

Date: September 2, 2004

To: Cora Marrett, Senior Vice President, Office of Academic Affairs

From: Marv Van Kekerix, Interim Chancellor
University of Wisconsin-Extension

Subject: Proposals for the Committee on Baccalaureate Expansion

Introduction

This memo presents a number of approaches that, taken individually or in total, would address barriers to completing a Baccalaureate degree in Wisconsin. It begins by exploring ways to help students make wise choices from among the many learning opportunities available within the two systems. It also points to the development of more online courses and programs of study, as well as the development of more Independent Learning offerings as a way of increasing access to and attainment of a Baccalaureate degree. Both distance-education approaches address significant barriers to participation, providing the flexibility desired by today's traditional and nontraditional students alike. Also included below are suggestions for a more consistent and robust approach to recognizing prior and nontraditional learning, and ways to translate that life experience into credits that can be applied toward a degree.

Fundamental to all of these proposals is the notion that increasing the number of four-year degree holders in Wisconsin will require significant collaboration across both systems of higher education.

Equally important are the reasons why these efforts vital at this time:

- A state's per-capita income correlates with the percentage of baccalaureate degree holders in the population—more residents with a bachelor's degree means higher income. According to Ward (2003), Wisconsin ranked 30th among the 50 states in 2001 based on the percentage of baccalaureate degree holders in its population (24.7%), and had an average annual income (\$29,270.00) that was not only below the national average (\$30,472.00), but also well below averages in neighboring states like Minnesota (\$33,101.00) and Illinois (\$33,023.00).
- We have dropped the ball in providing opportunities for our own working adults to achieve a four-year degree. According to the University of Wisconsin System Accountability Report 2003-2004, the number of adult students enrolled at the University has declined from 29,295 in 1992 to 20,214 in 2003. In fact, a recent National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2002) report, while acknowledging a high level of

participation by traditional-aged students, gives Wisconsin a grade of D+ in participation by working-age adults.

- Wisconsin retains 82% of its resident baccalaureate degree earners after they graduate from the University, but we do a poor job of attracting new residents with baccalaureate degrees from other states. Could one of the factors be that we do not provide ways for these new residents to pursue their higher education goals in a reasonably convenient manner and with minimal regard to time to and geographic place constraints?

It is very important to note that expanding the numbers of baccalaureate degree holders in Wisconsin is not just a matter of serving what we have generally considered the nontraditional student audience. The needs of traditional and nontraditional students are converging. As Borden (2004) notes, we have known since the early 1970s that “the majority of undergraduate degree recipients have accumulated degree credits at more than one institution and over a time span longer than the two or four years.” The bottom line is that “the majority of 18-24 year-olds, not to mention older students, does not experience a college education in a linear fashion” (Borden, 2004).

We are increasingly aware that traditional-age students are already employed in the workforce, exhibiting attendance patterns involving multiple institutions, moving back and forth within and between the University and Technical College Systems, and exhibiting behaviors that were previously associated with nontraditional students. A recent study by Clifford Adelman (1999, 64) indicates that almost 53% of those who considered themselves primarily a student were employed during 80% of the months during which they were enrolled. Furthermore, among those traditional-aged students, 22.8% worked 22-30 hours per week and 26.8% worked more than 31 hours per week. Working students averaged 25.9 hours of employment per week. One of the ongoing challenges is the current reality of student attendance patterns and the increased flexibility required of higher education institutions if they are to meet the needs of today’s students.

The following is a series of proposals for addressing these needs. At the core of these ideas is the belief that what people know and learn is more important than where or how they learn it. I believe it is time for the University, in cooperation with the Technical Colleges, to embrace this principle and to expand service to adult and traditional students alike, in an effort to make Wisconsin a “brain gain” state—a place where people have the opportunity to pursue their potential to the fullest.

A Continuum of Proposals

Provide a Comprehensive Access Gateway to Learning by expanding existing student information access points, adding more information about distance learning and nontraditional opportunities offered across the Technical College and UW Systems. The Higher Education Location Program (HELP) already has considerable capacity in this area. With additional investment, HELP could become a convenient and visible source of credible information and advice about options for earning credits and degrees across the both systems. An extensive marketing campaign would position this resource as a widely recognized and trusted provider of information to the public, potential learners and learning-services professionals across the state.

Expand the Role of Online Learning by making more courses and programs available in the online environment. Since online learning removes many time and place barriers to participation in Associate and Baccalaureate degree programs, it can address the needs of both traditional and nontraditional students. By incorporating online course delivery as a means of offering a significant number of program options and a base of individual courses, online learning can increasingly become a significant alternative means of pursuing and/or continuing progress toward a degree.

In addition to providing full program access to people who cannot relocate to attend a specific College or University, such online programs offer a significant service to more traditional students who encounter a variety of time constraints, such as their need to work and/or their inability to access the particular courses on one campus. This situation is likely to become more common in the future as a result of two converging phenomena:

- Increased constraints encountered by institutions of higher education, forcing them to offer some courses less often. This results in students finding it more difficult to match their schedules with a more limited timetable of courses being offered.
- The trend toward part- and full-time employment as a means of paying for tuition and other costs associated with attendance at institutions of higher education.

By offering a substantial number of general education courses and selected courses in the major areas of study online, our institutions would provide students with viable alternatives to waiting until needed courses reappeared in the schedule, or curtailing their employment to pursue courses.

Three things would need to happen to have online learning make a greater positive impact:

- Resources would need to be devoted to increase the numbers of both programs and courses that would be developed and offered online at both the Wisconsin Technical College System and at the UW institutions.
- An entity would need to be identified for developing, coordinating, marketing, and administering the effort.
- Students and their advisors in both systems would need to be informed about the myriad of options that are or would become available in this enhanced online environment.

A facilitating body could be charged with expanding such an effort by developing a more significant online learning presence for individual institutions in each system. This effort could be regarded as a step beyond promoting that which is currently available, as suggested above, and toward actively expanding the range of choices in both courses and programs available online environment. In the absence of such a coordinating entity, each system's offering in the online environment will remain disconnected from each other.

Expand Independent Learning Offerings across the Wisconsin Technical College and UW Systems. Expanding the range of courses offered via Independent Learning is an additional tool that can provide some of the flexibility that today's learners need. Independent Learning addresses a set of needs different than the typical online programs and courses. Most online learning programs are a form of cohort learning and, therefore, impose time constraints on the learner. Most require learners to start and complete course requirements on a predetermined schedule. Independent Learning, on the other hand, is a delivery method that allows learners to

exert greater control over the pace of a class. Learners can start a course at virtually any time, and can complete the course requirements on a schedule that they determine.

When combined with other alternative delivery mechanisms, Independent Learning can assist in meeting the needs of both traditional students, who face increasing demands on their time and attention while pursuing degree programs, and nontraditional students who face both time and geographic constraints on their ability to access the courses they need to complete degree programs.

UW System institutions currently offer approximately 350 courses in the Independent Learning format, serving about 3,500 students annually. An expansion of such offerings would significantly affect both traditional and nontraditional students, particularly when coupled with a focused effort to educate and inform learners, faculty and staff about the advantages and demands of engaging in independent study. Expansion of Independent Learning to include selected courses from the Wisconsin Technical College System should also be explored. The result could be a richer portfolio of courses that would address time and place barriers in new ways.

Expand and Enhance the External Degree Programs within the UW System to include a wider-range of course and program delivery options and be linked to the expanded UW System-wide online learning and Independent Learning efforts described above. Consideration should be given to the establishment of collaborative external degree programs that draw upon faculty and staff at multiple institutions across both the University and WTC Systems to create, shape and monitor them. A particular emphasis in the design of such a program must be to reduce or eliminate the expectations of time spent on a campus. Serious consideration should be given to expanding the existing UW-Green Bay and UW-Superior programs to include both online and independent learning approaches (Descriptions of these programs are attached as Appendix I).

The existing external programs attempt to maximize the opportunities for transfer of credit, credit for learning gained through experience, professional development credit, the granting of retroactive credit and maximizing the testing and assessment options for credit. The small number of graduates from the three existing UW Extended Degree Programs may indicate that they have not been structured, supported and/or marketed in ways that allow them to significantly address issues of access and flexibility and, in turn, grow the number of Baccalaureate degree-holders in the state. A renewed effort to develop, support and market these programs is needed, but research should be conducted to determine why past participation has been low and how programs might be restructured to meet emerging learner needs.

Create a more Robust Mechanism for Credentialing Prior and Non-traditional Learning. Thomas Edison College of New Jersey and Excelsior College in New York, both fully accredited institutions, have extensive programs designed to provide maximum flexibility in earning appropriate credit that can be applied toward a degree while assuring academic quality. They extensively utilize the College Level Examination Program, Graduate Record Examinations, the Defense Activity for Nontraditional Educational Support (DANTES), challenge examinations, oral examinations, and standardized recommendations for granting credit such as the College Credit Recommendation Service of the American Council on Education, and the American Council on Education recommendations on credit for training programs. A complete listing of

the sources through which Excelsior makes it possible for its undergraduates to earn college credit and an article describing the institution are included in Appendix II.

Although many of the UW institutions use similar approaches to assess prior and nontraditional forms of learning, the extent of their use varies considerably and their application is inconsistent. One solution might be to create a single entity that would utilize all of these approaches, acquire expertise in their application and bring consistency in their application. Forcing mature students, many of whom have significant family and work obligations, to sit through classes in lieu of demonstrating knowledge already acquired is inefficient for all concerned. Moreover, the experience of states that have more fully developed methods for recognizing learning outside the college classroom indicates that a more learner-friendly approach encourages greater participation in formal coursework and allows students complete degrees more quickly.

Concluding Thoughts:

In any discussion of distance education, adult degrees and credit-recognition programs, the question of quality often arises. The irony in this concern is that such programs and assessment methods are often more scrupulously evaluated than more familiar programs and assessments. After all, both traditional and nontraditional degree programs are accredited by the same bodies.

In instances where such efforts work best, University faculty who oversee nontraditional degree programs are drawn from the regular full-time faculty who also oversee traditional degree programs on the campuses. In Wisconsin, we could envision nontraditional baccalaureate degree programs for adults that would use regular faculty from a variety of UW and Technical College campuses to define the curriculum, to specify how requirements could be met, and to monitor the course and program quality on an ongoing basis.

Thank you for consideration of these proposals for expanding baccalaureate opportunities in Wisconsin. I would be happy to meet with the committee at any time to discuss these ideas, and if the members are interested in them, to talk about how we might begin to implement them on a pilot basis.

References

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Borden, Victor M. H. "Accommodating Student Swirl: When Traditional Students Are No Longer the Traditional," *Change*, May/June, 2004.

Appendix I

UW-Green Bay & UW-Superior Extended Degree Programs

Appendix II

Excelsior College

Cc: Ronald Singer, Associate Vice President
Frank Goldberg, Associate Vice President
Larry Rubin, Assistant Vice President
Robert Jokisch, Special Assistant to the Senior Vice President

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