1) Briefly describe the action steps and processes behind the specific reform effort. What was the rationale for the change? How did faculty and staff integrate the resources of LEAP into your campus reform efforts? What processes were already in place on your campus(es) in support of this effort? How have you worked to ensure the sustainability of this change?

This case study looks at the Flex Quality Profile, an instrument developed by UW Flexible Option faculty and administrators establishing a consensus framework by which to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of UW Flex programs. Submitted as the LEAP Wisconsin case study for UW-Extension, the Flex Quality Profile represents the multi-institutional academic development and delivery of the UW Flexible Option.

Since its inception, the UW Flexible Option has been grounded in the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and Principles. Indeed, clear learning outcomes remain at the heart of the UW System’s competency-based educational (CBE) program (as they do for all CBE programs). Conceptualized, developed and launched between summer 2012 and fall 2013, the UW Flexible Option is a multi-institutional, collaborative approach to CBE. UW-Extension’s Division of Continuing Education, Outreach and E-Learning serves as the administrative hub of the program; UW institutions provide the faculty and curricula, and grant the degrees and certificates that make up the UW Flexible Option’s program array.

Upon its announcement in summer 2012, there were questions about the UW Flexible Option’s quality from faculty and staff across the UW System, as well as from other higher education stakeholders and organizations beyond Wisconsin, including AAC&U, our national partners on LEAP. UW System leadership sought to address these questions and allay concerns by: 1) making clear that all Flex curricular would be developed from existing high-quality UW academic programs and faculty; 2) identifying program leads to develop UW Flex who had been instrumental in developing the UW System’s LEAP Wisconsin initiative, perceived as the System’s quality agenda; 3) convening an advisory group of UW faculty and instructional academic staff from throughout the UW System to develop a set of guiding principles; and 4) grounding those principles in the UW System’s quality student success framework, i.e., LEAP. These were critical steps in the formation of the UW Flexible Option, which then went into high development mode in order to be open to students for admissions in November 2013, and enrollment in January 2014.

In spring 2014, several faculty and administrators who had been working on the UW Flexible Option began discussing ways to evaluate and ensure the quality of the UW System’s groundbreaking (pioneering?) competency-based education (CBE) program. Recognizing the opportunity to establish a quality framework for both internal improvement and external accountability for a program that was completely new and unlike any other academic program in the UW System (indeed, the country), we wanted to be able to articulate clearly and make visible the quality of the UW Flexible Option (UW Flex) while the program was still in its infancy. We decided to call our framework the Flex Quality Profile (in a nod to Lumina
Foundation’s proficiency-based Degree Qualifications Profile). For those of us working on the framework, LEAP would play a foundational role.

In June 2014, eight faculty and staff from UW System and institutions attended the AAC&U Summer Institute on General Education and Assessment to further develop the Flex Quality Profile (Flex QP). We envisioned the framework as an accountability instrument that would be formative, i.e., that would be used by Flex faculty and staff to evaluate and improve the quality and the efficacy of Flex programs according to indicators and evidence that we, one, cared about and that, two, had been externally validated by others throughout the UW System and the country through LEAP and other CBE practitioners.

Over the course of the next year-and-a-half, we examined research into student learning in both traditional and competency-based delivery programs, and debated a variety of measures that would capture the breadth of quality we envisioned as critical to the program while also recognizing that we needed to delimit the number of indicators we included in order to make the instrument useful and usable. Throughout this process, we relied on the UW System’s engagement with LEAP, including research, practice and data from within the UW System, as well as that sponsored by AAC&U. One of the guiding principles for the Flex QP became “standards without standardization,” recognizing that every UW institution had its own way of implementing and adopting LEAP, and, for those UWs participating in the UW Flexible Option, its own faculty culture influencing how Flex programs were developed and delivered.

The Flex QP underwent a number of revisions and reductions, was vetted several times with Flex leadership, and was presented at a national conference, the AAC&U Annual Meeting in January 2015.

Perhaps most importantly, it was included as part of the self-studies UW-Milwaukee and UW Colleges wrote in Winter 2015 as part of their HLC re-accreditation reviews for the UW Flexible Option. In both self-studies, the Flex QP was designated as the quality evaluation plans for the UW Flexible Option.

2) Please describe how this specific change effort connected directly with, or was inspired by any of the major initiatives of the LEAP Campaign—assessment, learning outcomes, high impact practices and general education reform.

As a consensus framework for identifying quality in UW Flexible Option programs, the Flex Quality Profile (Flex QP) is built on the signature quality initiatives of LEAP: student outcomes, curricular integrity, assessment of student learning, high-impact practices, and inclusive excellence. The Flex QP conveys expectations and criteria by which the quality of the UW Flexible Option may be evaluated, and those expectations and criteria are LEAP-infused and -informed throughout the instrument. In fact, many of the early adopters who put together the first Flex programs believe that Flex curricula embody the Wisconsin commitment to the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes and the UW System’s Shared Learning Goals, which articulate the learning necessary to succeed in the 21st-century global society. The authors of the Flex QP, therefore, set out intentionally to bring LEAP into the framework.

The Flex QP includes a set of seven quality dimensions. Each dimension enumerates quality indicators that define key components of UW Flexible Option programs and suggested measures and evidence. The quality indicators derive from:

- Research into best practices in competency-based educational program development;
- The curricular development and delivery model of UW Flex as a direct assessment program; and
- Engagement with LEAP (www.aacu.org/LEAP), as the UW System’s quality educational attainment initiative, grounded in curricular reform, high-impact practices, Inclusive Excellence, and other
practices with proven effectiveness at deepening student learning and improving student outcomes and success.

The seven Flex QP quality dimensions cover: Student Outcomes; Integrated and Cumulative Learning; Assessment of Student Learning; High-impact Practices; Inclusive Excellence; Academic and Student Support; and Organizational Effectiveness and Excellence. The quality dimensions include inputs into the design, implementation and evaluation of Flex programs, as well as outputs or outcomes expected as a result of faculty/staff and student engagement with Flex programs.

While the first quality dimension—student outcomes—is paramount in the UW Flexible Option, these outcomes cannot be achieved without the other quality dimensions that identify the curricular, programmatic, and organizational quality indicators, and that—together—enable Flex programs to produce positive student outcomes.

The development process for the Flex QP is testimony to: 1) the extent to which faculty from across the UW System regard LEAP and AAC&U as their “go-to” resources for cutting-edge and research-driven best practices for teaching and student learning, engagement and success; 2) the extent to which LEAP is already integrated into reform efforts at UW institutions, of which the UW Flexible Option—as an innovative curricular and delivery model—is one.

3) Please articulate what difference this work made or is making on student learning and success.

The Flex QP authors always envisioned the primary purpose as one of formative evaluation to help Flex programs understand whether they were providing a high-quality and compelling learning experience for students demonstrated through appropriately assessed program outcomes. In fact, mindful of the newness of UW Flexible Option programs (and of direct assessment CBE programs), several of the indicators in the Flex QP are aspirational, reflecting the quality towards which UW Flexible Option programs are working. At the same time, it was also clear that the Flex QP could and should be used for external evaluation purposes, as its utility to the HLC accreditation for UW-Milwaukee and the UW Colleges Flexible Option programs made clear.

At the moment, then, this project is ongoing. Its impact on student learning and success, as well as its practical utility, remains to be fully tested. Piloting has begun with faculty in several UW Flexible Option programs. And the framework’s role in accountability reporting for UW Flex remains to be determined.

Finally, other CBE practitioners and programs have expressed interest in the quality framework and its authors plan to disseminate this initiative more broadly once we have a stronger record of use in place. The Flex QP is being referenced in a white paper written by Debra Humphreys from AAC&U, and Flex leaders Aaron Brower, UW-Extension, and Rebecca Karoff, formerly with the UW System Administration. The white paper is a deliverable of the UW System’s Lumina Foundation grant on the UW Flexible Option. Flex QP authors intend to share the framework with AAC&U and CBE peers and community networks.

Supporting Materials

- The Flex Quality Profile: A rubric for designing, implementing, and evaluating Flexible Option Programs
- The Flex Quality Profile Legend
- Statement of Principles to Guide Development and Implementation of the UW Flexible Option (UW Flex)