



Accelerating Online Education

**Recommendations of the UW System
Online Strategic Growth Task Force**

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UW System Online Strategic Growth Task Force

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

UW SYSTEM ONLINE STRATEGIC GROWTH TASK FORCE	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
PROCESS.....	8
THE NATIONAL LANDSCAPE.....	9
WISCONSIN ONLINE TODAY	12
ONLINE LEARNER OPPORTUNITIES	17
STRATEGIES AND TACTICS.....	19
THE FOUNDATION FOR GROWTH AND QUALITY.....	20
STRATEGIES TO ACCELERATE ONLINE EDUCATION.....	24
COST ESTIMATES AND PRIORITIES FOR PHASE 1 OF IMPLEMENTATION.....	26
SUCCESS TARGETS.....	27
CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS	29
APPENDIX A – CHARGE	31
WORKS CITED	35

Executive Summary

The UW Online Strategic Growth Task Force strategic plan objective is to make Wisconsin Online the preferred online provider for learners in Wisconsin and beyond. The plan considers how online courses and programs can further the educational aims of current and future UW students, adult degree completers, and graduate students and professionals looking to upskill and reskill.

Nationally, participation rates in online learning are growing even as overall higher education enrollments are declining. While there has been a slight decline from pandemic highs, participation rates in online education remain above pre-pandemic levels. This is also evident in the UW System, with two-thirds of UW students earning credit in online education courses over the entire 2021–2022 academic year. At a time when overall enrollment is declining, online is an increasingly important component of universities' strategic enrollment management mix.

While the increase in UW online distance education enrollments follows national trends, Wisconsin is not in line with national and regional online participation rates. As a percentage of online enrollment to total enrollment for Fall 2021, Wisconsin is underperforming and has the lowest online enrollment rate of a Midwest comparison group of public 4–years, including adjoining states and Kansas, Indiana, Nebraska, Ohio, and the Dakotas.

Across UW institutions, there is considerable variance in online enrollments both in absolute numbers as well as percentage of online to non-online enrollments. For Fall 2021, all but four UW institutions had online enrollment rates greater than half of all enrollments. The institution with the lowest online participation rate for Fall 2021 saw 27 percent of its students enrolled in at least one online course, while the UW institution with the highest online participation rate had just short of 77 percent. For Fall 2021, the median online participation rate for UW institutions was 60.4 percent.

Additionally, within a single UW institution there can be considerable variability in undergraduate and graduate student online participation rates. As an example, in Fall 2021 one UW institution had about 30 percent of its undergraduates enrolled in at least one online course, and 97 percent of its graduate students were enrolled exclusively online.

To a greater or lesser extent, these variations in online participation rates exist for all campuses. All UW institutions have online growth potential in various areas and among various online student segments. Given national trends, one can expect online participation rates to continue increasing.

One of the drivers of online growth can be found in the changing education-to-work model. Multiple factors are remaking the workplace, requiring higher education to shift from thinking only about a sequenced model, in which one receives most or all of one's education prior to employment, to thinking of a blended model of work and learning over the course of an individual's career span. There exists a growing need for workforce reskilling and upskilling to meet a changing workplace and new employment opportunities. UW institutions are uniquely situated to capitalize on these growing needs afforded by the flexibilities of online education.

This report focuses on three types of online learners, following research related to the online market. Multimodal learners are those, mostly undergraduates, who take a mix of online and in-person courses. Professional graduate students are those who are investing in career advancement and lean toward fully online opportunities. The third online market segment is the adult degree completer, who has some college but no degree and is looking for affordability, flexibility, and career impact.¹

A vision for the future emerges from the data on national trends and on UW institutions' current online programs and enrollments. Online growth has occurred and will continue to occur at the campuses both through campus-only and collaborative online programs. The expertise needed to meet future workforce needs also exists through both the local relationships each campus has with its community and region and System-fostered relationships across the state. Collectively, the following strategies and tactics provide a vision for Wisconsin Online Strategic Growth.

The Task Force identified six strategies, each with several aligned tactics, for achieving the objective to make Wisconsin Online the preferred online provider for learners in Wisconsin and the region:

- I. Optimize Resources and Infrastructure,
- II. Establish an Oversight Framework to Ensure High Quality,
- III. Invest in Marketing,
- IV. Remove Barriers for Adult Students,
- V. Partner with Employers, and
- VI. Offer Innovative Pathways to Careers.

The first three strategies are essential for building a foundation of growth and quality. The remaining three strategies and their tactics are important to address barriers for

¹ For purposes of this report, we will use these three online-learner types. We recognize that these types do not capture all learners utilizing online. For example, adult degree completers include learners who might pursue certificates or other credentials; in short, this group includes all adult credential completers.

students and develop markets to address growing workforce needs. The following table details these strategies and tactics, which are discussed in more detail in the full report.

Strategy I. Optimize Resources and Infrastructure			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	1	Create a centralized UW System Online Program Support Center (OPSC) to facilitate the UW System online growth agenda and expand campus-driven online programming.	•	•	•
	2	Investigate making online courses widely available with a course-sharing platform.	•	•	•
	3	Revise UW System policies and practices to accelerate online program growth.		•	•
Strategy II. Establish Oversight Framework to Ensure High Quality			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	4	Form the Wisconsin Online Advisory Council to guide plan implementation and oversee online quality initiatives, online marketing at System level, and OPSC.	•	•	•
	5	Adopt systemwide online metrics.	•	•	•
	6	Offer professional development and create community among online instructors to ensure high-quality online program design and instruction.		•	•
	7	Conduct an online student services inventory.		•	•
Strategy III. Invest in Marketing			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	8	Launch the Wisconsin Online portal and implement a state/regional marketing campaign.		•	•
	9	Integrate a centralized CRM into the Wisconsin Online portal.		•	•
	10	Produce an adult-friendly marketing toolkit for campuses.		•	•
Strategy IV. Remove Barriers for Adult Students			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	11	Create an Earned Debt Forgiveness program.			•
	12	Scale credit for prior learning in online programs.		•	•
	13	Offer condensed academic sessions.		•	•
	14	Establish the Wisconsin Adult Learner Grant program.			•
	15	Create better pathways and practices to accept more transfer credit.	•		•
	16	Create an adult-friendly E-app.			•
Strategy V. Partner with Employers			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	17	Distribute Wisconsin workforce competency gap information to campuses.		•	•
	18	Address workforce skills gaps through professional skills training programs.		•	•

	19	Endorse UW System’s acquisition of the Okta enterprise identity platform to enable pre- to post-enrollment communications.	•	•	•
Strategy VI. Offer Innovative Pathways to Careers			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	20	Design degrees based on stackable credentials.		•	•
	21	Provide career navigation & support for working adults.		•	•

Of the 21 tactics, four (1, 4, 8 and 9) are fundamental to the Wisconsin Online Strategic Growth initiative and should be included in the first of two implementation phases.

- Tactic 1 calls for restructuring UW Extended Campus into an Online Program Support Center, charged with the mission to facilitate online growth by expanding campus-driven and collaborative online programming. This vision changes the current UW Extended Campus model to a comprehensive service role supporting campuses’ online programs, where the vast majority of online programs and enrollments exist.
- Tactic 4 recognizes the lack of a comprehensive Systemwide approach to online education and recommends the creation of an Advisory Council to oversee online quality initiatives, online marketing and UW brand identity, and oversight of the restructured Online Program Support Center. Advisory Council membership will come from campuses and reflect campus priorities.
- Research indicates that students seeking information about online programs of interest use a search engine more than any other method. Prospective students used college search sites second most. UW System, however, lacks an up-to-date, persuasive online program website to market its online programs and gather leads. Tactics 8 and 9 attempt to address this deficit through a Wisconsin Online Portal and an integrated customer relationship management (CRM) system.

Given the significant changes in the first implementation phase, the Task Force recommends hiring a full-time project manager who will work closely with both UWSA, UW Extended Campus, and UW campus leadership to transition these changes effectively and over an identified period. This recommended project manager position is a fixed-term appointment and requires strong leadership and extensive knowledge of online and UW System. Once these first four tactics are implemented, the Task Force believes that the second implementation phase can be facilitated by the Online Advisory Council and any needed workgroups created for specific projects.

Finally, this report identifies three core goals and metrics to meet the objective to make Wisconsin Online the preferred online provider for learners in Wisconsin and beyond. By 2030, the goals are to:

- Grow all UWS online enrollments as a percent of all enrollments to close the 11 percent gap between Wisconsin public, 4-year and comparable institutions in the Midwest region;
- Grow online enrollments in all student segments, including multimodal, professional graduate, and adult degree completer; and,
- Develop new workforce pathways across multiple industries through curriculum redesign and innovations.

UW institutions and collaborative partnerships are key to achieving these goals and objectives. The strategies will create a unified UW System approach to online development and oversight with campuses driving the future of Wisconsin Online.

Process

In August 2022, UW System President Jay Rothman created and charged the UW System Online Strategic Growth Task Force with identifying strategies to increase online enrollment across UW System institutions, building on existing strengths and targeted growth opportunities. The charge called on the Task Force to develop a plan that would:

Identify collaborative roles for Extended Campus and each of the UW System institutions to maintain, build and maximize quality programs that are accessible and affordable. The strategic plan should clearly identify and justify the model to be implemented and how that model serves campus-based and collaborative online programs and targeted growth in the adult/professional market. An objective of this strategic plan is to develop a structure and identify targeted investments to increase online enrollments and revenues. An analysis of UW online program business models and finances should be part of the committee's review.

In examining seven focus areas, the Task Force examined the best means to leverage the expertise of UW campuses, Extended Campus, and institutional partners to serve online learners in the state, the region, and beyond. The charge also outlined expectations to provide an enrollment growth goal and estimates of costs associated with Task Force recommendations.

The Task Force Workgroup formed subteams to research the focus areas and develop recommendations. UW System's Office of Policy and Research (OPAR) analyzed UW System's online enrollment data, contextualizing patterns within UW System and providing comparisons to state and regional online providers.

Due to the accelerated timeline of this Task Force, it was not possible to conduct full implementation studies for several key recommendations. Going forward, the Task Force

recommends two implementation phases. The first phase will focus on strategies and tactics in the section Foundation for Growth and Quality. The second phase will focus on strategies and tactics included within the Strategies to Accelerate Online Education section.

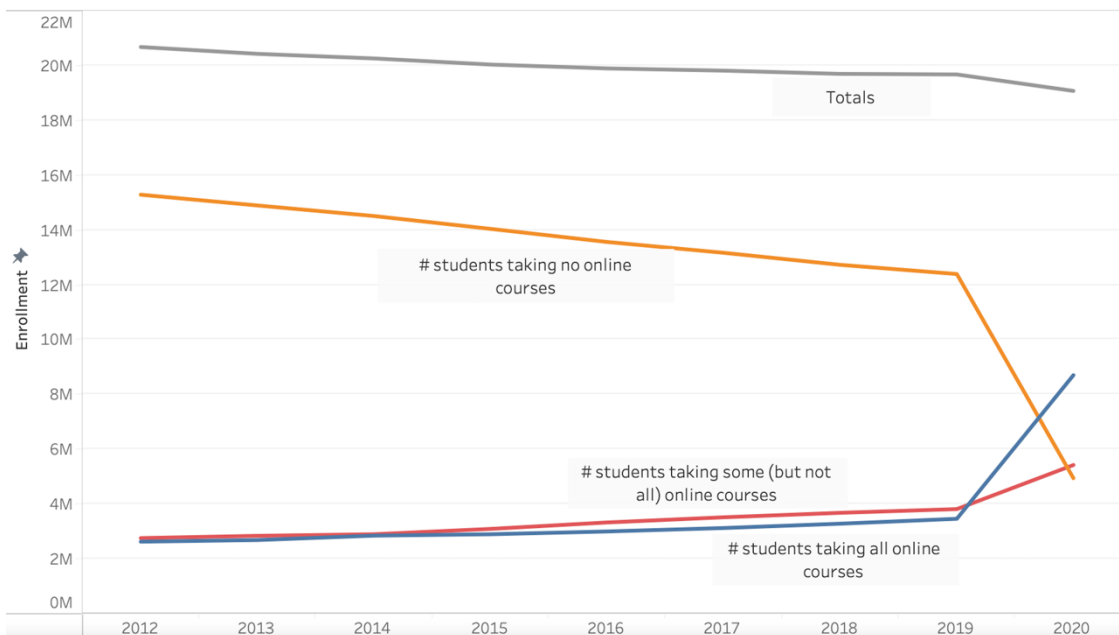
The National Landscape

Four broad trends characterize online education in the United States:

- i. growth;
- ii. a new model integrating work and learning;
- iii. the emergence of three key student segments; and,
- iv. an increasingly crowded marketplace coupled with the rise of non-university alternative credentials.

Growth. In the United States, fully online enrollment showed steady year-over-year growth from 2012 to 2019, until the pandemic when online enrollment spiked. A similar pattern is evident in students mixing online and face-to-face courses. Figure 1 also shows a drop in total enrollment of 7.7 percent in that time period and a significant decline in students who took no online courses.

Figure 1. U.S. Higher Education Enrollment Trends Fall 2012–2020 by Student Distance Education Status (Graduate and Undergraduate). Source: Hill, 2022, data drawn from IPEDS.



Early indicators for 2022 show the potential for a “new normal” with online enrollment dropping from pandemic levels, but not as steeply as anticipated (Hill, 2022; Knox & Weissman, 2022).

At a time when overall enrollment is declining at many higher education institutions, online is an increasingly important component of universities’ strategic enrollment management mix.

A New Model Integrating Work and Learning. Automation, the rapid pace of technological change, and shifting demographics are remaking the workplace, prompting calls for innovation in postsecondary education (Buford & Good, 2021). Society needs a higher education system that can shift from a sequenced to a blended model of work and learning:

The traditional model of higher education—in which a young person invests once in early-career education to get a college degree and then transitions to work—is no longer sufficient to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change (Goger, 2020).

The boundaries between the “education” and “work” phases of life are blurring as career shifts become more common. In the new world of work, individuals will need to refresh and acquire new knowledge, skills, and abilities across their work lifespan, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Future of work: Switching from “one & done” to blended work and learning over the lifespan. Source: Goger, 2020.



Integrating work and learning will require a new emphasis on university–employer partnerships. The APLU/CUMU report, *Delivering 21st Century Skills*, concludes that,

Through collaborative work, universities can develop models and frameworks (i.e., financial models, pathways, integrated credentials into the curriculum, etc.) to address the change in the workforce.... Without a fundamental transformation in how we view lifelong learning and skill attainment, institutions, communities, and the economy risk being left behind (2019, p.21).

This new paradigm will draw more adult learners into higher education through work–based learning and an increasing emphasis on short–form microcredentials focused on skill development, for which online instruction will be the preferred delivery mode (Gardner & Maietta, 2021; Laboissiere & Mourshed, 2017).

Serving Three Key Student Segments. In analyzing the market for online education, the higher education research company EAB identified personas that typify online learners:

- Multimodal learners—students who combine face–to–face and online courses to take advantage of scheduling flexibility;
- Professional graduate students, who are already in the workplace and who seek career advancement; and,
- Adult degree completers, who may have some college but no credential and who also have life/work commitments that preclude full–time on–campus enrollment.

Figure 3 outlines their respective motivations and selection criteria when considering online programs.

Figure 3. EAB’s Online Learner Personas. Source: EAB 2018.



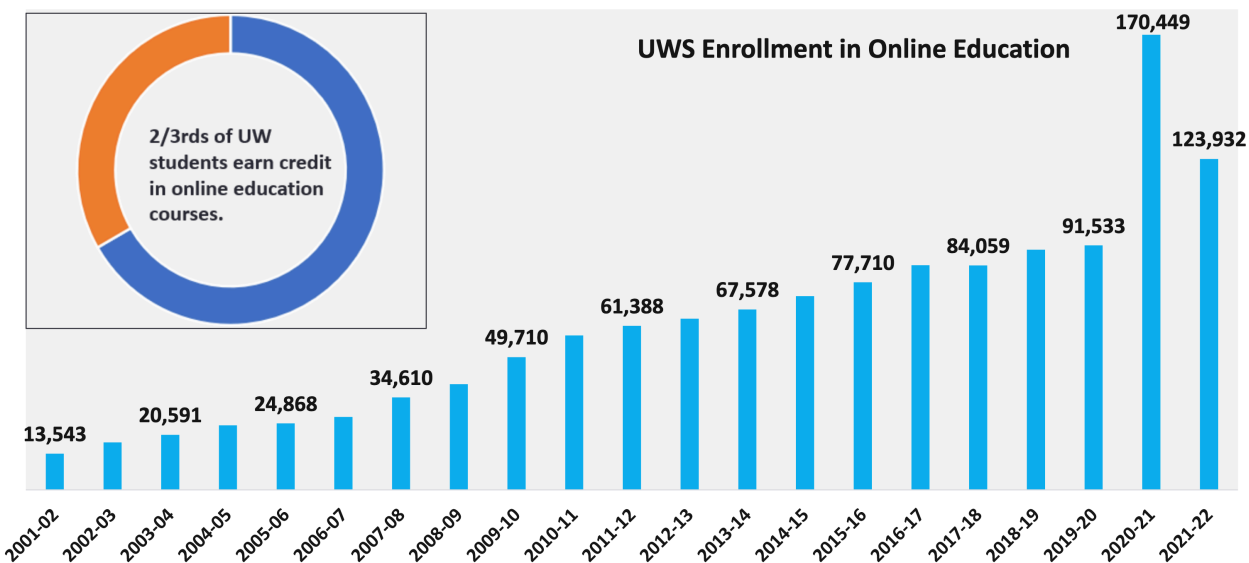
Of course, these personas simplify online learners. For example, adult degree completers also take face-to-face courses, including evening and weekend offerings; and, graduate students can fit the multimodal profile, opting for a mix of online and on-campus courses. However, EAB’s analysis is useful as a planning tool to ensure consideration of actions that address divergent motivations and needs while minimizing complexity, and other market research aligns with this approach (e.g., the Chloe 7 survey of chief online officers, 2022).

An Increasingly Crowded Marketplace. Online enrollment is growing, but the number and variety of online educational providers is *exploding*. Among accredited universities, 83 percent of leaders surveyed indicated that they are planning to increase online learning options (Knox & Weissman, 2022). There are many alternative credentials emerging in the non-credit space as well, with companies such as Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and several massive open online course providers (MOOCs) offering online skills training. These providers are also developing bridges to credit either through Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) or partnerships with accredited universities (e.g., StraighterLine, Coursera). While there are more providers, the marketplace is also becoming concentrated, with large online providers such as Southern New Hampshire (109,233 online students), Western Governors (104,919 online students), and Arizona State University (61,572 online students) capturing an increasing share of online students (College Scorecard, 2022; ASU News, 2022; Schroeder, 2019).

Wisconsin Online Today

Understanding the foundations for online quality and growth within UW System involves contextualizing these national trends with UW System institutions’ current level of online engagement. To some extent, online education in Wisconsin mirrors national trends. There is a pattern of historical growth since 2001, with a spike in 2020–2021.

Figure 4. Online Education in the UW System. Source: OPAR.



(Note: Online data definitions present challenges, including a lack of agreement at the federal, accreditor and System levels on data definitions, and the extent to which collaborative programs obscure the “source” of enrollment. Where possible, Wisconsin data are triangulated to provide a reasonable picture of the current context.)

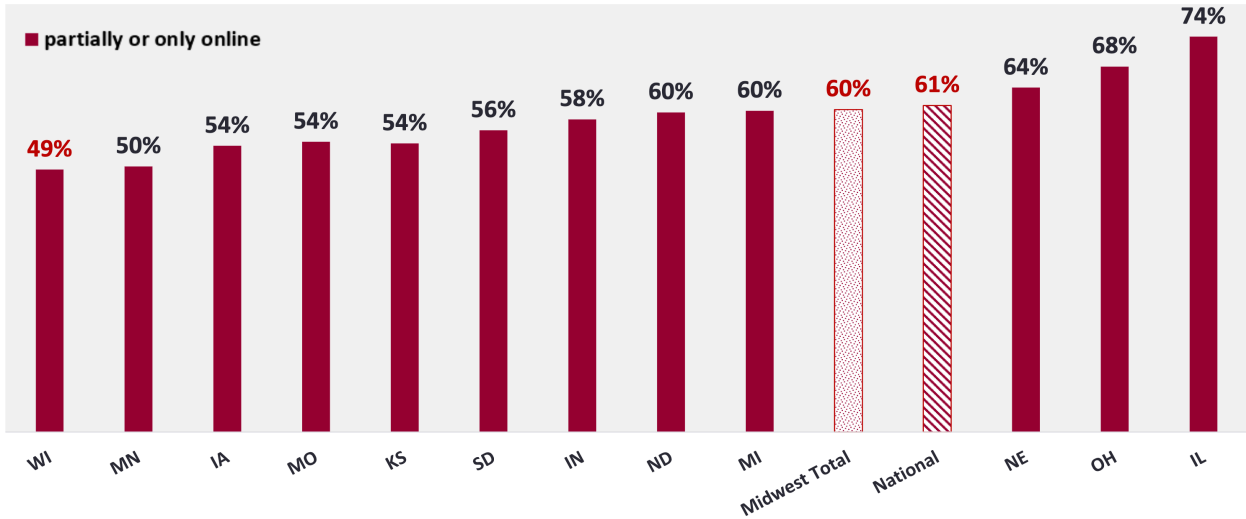
Reflecting national patterns, UW System online enrollments have declined from pandemic highs but remain above the long-term trendline and presage a “new normal” of higher online enrollments. For academic year 2021–2022, approximately two-thirds of UWS students took at least one online course. While UWS enrollments have declined about 10 percent in the past decade, enrollments in online courses have doubled.

Of the three online personas mentioned above, 80 percent of the students enrolled in online courses in 2021–2022 were multimodal students—students who are on a UW campus and taking a mix of online and in-person courses. The remaining 20 percent are students who were enrolled exclusively in distance education coursework. About 80 percent of these exclusively online students are part-time students.

These online enrollment growth trends are seen for undergraduate students, graduate and professional students, and adult degree completers. Students attending public colleges expect that online education will be a course delivery option.

While the increase in online distance education enrollments is similar to national trends, Wisconsin is not in line with national and regional online participation rates. Figure 5 shows online enrollment as a percentage of total enrollment for Fall 2021. Compared to other Midwestern states and the nation, Wisconsin is underperforming and has the lowest online participation rate of this regional comparison group.

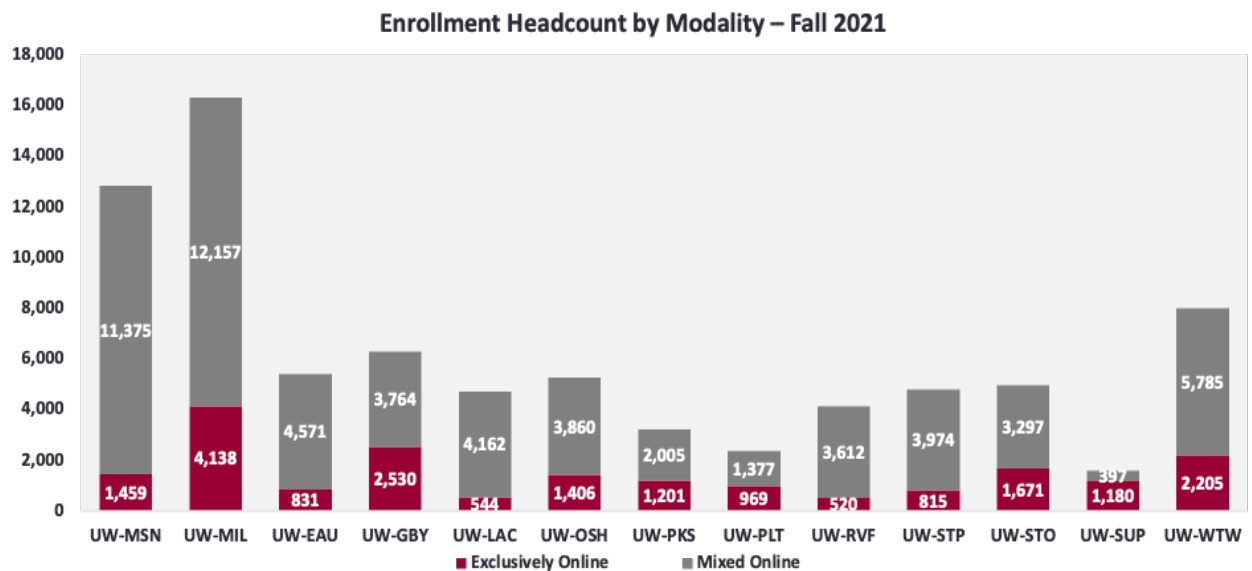
Figure 5. Fall 2021 Public, 4-year or above Overall Enrollment. Source: OPAR.



Wisconsin’s underperformance holds true for both undergraduate and graduate levels, although for graduate students Wisconsin (47%) is closer to the national percentage (53%) for online graduate enrollment as a percentage of total enrollments.

Across UW institutions, there is considerable variance in online enrollments both in absolute numbers as well as percentage of online to non-online enrollments. For example, in Fall 2021 UW–Milwaukee had 4,138 fully online students, which was the most of any UW institution. UW–River Falls had the fewest fully online students with 520 (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Enrollment Headcount by Modality. Source: OPAR.



Yet, when compared to UW–Superior as a percentage of fully online enrollments to all enrollments, UW–Milwaukee has 17 percent of its students enrolled fully online while UW–Superior has 45 percent of its student body fully online. Figure 7 shows the Milwaukee and Superior institutional comparison, where it is easy to see UW–Superior’s dependence on online enrollments.

Figure 7. UW Institutions Different Emphases on Online. Source: OPAR.

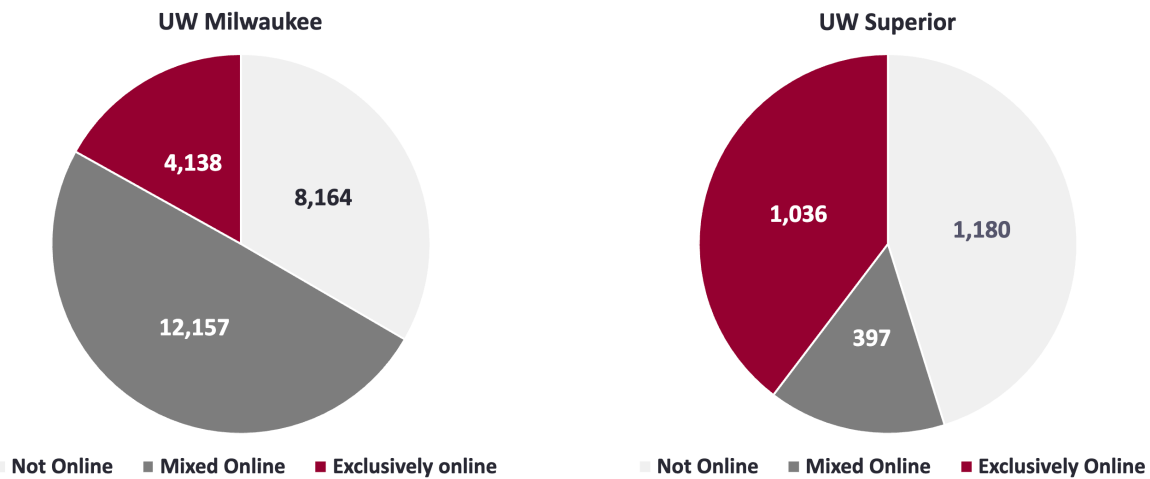
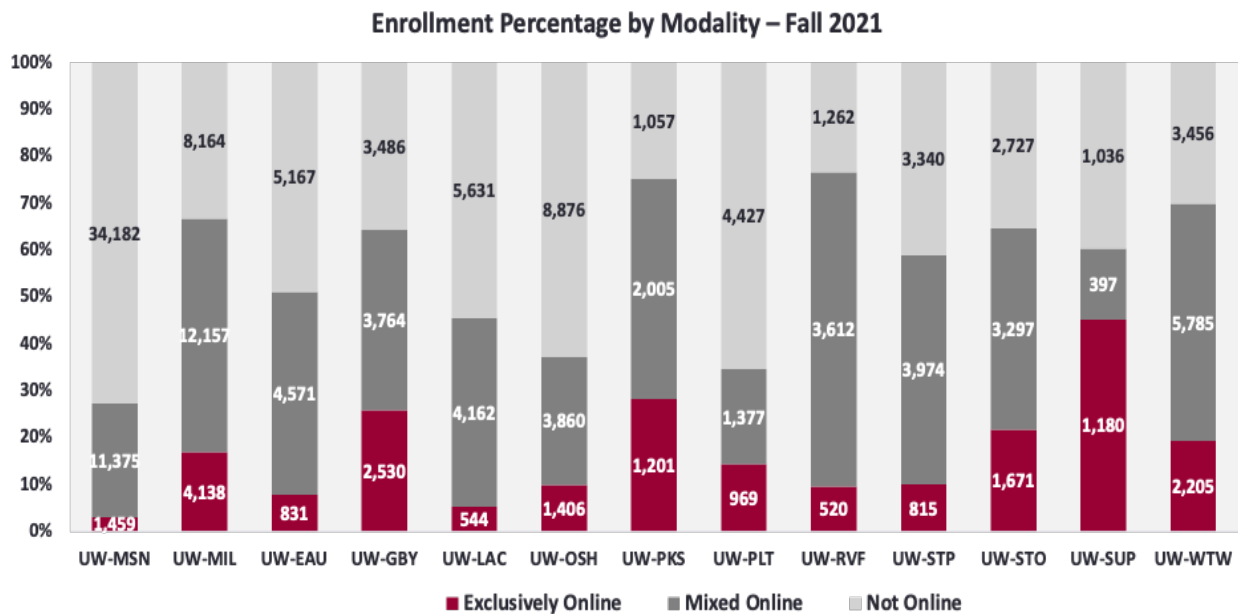


Figure 8 shows the ratio of enrollment types for all UWS institutions

Figure 8. Enrollment Percentage by Modality. Source: OPAR.



The differences between campuses in the ratio of online to non–online enrollments results from multiple factors, including institutional branding as a residential campus,

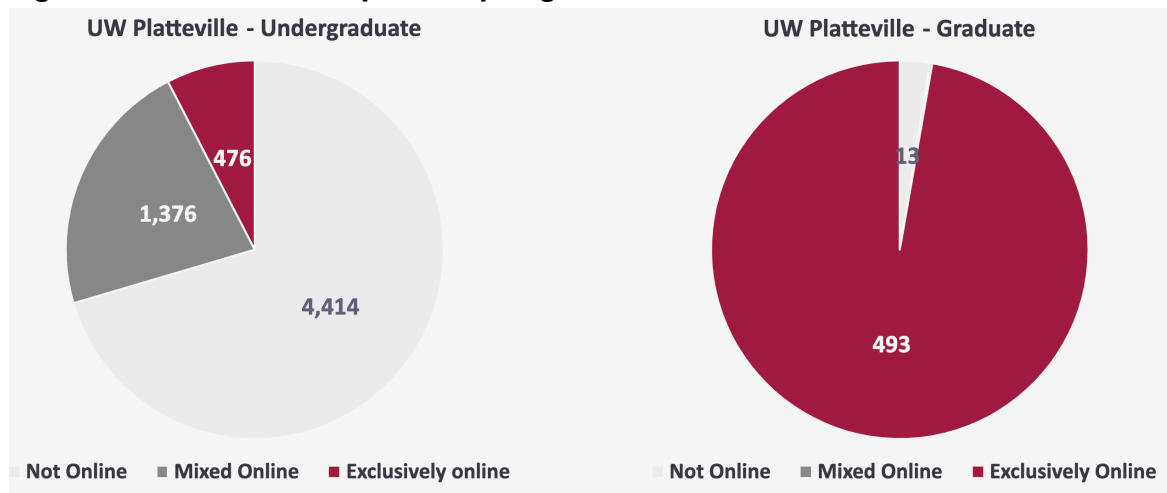
campus and faculty culture, regional demands, and past institutional commitments of resources to developing online programs. Regardless of the reasons, for most UW institutions online enrollments are a significant percent of overall enrollments and a vital part of the institution’s business model.

As indicated earlier, the undergraduate student population is the largest share of online education in UWS. The trendline suggests that in the not-distant future, practically all undergraduates will take some online courses as part of their traditional, campus-based education. Given that UWS students lag other states in online participation rates (Figure 5), growing UWS online enrollments through increased online participation rates is a realistic growth opportunity.

Even with this growth in online participation rates, the percentage of Wisconsin high school students is expected to decrease in the late 2020s, and the percentage of these students enrolling in UWS institutions continues to decline. In addition to other remedies to reverse UWS enrollment and market-share declines, online growth will depend on tapping into new markets and opportunities. One of those new markets reflects the changing dynamic between work and learning as mentioned in the national trends section.

Multiple factors are changing the traditional workplace, requiring workers of all educational backgrounds to reskill and upskill to keep pace with changing industry and workplace requirements. Changing work and learning dynamics will positively affect online graduate and professional programs. This trend in graduate online education is already apparent and reflected at UW-Platteville, where online graduate enrollment accounts for the vast majority of online enrollment, and in fact, almost all graduate enrollment (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Institutional Emphasis by Degree Level. Source: OPAR.



Other UW institutions are experiencing similar growth in online graduate programs, which is expected to accelerate.

In addition, workforce development needs can be served by developing industry specific or skills-gap training through targeted degree programs, microcredentials and certificates. To varied degrees, 11 UW institutions are actively developing credit-bearing online programming to address specific workforce needs. In addition, all campuses reported having non-credit Continuing Education online courses to serve workforce needs. Innovations in meeting workforce needs through microcredentials and stackable certificates are new ways to package tailored education and training for reskilling and upskilling working adults. The development of faculty-to-industry partnerships is also needed to help identify and create desired credentials.

The foundations of online growth in Wisconsin are clear. If Wisconsin Online is to grow, UWS must grow the existing base at the campus-level for undergraduate multimodal students and for graduate/professional learners through online courses and online-only programs. This growth is best accomplished through coordinated efforts across all UW institutions and System. In addition, new market growth is likely to occur by targeting workforce development for degree programs serving industry workforce gaps and microcredentials targeting local- and regional-market skills gaps.

A vision for the future emerges from the data on national trends and on UW institutions' current online programs and enrollments. Online growth has occurred and will continue to occur at the campuses both through campus-only and collaborative online programs. The expertise needed to meet future workforce needs also exists through both the local relationships each campus has with its community and region and System-fostered relationships across the state. What is desired is a comprehensive and collaborative strategy for growing high-quality online education, including supports and resources to help each campus implement its respective online growth strategy. Collectively, the following recommendations provide a vision for Wisconsin Online Strategic Growth.

Online Learner Opportunities

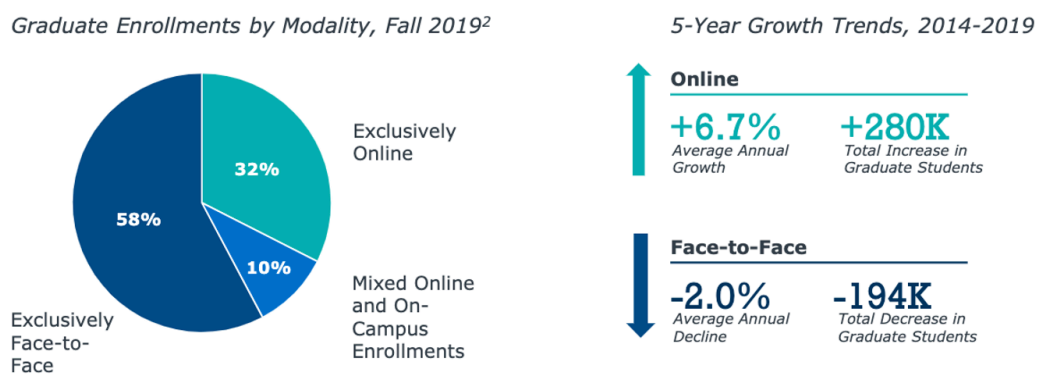
Characterizing the online learner is complex and changing. For the purposes of this report, we will follow EAB's division of online learners into three personas: multimodal undergraduates, professional graduate students, and adult degree completers. As useful as these three personas are, they simplify the complexities of characterizing the online student population, as these examples illustrate.

Multimodal Student: As indicated in the OPAR data, online growth in the undergraduate and adult degree completer populations will be greatest among students taking a mix of in-person and online courses. It will be increasingly important to ensure that the online educational experience is of similar quality with similar student-success supports as found in the traditional on-campus learning environment. Online courses reduce course scheduling conflicts, helping with degree progression—a recent University of Florida study found that students who took online courses were more likely to earn degrees (Ortagus, 2022).

While online growth in the undergraduate population will likely be grounded in multimodal courses offerings, a significant and growing number of graduate students are fully online.

Professional Graduate Student. Online enrollment represents a fast-growing share of the graduate market. As mentioned above, many UW institutions are experiencing enrollment growth in graduate online programs. EAB research confirms the market potential for graduate programs. From 2014–2019, online graduate enrollment grew by an average annual growth rate of 6.7% (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Online Graduate Market Opportunities. Source: EAB, 2021.

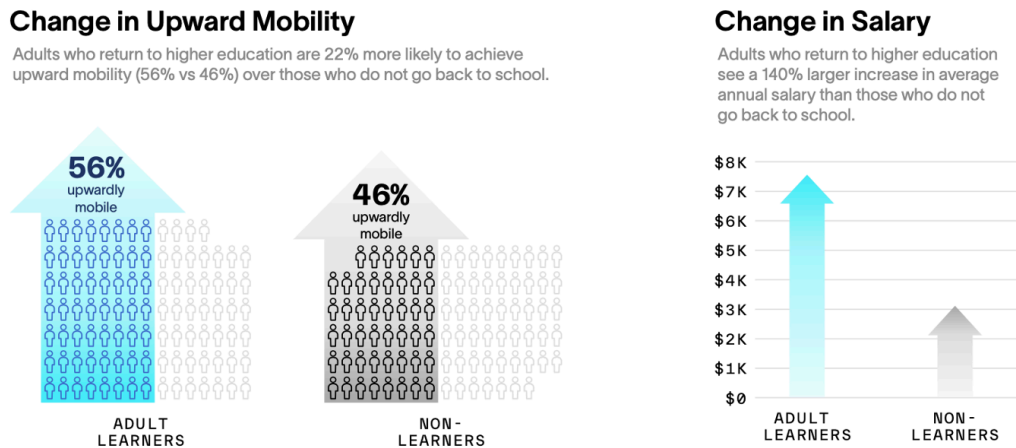


Like undergraduate students, NCES, RNL analysis shows that all net graduate growth from 2016–2019 has been among online students (GOIG, 2022). For the professional graduate student, online is the preferred course delivery modality.

Adult Degree Completer. Higher education is often described as having a “leaky pipe” problem. Nationally, there are 39 million adults who have some college, but no credential (SCNC) (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2022). In Wisconsin, the SCNC population is 721,679 (Ibid).

Growing adult degree completer enrollment is challenging, as evidenced by OPAR data that shows no enrollment change for this population for the past decade. Adults have life and work commitments, and they need strong student service and financial supports in order to step back into higher education. However, the benefits to SCNC students who do complete are substantial. Figure 11 summarizes the findings of a 2022 Lightcast study that found life-transforming increases in earning power for adults who returned to higher education.

Figure 11. Benefits to Adult Degree Completers. Source: Clochard et al., 2022.



Given the flexibility of online education, adult degree completers may find completing a degree online more achievable than having to return to a fully in-person environment. In addition, adult degree completers may find that taking some online courses helps them complete their degree. While enrollment in this sector has been flat over the past decade, tactics focused on removing barriers to online engagement may create opportunities to grow this population.

It is important to note that these three personas, while useful in segmenting online learner populations, do not explicitly include traditionally aged undergraduate learners who are fully online. There are many ways to segment the online learner populations and UWS would benefit from identifying the online student segments it wishes to track.

Strategies and Tactics

The Task Force Workgroup generated 21 recommendations to meet the objectives outlined in the charge. Workgroup subteams used the following evaluation criteria in developing recommendations:

- a growth mindset (how UW System and its institutions can enhance and grow UW System’s online programs to address current and future state and regional needs, aligning with the Wisconsin Idea);
- the parity principle, to ensure equivalence across all instructional modes;
- evidence of impact on enrollment growth, student success, and/or meeting workforce needs; and,
- efficiency, leveraging existing resources, and/or reduces operational costs over time.

In each strategy section that follows, one tactic is highlighted. While we highlight one tactic for brevity, all tactics and recommendations are important to growing Wisconsin Online. The full text for all the listed tactics is included in the accompanying Resources for Implementation document.

THE FOUNDATION FOR GROWTH AND QUALITY

The Task Force segmented strategies into two main categories—those that are foundational and those that will accelerate online growth and quality. As implied, the Task Force asserts that the strategies of this first section are essential to UW Online strategic growth and have the highest priority.

Strategy I. Optimize Resources and Infrastructure

As highlighted above, online growth opportunities exist both at the campus level and through collaborative programs for multimodal and online-only learners, and by pursuing new online opportunities that serve workforce needs. While ostensibly these are different pursuits, each requires strategies to optimize resources and systemwide infrastructure. More importantly, optimizing opportunities for campuses will benefit from Systemwide collaborations and strategic planning.

Strategy I. Optimize Resources and Infrastructure		UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	1 Create a centralized UW System Online Program Support Center (OPSC) to facilitate the UW System online growth agenda and expand campus-driven online programming.	●	●	●

	2	Investigate making online courses widely available with a course-sharing platform.	●	●	●
	3	Revise UW System policies and practices to accelerate online program growth.		●	●

The Task Force recommends creating a centralized UW System Online Program Support Center (OPSC) to facilitate the UW System online growth agenda and expand campus-driven and collaborative online programming. OPSC’s mission is to support the full array of online offerings across the UW System and evolving campus needs.

At the heart of this recommendation is a rethinking of UW Extended Campus to create a service center for all campuses. OPSC’s mission scope would be to provide coordinated supports across UW System leveraging systemwide expertise and resources. Campus chancellors would identify campus point-person/s to work with UWSA and inform OPSC’s services that would include and not be limited to:

- provide support in “jump starting” campus-driven online program development, whether curricular delivery is collaborative or at a single institution;
- provide startup and ongoing administrative support for collaborative online programs in emerging niche markets for which individual campuses may not have initial adequate capacity;
- support and manage updates to the proposed Wisconsin Online portal promoting online education across the UW campuses;
- provide start-up support of programming for opportunities related to workforce development, upskilling, and reskilling;
- develop and deliver programming, in consultation with OPID and campus Teaching and Learning Centers, in topics of interest related to online program development, instruction, and delivery to consortia of campus stakeholders;
- house and provide administrative support for existing UWS initiatives that focus on collaborative online delivery of courses for mission-aligned program areas, e.g., the Collaborative Language Program;
- provide administrative support for the Flexible Option competency-based degree programs; and,
- provide administrative support for the current UW Extended Campus Collaborative degree programs, including a phased transition where/as necessary to align expenses to revenues, in concordance with benchmarking results.

This vision changes the UW Extended Campus current model to a comprehensive service role. A commitment to facilitate this type of change would require the appointment of a full-time project manager with online growth expertise who would work closely with

UWSA, UW Extended Campus, and UW campus leadership to transition these changes effectively and over an identified period of time. This appointment is envisioned as a limited-term appointment.

In addition, the Task Force recommends that a Wisconsin Online Advisory Council provide sustained strategic direction for OPSC. The recommendation to stand up an Advisory Council follows below.

Strategy II. Establish an Oversight Framework to Ensure High Quality

An important element to Wisconsin Online Strategic Growth is UW brand identity and the world-class, high-quality education that students receive through UW institutions. The lack of a fully Systemwide approach to online education was identified several times in various recommendations and across several strategies focusing on accelerating online growth and quality. For example, the Task Force conducted a campus survey and learned that all campuses have adopted or developed quality standards for online education. However, those quality standards are inconsistently applied across and within institutions, with only two institutions requiring all online courses follow their quality standards. Collectively, the multiple references to an oversight arm led to the recommendation to create a Wisconsin Online Advisory Council (WOAC) that will help promote an online quality framework that employs best practices as endorsed by the Higher Learning Commission. The Council will also guide implementation of this plan, with the assistance of subcommittees.

Strategy II. Establish an Oversight Framework to Ensure High Quality			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	4	Form the Wisconsin Online Advisory Council to guide plan implementation and oversee online quality initiatives, online marketing at the System level, and OPSC.	●	●	●
	5	Adopt systemwide online metrics.	●	●	●
	6	Offer professional development and create community among online instructors to ensure high-quality online program design and instruction.		●	●
	7	Conduct an online student services inventory.		●	●

As conceived, a core component of WOAC is to have representatives from each UW campus and System constitute a council to oversee online quality initiatives, online marketing, and the Online Program Support Center (OPSC). The following list captures many of the anticipated oversight activities:

- Online quality standards;
- Strategic direction on program development;
- Strategic direction to align online efforts with workforce development;
- Guidance on emerging academic niches;
- Development of online metrics and goals;
- Review of program enrollments and program lifecycle analysis;
- Oversight and guidance of several subcommittees targeting online opportunities: e.g., workforce development, quality standards, etc.;
- Oversight of the Wisconsin Online portal (Tactic 8); and,
- Oversight of the Online Program Support Center (Tactic 1).

Standing up WOAC should be one of the first efforts following this report’s acceptance. The Council will provide the campus-based guidance and oversight for many of the implementation plans to be developed based on this report.

Strategy III. Invest in Marketing

The third set of foundational recommendations is critical to meeting this plan’s enrollment goals. Findings from the RNL Online Student Recruitment Report (RNL & Plexuss, 2022) show that students seeking information about online programs of interest use a search engine more than any other method. Prospective students used college search sites second most. UW System, however, lacks an up-to-date, persuasive online program website to market its online programs and gather leads. While UW System cannot compete in marketing expenditures with the large online universities, which average close to \$87M per year (EAB, 2020), the lack of a compelling web presence and a comprehensive marketing strategy puts UWS institutions at a disadvantage in capturing Wisconsin residents.

Strategy III. Invest in Marketing			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	8	Launch the Wisconsin Online portal and implement a state/regional marketing campaign.		●	●
	9	Integrate a centralized CRM into the Wisconsin Online portal.		●	●
	10	Produce an adult-friendly marketing toolkit for campuses.		●	●

STRATEGIES TO ACCELERATE ONLINE EDUCATION

The strategies and tactics in this section address the barriers to adults enrolling in online programs, identify the key innovations and workforce partnerships that will align best with the interwoven work/learning model of the future, and outline strategies to improve systemwide marketing of all UW institutions’ online programs.

Strategy IV. Remove Barriers for Adult Students

Flexibility and affordability are two key motivators for adult students. Tactics 11–16 address these motivators, identifying barriers and providing evidence-based solutions.

Strategy IV. Remove Barriers for Adult Students			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	11	Create an Earned Debt Forgiveness program.			●
	12	Scale credit for prior learning in online programs.		●	●
	13	Offer condensed academic sessions.		●	●
	14	Establish the Wisconsin Adult Learner Grant program.			●
	15	Create better pathways and practices to accept more transfer credit.	●		●
	16	Create an adult-friendly E-app.			●

Tactic 11 recommends creating an Earned Debt Forgiveness program, which would serve adult degree completer students who have stopped out for a minimum defined period of time (12 months is suggested) and who cannot return or transfer because of an outstanding debt to the institution. The proposed program would allow students who have debt up to \$4,000 to enroll and earn debt forgiveness of up to \$2,000 per term for two terms, provided they meet program requirements. This program would attract a returning population of students to UW online programs who are currently excluded because of their debt.

Strategy V. Partner with Employers

The Partner with Employers strategy recommends actions to increase UW institutions’ ability to partner with employers and create programming that has an impact on careers. This workforce-focused strategy depends on access to information about skills gaps and employer needs, the capacity to act on that information, and technology that enables communication with learners about these career-advancing opportunities.

Strategy V. Partner with Employers			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	17	Distribute Wisconsin workforce competency gap information to campuses.		●	●
	18	Address workforce skills gaps through professional skills training programs.		●	●
	19	Endorse UW System’s acquisition of the Okta enterprise identity platform to enable pre- to post-enrollment communications.	●	●	●

The Task Force’s Campus Online Resource Survey revealed that almost all campuses were engaged in some workforce support activities. To assist campuses in their continuing efforts to meet workforce needs, campuses would benefit from workforce data derived from continuous tracking and reporting on current workforce competency gaps in Wisconsin by industry sector and by region. At the UW System level and in collaboration with the Department of Workforce Development, regional economic development organizations and other external partners, the reports should identify current and transferable workplace competencies/competency gaps and credentials at both the noncredit and credit levels. This recommendation also supports incentivizing campuses to develop credit and noncredit online programming to address those needs.

Strategy VI. Offer Innovative Pathways to Careers

In a Strada and Gallup 2022 survey, nearly half of Americans report needing additional training and education to advance their careers. One of the most telling insights are the three factors that would motivate adults without degrees to enroll in reskilling/upskilling courses: career impact, affordability, and flexibility. The following recommendations align with these three motivators.

Strategy VI. Offer Innovative Pathways to Careers			UG Multimodal	Graduate/ Professional	Adult Degree Completer
Tactics	20	Design degrees based on stackable credentials.		●	●
	21	Provide career navigation and support for working adults.		●	●

Tactic 20 recommends designing degrees based on stackable credentials, with the intention to incentivize campuses to offer online degrees based on stackable credentials to serve the needs of adult learners. This tactic includes funding innovation grants for campuses committed to developing stackable-credential pathways to capture those Wisconsin students with some college but no credential. The Lumina Foundation defines stackable credentials as “A credential that is part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual’s qualifications and help that individual move along a career pathway to further education, different responsibilities, and potentially higher-paying jobs” (Lumina, 2015, p.5).

Cost estimates and priorities for Phase 1 of implementation

The estimated **Phase 1** implementation budget is shown below for what the Task Force considers to be the four highest priority recommendations. These priorities are the foundation needed so that the Wisconsin Online Advisory Council (WOAC) can guide the implementation of further phases and, importantly, guide the development of an accurate budget model for each tactic, in consultation with UW System leadership. The accompanying Resources for Implementation document contains estimates for each of the tactics that were developed by the working group subteams. The budget items for the four highest priority recommendations are listed below as a range, low to high. It should also be recognized that there would be cost savings from the restructuring/reimagining of UW Extended Campus into the new entity, the UW Online Program Support Center, to support the UW System online growth agenda and expand campus-driven online programming through both single campus and multicampus online programs.

Phase 1 Implementation Cost Estimates			Low End	High End
Phase 1 Priorities by Tactic #	4	Form the Wisconsin Online Advisory Council to guide plan implementation and oversee online quality initiatives, online marketing at the System level, and OPSC. ¹ (Tactic 4)	\$30,000	\$60,000
	8	Launch the Wisconsin Online portal and implement a marketing plan. ² (Tactic 8)	\$555,000 (WI Marketing)	\$855,000 (WI plus Regional Marketing)
	9	Integrate a centralized CRM into the Wisconsin Online portal. ³ (Tactic 9)	\$90,000	\$120,000
	1	Create a centralized UW System Online Program Support Center (OPSC) to facilitate the UW System online growth agenda and expand campus-driven online programming. ⁴ (Tactic 1)	Cost savings TBD	Cost savings TBD
TOTAL			\$675,000	\$1,035,000

¹ Calculated based on the **high priority** for the creation of the Wisconsin Online Advisory Council. A mix of monthly online and face-to-face meetings consisting of representation from multiple UW System campuses, UW System, and OPSC would be required. Implementation teams can then be created to implement further recommendations that would include budget development.

² This is a **high priority** that should begin immediately.

³ This is a **high priority** that should begin immediately and **must** accompany the development of the Wisconsin Online Portal. Any ongoing costs are currently unknown but would be determined by an implementation team.

⁴ There will be cost savings realized as part of the implementation plan that will restructure/reimagine UWEX into the UW Online Program Support Center (OPSC), a new entity, that supports the online growth agenda. An implementation team needs to be created as a **high priority** to begin this work.

Success Targets

Three core areas for measuring the success of Wisconsin Online align with the three personas used in this report.

1. UWS will grow all UWS online enrollments as a percent of all enrollments to close the 11 percent gap between Wisconsin public, 4-year institutions and comparable institutions in the Midwest region by 2030. As Figure 5 shows, Wisconsin lags many Midwestern public institutions in online participation rates.

Closing the 11 percent gap in online participation rates will require increasing online enrollments across all student segments for both undergraduate and graduate students, as a percent of all enrollments. Given overall enrollments remain static, achieving comparable online participation rates as the Midwest, Public 4-years would result in UW System:

- Growing UG multimodal enrollments by 5.3% or 7,200 students;
- Growing UG exclusively online enrollments by 7.3% or 10,050 students;
- Growing Graduate multimodal enrollments by 2% or 470 students; and,
- Growing Graduate exclusively online enrollments by 4.7% or 1,200 students.

This Midwest-comparable model results in a considerable increase in UW undergraduate students who are exclusively online, as a percent of all enrollments. To achieve these results in this segment will require many UW institutions to increase virtually delivered academic and non-academic student supports.

2. Adult degree completers can be segmented into two categories: those who are enrolled in FLEX and Independent Learning programs (Fall 2021 n=1,631), and those who are 25 years and older and multimodal undergraduates (Fall 2021 n=12,000). Using the same target increase of 11 percent will result in UW System:

- Growing FLEX/IL enrollments by 163 to 1810; and,
- Growing 25+ multimodal undergraduate enrollments by 1320 to 13,320.

3. Wisconsin Online will develop new workforce pathways across multiple industries through curriculum redesign and innovations:

- Develop workforce pathways that are shareable across all UWS institutions;
- Increase the number of microcredentials serving identified workforce needs; and,
- Increase the number of professional graduates in online programs and completing online degrees in areas of high demand in the state.

The Task Force recommends annual review of online participation rates and other online metrics, including a production of an annual report detailing these metrics. It should be noted that in some cases, there currently exists no baseline for some online metrics. In addition, there is no agreement on definitions and how best to define the online learner space. As recommended above, the Wisconsin Online Advisory Council in conjunction with OPAR will need to define and identify metrics for measuring online success as one of its first tasks.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Online program development at each UW institution has varied. Early adopters started experimenting with online courses and content delivery in the late 1990s. In some cases, a department or academic unit saw the potential for online learning and built a framework for training its faculty and delivering high-quality online courses. In most cases, this early growth was organic, grassroots and funded locally within the existing budget models of the department, academic unit, or university. While UW Extended Campus has played a crucial role in developing its 22 collaborative and competency-based online programs, the additional ~200 online programs² offered by UW System institutions must also be included in a comprehensive plan if we are to achieve greater online growth.

The work of this Task Force starts from the successes of UW campuses and Extended Campus and develops a vision for the future. Online growth has occurred and will continue to occur at the campuses both through campus-only and collaborative online programs. The expertise needed to meet future workforce needs also exists through both the local relationships each campus has with its community and region and System-fostered relationships across the state.

This report advances a comprehensive and collaborative strategy for growing high-quality online education, including supports and resources to help each campus implement its respective online growth strategy. Achieving this vision is best accomplished in two phases.

The first phase requires developing implementation teams, in conjunction with UW System, to pursue the strategies detailed in The Foundation for Online Growth and Quality section. The first step is to stand up the Wisconsin Online Advisory Council, which will oversee the various implementation teams and solidify the vision for Wisconsin Online. It is recommended that UW Extended Campus restructuring commence with a benchmark study of similar online service centers at other state systems. Finally, a separate implementation team will focus on developing the online marketing portal that is essential to promoting online programs as well as generating leads.

After the foundation is laid, the second phase will focus on the strategies and tactics detailed in the Strategies to Accelerate Online Education section. With the Wisconsin

² For this data point, OPAR defines distance delivery programs as those where 50% or more of courses may be taken as distance-delivered. Source: OPAR's Academic Majors UWS Institutions: Majors with Distance Delivery, <https://www.wisconsin.edu/opar-frontier/uws-academic-majors/>.

Online Advisory Council (WOAC) established, this group will set priorities and form implementation teams to pursue the remaining recommendations. The Task Force recognizes that online education and workforce continues to change and the WOAC may have to adjust strategies given changing circumstances. That is exactly the role of WOAC—to oversee online education systemwide and adjust strategies and priorities to help serve campuses in their efforts to both grow online engagement and serve workforce needs.

Appendix A – Charge

UW Online Strategic Growth

Growth in online learning accelerated during the pandemic as did expectations that online learning and academic and student support online services would continue, improve and expand. In addition to campus-based students' expectations, adult and professional learners increasingly expect online options to meet their educational, reskilling or upskilling needs.

The University of Wisconsin System is committed to making UW institutions the preferred online option for Wisconsin learners, whether the traditional campus-based student, who expects a blended experience of in-person and online, or the adult/professional learner, who is primarily online-only. This charge directs a select group of UW leaders and online experts to determine how UW System and its institutions can enhance and grow UW System's online programs to address current and future state and regional needs.

Public Institution Online Models

Across the country, public institutions' efforts to capture the growing online market can be segmented into at least four models:

1. Creation of a free-standing, independent academic institution either from scratch or by acquisition/merger with an existing online provider;
2. Third-party contracting with an online program manager (OPM) to build programs, market/recruit students, and generate revenues under a revenue-sharing arrangement;
3. State System in-house online program manager that fulfills the same roles as a third-party OPM; or,
4. Semi-decentralized yet coordinated online programs that utilize a mechanism (e.g., an advisory council) to set standards and that provide some centralized services for all institutions within the state System.

For several reasons (acquisition costs, quality concerns, and brand/mission integrity), models 1 and 2 above should not be considered viable options for UW System. More than a year ago, UW System proposed a version of the third option, which was called Project Distance Education (DE) +. After initial review by UW System chancellors and provosts, that model was not supported. UW System institutions have pre-existing online programs that serve tens of thousands of students each year.³ Building on existing

³ According to OPAR's online dashboard, unduplicated distance education headcount for all System institutions, including Extended Campus Collaboratives, was 91,533 for 2019–2020 and 170,449 for 2020–2021.

programs and local workforce connections at UW System institutions is important to enhance and grow the UW online market, especially the adult/professional market.

Charge

Develop a strategic plan that builds on UW System’s existing strengths, and both enhances existing local online programs and targets adult and professional learners throughout the state, region and beyond. The strategic plan should identify collaborative roles for Extended Campus and each of the UW System institutions to maintain, build and maximize quality programs that are accessible and affordable. The strategic plan should clearly identify and justify the model to be implemented and how that model serves campus-based and collaborative online programs and targeted growth in the adult/professional market. An objective of this strategic plan is to develop a structure and identify targeted investments to increase online enrollments and revenues. An analysis of UW online program business models and finances should be part of the committee’s review.

Key Focus Areas

1. **Quality, Access and Affordability.** The committee should articulate UW Systemwide standards for online programs, including key measures of quality (e.g., content, design, and delivery), access and affordability. In doing so, the committee should provide definitions of each. The committee should survey each campus to learn what standards and training are being used at each campus and measures being used to ensure quality online delivery. The committee should recommend a mechanism (e.g., advisory council, provost subgroup) by which standards for quality, access and affordability can be articulated and reviewed. This proposed mechanism would also play a role in fostering program development, identifying opportunities for innovation, and managing the program array to create a collaborative and competitive online environment that does not favor one over another.

2. **Extended Campus.** The Extended Campus currently provides collaborative online program development and delivery, with 31 collaborative programs currently in its portfolio. The committee should consider the future role and funding structure of Extended Campus with an emphasis on determining how Extended Campus expertise and operations (e.g., instructional design, market research, marketing, student support tools and practices, and development of new online pedagogies) can best serve the success of the UW institutions’ online array.

3. **Marketing:** The committee should propose a model for marketing all UW System online programs to residents in Wisconsin as well as national and international audiences. Many higher education systems have online portals that promote online learning to multiple audiences, including adult and professional learners. Are there other/additional marketing options that will position UW Online as the first choice for online learning across the state of Wisconsin and region? In addition, the committee should consider adult-friendly marketing, recruitment, and admissions processes in order to capitalize on the adult/professional market.

4. **Workforce Needs:** The committee should investigate the best means for creating a comprehensive list of statewide workforce educational, upskilling and reskilling needs. The purpose of this research, which should be ongoing, is to determine regional workforce needs for adult and professional learners and identify and develop strategies for addressing growth in this market. Workforce needs should be compared with the existing 151 online programs at UW institutions and Extended Campus to identify areas for growth.

5. **Innovations:** The committee should investigate how to leverage and accelerate innovations in “course-to-career” educational packaging and degree completions for the online modality, including in part the use of certificates, microcredentials, stackable degrees, prior learning assessment, and the integration of continuing education noncredit options. Innovations that extend beyond UW System and current capacities should be identified for further consideration and development.

6. **Metrics:** The committee should collect data about current online programs at each campus and within System, including program array, program enrollments and degree completion rates. The committee should develop reasonable growth targets for online enrollments based on current UW campus and Extended campus offerings, especially related to adult/professional learners. These metrics should include assessment areas for determining online program quality, access and affordability. These metrics also should define criteria for success/failure in online program growth by school, region and state, as appropriate.

7. **Ancillary Supports:** With the expected increase in students getting their educational needs met through online-only options, there also is a need to provide services to students beyond academics, including career services, mental health services, and other student retention and support services. The committee should investigate options and financial requirements for delivering these additional student support services at scale.

In all of the above focus areas, the committee should consider how best to leverage the expertise of our campuses, Extended Campus, and our partners to serve online learners

in the state and beyond. The committee should suggest future areas for investigation, perhaps including a review of UW policies involved in online education and how they aid/hinder collaboration and cooperation. Finally, the committee should strive to provide initial estimates of financial costs for pursuing the various outcomes of this charge.

Process

To pursue this charge, a Taskforce representing leadership and online experts from across UW System and its institutions will be created. The Taskforce will convene in person for a half-day kickoff meeting to discuss the charge and establish key issues to address within that charge. The Taskforce will meet to review Workgroup updates and recommendations as needed. The UW Online Strategic Growth initiative will have a trio of executive sponsors: Johannes Britz, Interim Senior Vice President of the Office of Academic and Student Affairs for UW System, Mark Mone, Chancellor of UW–Milwaukee, and Renée Wachter, Chancellor of UW–Superior. The Taskforce will be chaired by John Koker, Provost of UW–Oshkosh and Glendalí Rodriguez, Provost of UW–Stout.

Following the kickoff meeting, a smaller Workgroup will convene to work on the details of the charge as directed by the Taskforce. The Workgroup will include online experts from across UW System. The Workgroup will consult with the Taskforce as necessary to gather information and to elicit guidance on questions that might arise. The Workgroup will meet up to two times a week, and it will prepare updates on a weekly basis for the Taskforce. The Workgroup will complete its work by early October for Taskforce, Chancellor, Provost, and external stakeholder review. The Taskforce's final report will be due by the end of October 2022.

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