

Competency-Based Education: What It Is, How It's Different, and Why It Matters to You

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Everyone is talking about competency-based education, and for good reason. New competency-based programs such as the [UW Flexible Option](#) have the potential to revolutionize higher education by personalizing student learning and making it possible for millions of adults to at last earn a college degree while balancing work and family.

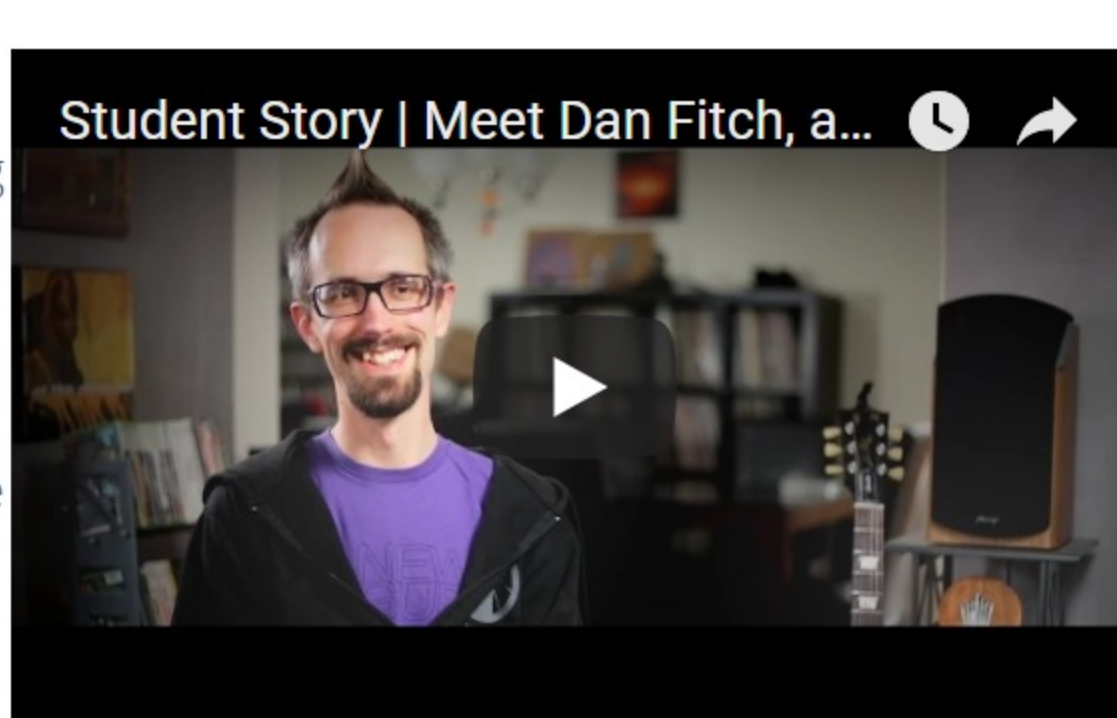
But what *is* competency-based education, and how is it different from the traditional model? Most importantly, what does it mean to *you*?

Competency-based education explained

Competency-based education is different from traditional education in that it breaks from the credit hour, today's prevailing measure of student progress. Popularized by the [Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching](#) in 1906 as a way to measure faculty workload and determine eligibility for pensions, the unit was [never intended as a measure of student learning](#). And yet, it became just that.

In today's traditional higher education model, students must accumulate a set number of credit hours—usually 120 to earn a bachelor's degree. Students earn the same number of credits regardless of the grade they receive from their instructors, provided the grade is passing.

Competency-based education turns the traditional model on its head. Instead of awarding credits based on how much time students spend learning, this model awards credits based on whether students can prove they have mastered *competencies*—the skills, abilities, and knowledge required in an area of study.



To put it simply: In competency-based education, it's not about time—it's about what you know and are able to do.

What are the benefits of competency-based education?

By focusing on *what you know* rather than how much time you spend learning, competency-based education puts you in charge of your education as never before. No longer are you confined to a rigid set of courses and semester schedules. Instead of working at an instructor's pace, studying material you may already know, competency-based education makes it possible for you to work at your pace, studying only the things you need to learn.



See how the Flex RN to BSN program helped Carla earn her bachelor's while working full-time and taking care of her family.

The idea is especially appealing for the millions of American adults with busy schedules who already have significant knowledge or even some college credits, but no degree. Many of these adults may need a degree to become eligible for promotions or raises, but due to work and family commitments, they simply don't have time for a traditional education. These people need a more flexible option that allows them to earn a college degree on their own terms.

The [U.S. Department of Education's November 2017 Secretary's Proposal](#) stated:

"Each American student is unique and enters school with a distinct set of strengths and challenges. Each student learns and grows at his or her own pace and in his or her own way; therefore, States, districts, schools, institutions of higher education, and other local providers must help every student build upon his or her unique strengths and address his or her unique challenges."

Competency-based learning is one possible approach to improve student outcomes and prepare students for careers. Under this approach, instead of equating seat time with learning—assuming all students need the same amount of time to learn material—students can work at their own pace and progress as they demonstrate mastery of content."

For returning adult learners, the competency-based Flexible Option aims to be:



Discover how this busy RN earned her BSN degree in just 11 months through Flex.

- **Flexible.** No classes, no commutes. No set semesters or study times. The Flexible Option lets you start when you want, the first of any month, and work toward your degree online, on your own time, when and where your schedule allows.
- **Personalized.** The Flexible Option recognizes and rewards prior learning by giving you the opportunity to pass assessments using knowledge you already have. You study only the material you need to master and never spend time or money revisiting things you already know. In addition, an Academic Success Coach will work with you to customize your learning plan based on your knowledge and goals.
- **Self-paced.** Take assessments whenever you are ready. Practice first to make sure. As soon as you prove mastery, you receive credit and move on, without having to wait for the next lesson or semester. Move quickly through material you know or take more time if you need it.
- **Supportive.** Receive personalized mentoring and advising from an Academic Success Coach who will help you prepare for assessments and point you to learning resources you need to succeed, such as textbooks, web pages, and even free online resources offered by other universities.
- **Skills-based.** You make progress by passing assessments that show you have mastered the skills essential to your degree—not by accumulating credit hours, either in the classroom or online.
- **Respected.** The Flexible Option builds on the UW System's reputation for quality and innovation. By measuring and assessing your mastery of competencies, the Flexible Option provides proof to employers that you have the skills and knowledge your field requires.
- **Affordable.** Instead of paying by course or by credit, the Flexible Option lets you pay a flat rate for a subscription period of your choice. If you are [highly motivated and have significant experience related to your degree](#), you may be able to accelerate your progress and shorten your time to graduation, saving time and money.

Is competency-based education right for you?

Although competency-based education offers returning adult learners a real opportunity to earn a college degree while balancing commitments to work and family, this innovative model is not for everyone. There are no set classes, and the pace of your learning is entirely up to you. But if you are the right kind of student—experienced, self-directed, and motivated to succeed—then competency-based programs such as the Flexible Option may be just what you've been waiting for.

Explore competency-based degree and certificate programs from the University of Wisconsin

Find your future in flexible, self-paced programs in nursing, information systems, diagnostic imaging, business and technical communications, project management, and more. Visit our [Flexible Option programs page](#) now.

If you have questions about the competency-based UW Flexible Option, or about any of the UW degree and certificate programs available in this new format, call 1-877-895-3276 or email flex@uwex.edu to speak with an enrollment adviser today.

DOWNLOAD A FREE FLEXIBLE OPTION INFO KIT

Learn more about this competency-based education option and why it's a smart choice for working adults.



FLEX STUDENT STORIES:

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- [How One Ambitious Student Saved \\$7,500 and Nine Months in His Very First UW Flexible Option Subscription Period](#)
- [Busy IT Specialist and Bass Player Still Finds Time to Earn His Bachelor's in Information Science and Technology Degree](#)
- [CT Technologist Finds New Challenges, Direction with Competency-Based Diagnostic Imaging Program](#)
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Download an introductory guide (PDF) to the self-paced, competency-based UW Flexible Option programs, including details about costs, admission requirements, and more.

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