quality education at their own pace at a fraction of the cost it takes to pursue a traditional on-campus or traditional online program. For example, Registered Nurses who take the UW Flex Bachelor of Science in Nursing program are completing their degree at their own pace and in often less time than the standard two years of a traditional program. UW Flex's BSN degree outcomes are exactly the same as that face-to-face BSN, and in fact, the faculty are the exact same College of Nursing faculty from UW-Milwaukee.

One area in need of reform to expand the delivery of CBE learning is the issue of "regular and substantive interaction" with an instructor, as it is currently defined.

The current definition was rightly developed with the goal of safeguarding taxpayers and students from unscrupulous providers, but the current definition also leaves out modern instructional roles and uses of adaptive instructional technologies. Institutions offering well-designed and proactively engaging CBE programs must adhere to the current narrow definition of regular-and-substantive interaction or risk having their direct-assessment CBE programs labeled as correspondence study. If the program is labeled as correspondence study, it could severely limit student aid at an institution or it could become ineligible for Title IV aid, depending on the institution.

We suggest that the Department change the regulation to focus it more directly on regular and substantive interactions that directly impact student learning outcomes, while continuing to protect taxpayers and students against fraud. New models like CBE that support student learning should be recognized and encouraged through new regulations.

The current definition of “credit hour” also hampers innovation, because the amounts and disbursement rates of Federal Financial Aid are both tied to credit hours achieved in regular semesters or terms. On the other hand, the major difference between direct-assessment CBE and traditional programs is that student learning is uncoupled from time, making credit hours-per-semester not a good indicator of learning, or even progress, for students in direct-assessment CBE programs.

We suggest that the Department explore disbursing aid for direct-assessment CBE programs using means other than the credit hour, such as awarding aid based on the amount of work completed within pre-designated intervals. We colloquially call this a “paycheck model” of disbursement, because if a student completes more work at the mastery level within a month, say, they could then receive an amount of aid commensurate with the amount of work completed. This model provides incentives for students to progress productively through their program, and it also could have a side benefit to elegantly bypass the processing of Return of Aid (R2T4).

In conclusion, we respectfully ask the Department of Education to include the aforementioned topics as part of any final agenda items for the negotiated rulemaking committee and subcommittee on direct assessment competency-based education. We look forward to the opportunity to work with the Department and other stakeholders toward developing regulations that can accomplish the goal of greater access for students to high-quality, innovative programs.

On behalf of the UW System, thank you for this opportunity to comment. I am pleased to answer your questions.