

THE UW-M FLEXIBLE OPTION FOR BSN COMPLETION

It is with great pleasure that I write this letter of nomination for the **Innovations in Professional Nursing Award** recognizing the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee College of Nursing Flexible Option for BSN Completion. This degree completion option augments our face-to-face and online options for degree completion, recognizing that adults seek learning opportunities that work with the multiple competing demands of work-home life, as well as cost barriers. The Competency Based Education Network (CBEN) defines CBE as “an intentional and transparent approach to curricular design with an academic model in which the time it takes to demonstrate competencies varies and the expectations about learning are held constant. Students acquire and demonstrate their knowledge and skills by engaging in learning exercises, activities and experiences that align with clearly defined programmatic outcomes. Students receive proactive guidance and support from faculty and staff. Learners earn credentials by demonstrating mastery through multiple forms of assessment.

Award Criteria

Shows evidence of execution and subsequent sustainability for at least 12 months after a full execution cycle

The Flexible Option for BSN degree completion launched in December of 2013, enrolling students in early 2014. As of May 2019, we have had 112 Flex graduates, with 250 students “actively engaged” in work. To date, over 1000 unique students have enrolled in the Flex Option, completing 2429 competency sets (courses). The first student to graduate using the Flex Option was able to complete her degree in 11 months, using her ADN degree credits, as well as additional undergraduate credits and the 30 upper division Flex nursing credits. The median completion rate for graduates from initial enrollment to graduation is 18 months; mean is 16 months. We have a retention rate of 86%, exceeding the retention rate for traditional online programs. The program is solid and financially sustainable for the College of Nursing and campus.

Serves as a catalyst for change within the curriculum and/or educational mission of the institution

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee defines itself as an R1 research university, with an access mission. As such, the University strives to eliminate barriers to higher education and degree completion. The four main barriers to pursuing a BSN are financial constraints, competing priorities including work and family, past academic experience and lack of academic support. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) College of Nursing (CON) has a long history of supporting BSN completion, by removing and addressing barriers to the BSN degree. The Flexible Option offered by the UWM College of Nursing removes barriers to the baccalaureate degree by reducing cost, allowing for self-paced work completion and by recognizing existing competencies of practicing nurses. The FLEX Option offers significant flexibility in an economical independent learning mode. Students in this self-paced option can start on the first day of any month and can earn credit for knowledge they have obtained through work and other learning experiences. Competency base education (CBE) is a unique pedagogical

approach, which can open access to specific groups of students not enrolled in traditional forms of higher education. Students progress through the degree by successfully completing a series of competency assessments that demonstrate mastery of required knowledge and skills. The UW Flexible (Flex) Option allows students to receive credit only upon demonstration of clearly defined competencies required of BSN prepared nurses. Malcolm Knowles observed that adult learners learn best when they understand *why* something is important; when they have the freedom to learn in their own way; when learning is experiential; when the time is right for them to learn and when the process is positive and encouraging.¹ While all modes of RN-BSN delivery consider the principles of adult learning, only the Flexible Option, utilizing competency based education (CBE), embraces all five of Knowles' principles. The Option allow students to learn when the time is right. The critical difference of the Flexible (CBE) option is the freedom for students to learn their own way.

Has the potential for replication and dissemination

The Flexible Option for degree completion started at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee in Nursing, Diagnostic Imaging and Information Studies. Other UW campuses have replicated the Flexible Option model for other degree programs. CON faculty have published and presented on this model through the Macy Foundation and AACN academic educational conferences. We have consulted with other colleges of nursing who are interested in this innovative CBE approach and are glad to share our expertise with others who may wish to implement CBE in the future.

Has involved teams of faculty when possible (e.g., across programs, disciplines) Is consistent with AACN's mission and vision

To offer the Flexible (Flex) Option BSN, UW Milwaukee is supported by, and works in partnership with UW Extension. UW Extension works with all of the 26 UW campuses providing, among other things, E-learning (online courses) for degree completion UW-Extension also develops and administers collaborative degrees across all 26 UW campuses. Through this role, UW-Extension has developed the administrative and "back office" capacity (instructional designers, instructional technologists, online recruiters and admissions personnel, bursar and financial aid counselors, and the student information system) to create and support Flex programs offered throughout the UW campuses for the UW Flexible Option. CON administrators worked with UW Extension as well as UWM Campus personnel to implement this initiative.

CON faculty teaching in our traditional BSN completion courses are course content experts based on their education and experience. This expertise was used to create each competency set of assessments for each nursing course. Competency based assessment is a very different way of working with students. While faculty maintained independence over their competency sets, we discovered early on that consistency across the curriculum (i.e. curricular integrity) was the key to success. Each competency set uses the same syllabus template. Faculty worked in teams to ensure this consistency. All faculty used the same template for loading their competency sets into our learning management system. All sets began with a set PowerPoint orientation with notes. Each competency set had between 3-4 learning assessments. Each assessment has a consistent

learning path and an evaluation rubric. Course outcomes are identical, regardless of the delivery mode. Assessments are directed towards the knowledge, skills and abilities that will demonstrate mastery of the required set outcomes and content area.

UW Flexible Option programs are partnership programs: UW-Extension provides administrative leadership and each UW campus provides academic leadership for their partnership program. CON faculty have partnered with other faculty and programs as the Flexible Option expands into other degree programs and campuses. As one example, CON faculty collaborated with faculty in arts and sciences to develop Flex courses to meet general education electives and required courses for nursing degree completion

Demonstrates advancement of professional nursing education

In March 2019, AACN created a position statement articulating AACN's commitment to creating a more highly educated nursing workforce and answering the Institute of Medicine's call for increasing the number of baccalaureate-prepared registered nurses. In doing so, colleges and universities are called upon to not only graduate BSN prepared RNs, but to facilitate academic progression from ADN to BSN. The Institute of Medicine's 2010 Future of Nursing Report suggests that 80% of nurses should be prepared with a Bachelor's degree or higher by 2020. Anticipating this requirement, Magnet Hospitals will need to ensure 80% of its nurses hold a BSN degree. Multiple studies have confirmed that patient outcomes are better when an organization has a higher percentage of nurses prepared at the baccalaureate (BSN) level or higher.

The UWM Flexible Option recognizes the expertise and experience of ADN nurses, and provides a degree completion option for nurses who may find traditional face-to-face and online options incongruent with their personal circumstances. Competency based education (CBE) is a unique pedagogical approach which can open access to specific groups of students who are not enrolled in traditional forms of higher education.