

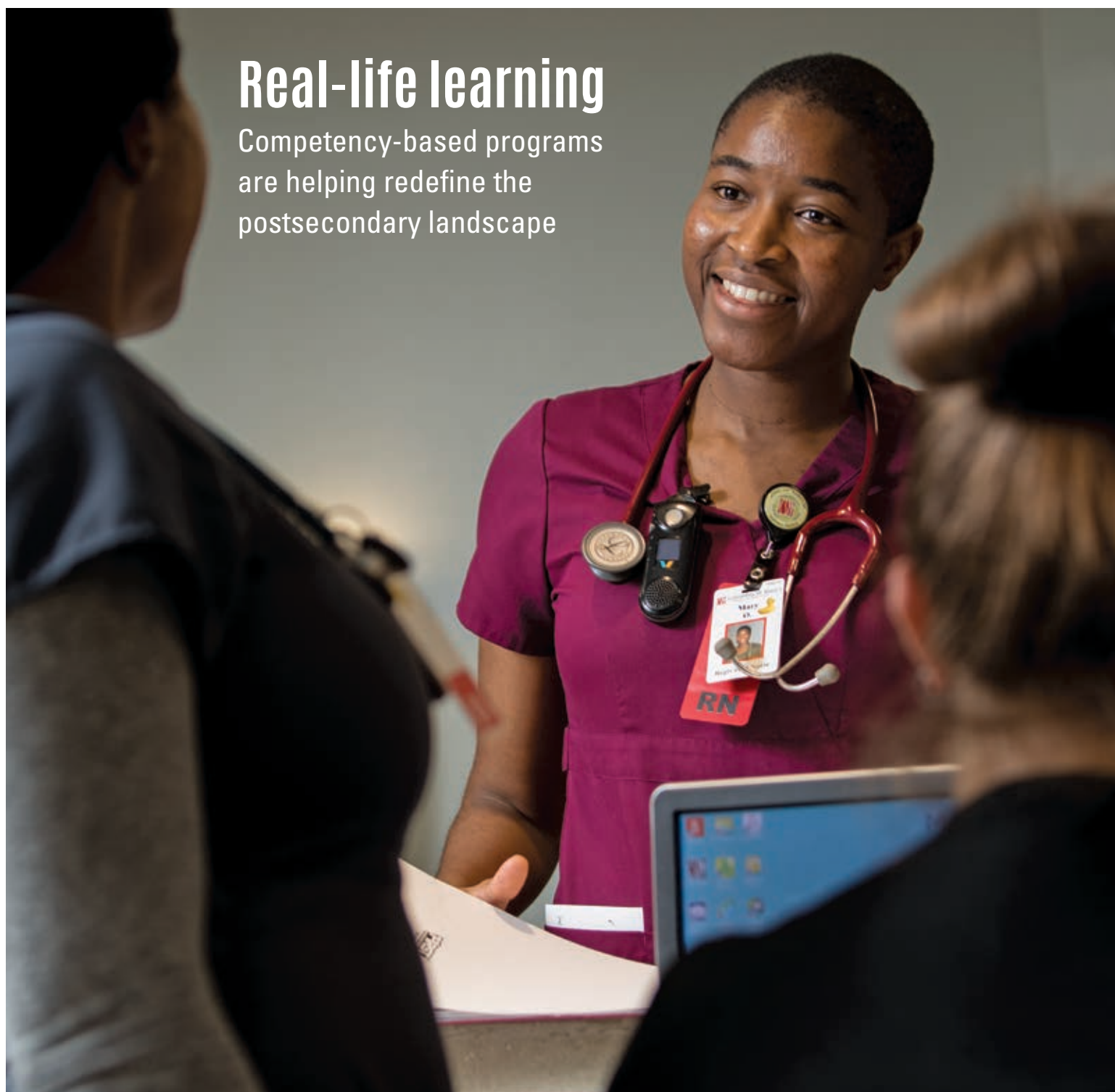
LUMINA FOUNDATION

FOCUS™

Summer 2017

Real-life learning

Competency-based programs
are helping redefine the
postsecondary landscape



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Editor's note: The stories in this issue of *Focus* were reported and written by Steve Giegerich. Giegerich is a journalist with decades of experience, including stints as a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and as an education writer for the Associated Press. He has also taught journalism at Columbia University and is now a freelance writer based in New York City.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

We have a saying at Lumina Foundation that's become something of a mantra: "It's all about the learning."

This mantra isn't a quip about our own penchant for trial and error (though there's a fair bit of that here, as there is in any organization). No, when we say: "It's about the learning," we're stating a core commitment, a belief that educational quality shouldn't be measured by a list of courses taken or grades earned or even the time students spend in classrooms. Rather, we believe quality should be measured by what students actually *learn* – by the specific knowledge and skills they gain through their programs.

This sort of competency-based approach might seem logical – perhaps even self-evident. But in reality, it's much more the exception than the rule. Fortunately, that's changing. In fact, one of Lumina's goals is that *all* credentialing be competency-based.

One way to move in that direction is to shine a very bright light on postsecondary institutions that are going all-in – those that are designing programs to be fully competency-based from the ground up. This issue of *Focus* shows how powerful such an approach can be, especially for students from varied backgrounds and with a wide array of learning needs.

An October 2016 study by rpk GROUP notes significant growth in "all-in" competency-based education, pointing out that hundreds of institutions are developing such programs. The study, which focuses on emerging programs at four institutions – public and private, two-year and four-year, nonprofit and for-profit – doesn't gloss over the challenges inherent in developing competency-based programs. For instance, it points out that such programs typically require substantial upfront investment, and that they rely on economies of scale and efficiencies in the creation and delivery of learning modules to keep prices lower than comparable credit-hour programs.

Admittedly, it won't be easy to make competency-based education programs widely available. But such programs, when taken to full scale, show tremendous promise. They offer an exciting new way to serve many students who seek clearer pathways and alternatives to the regular classroom. And, they have much to "teach" others in more traditional, time-based programs.

Also, through the Competency-Based Education Network, an independent nonprofit organization, Lumina is working with educators to ensure they design programs that produce outcomes that are racially and economically just. We must do better by African-American, Hispanic, and American Indian students, and competency-based learning can help address the nation's equity imperative.

Increasing innovation and urgency in the competency-based movement is among five national priorities that Lumina Foundation outlines in its strategic plan. The four-year plan, which took effect this year, continues to advocate a level of postsecondary attainment – 60 percent by 2025 – that will benefit many Americans whose needs might otherwise go unmet.

Over time, the success of competency-based programs will hinge on how well colleges and universities explain how this approach can support a broader array of today's students.

In this issue of *Focus*, we talk to some of those students, individuals enrolled in programs at three very different institutions – a large public university; a small, private liberal-arts college; and a tech-focused community college. The institutions are diverse – as are the students they serve – but the programs offer students several common characteristics, including coaching and mentoring, meaningful interaction with instructors, and rigorous assessment of learning with a follow-up that includes in-person and IT-enabled developmental feedback.

Competency-based education programs often "look different" to students, parents, and hiring managers. There may be no grades, and students often have flexibility in how they approach coursework – if courses are even used to structure learning. Some explanation of competency-based education is usually needed to help stakeholders understand how learning occurs in active, supportive environments.

Also, growing these programs will require policy and funding environments at the federal and state levels that permit – even encourage – new thinking. This new thinking includes all of the following:

- Alternatives are needed to standard definitions of "satisfactory academic progress" and other time-based measures.
- Transfer agreements must be configured so that they are based on students' attainment of specific learning objectives rather than the accumulation of credit hours.
- Approval processes must be adopted that do not place unfair burdens on competency-based education programs merely because they look different.
- Outcomes-based funding, which can increase the likelihood that students finish their programs on time, should be structured in ways that encourage competency-based education.
- Schools should be able to charge tuition for these programs at flat rates or by the competency or sets of knowledge and skills that students have mastered.

Higher-ed innovators have an important role in helping people who can make or break these programs – everyone from faculty members, students, and parents to employers, regulators, and policymakers – understand how competency-based approaches can deliver high-quality education.

It's our hope that this issue of *Focus* can help foster that understanding.



Jamie P. Merisotis
President and CEO
Lumina Foundation

On the cover: Registered Nurse Mary Olukotun, 24, took just 16 months to earn her bachelor's degree in the competency-based "Flex" program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She's now pursuing a doctorate and hopes to work with women and children as a nurse practitioner in the field of public health.



Miriam and Mark Blackman have plenty of “old-school” machines in their Texarkana shop, but their purchase of high-tech, programmable equipment led Miriam to a new kind of school. She recently finished a competency-based program at Texas State Technical College, earning an associate degree in computer-aided manufacturing.



At Texas State Technical College, learning means doing

DODDRIDGE, Ark., —
A massive, high-tech machine sits incongruously in the far corner of a shed in rural Arkansas. This four-ton behemoth, whose delivery required use of a front-end loader, is the pride of Blackman Machining, a small shop tucked into an 80-acre spread near the Texas-Arkansas-Louisiana corner.

The machine is an Enshu Yuasa, a three-axis, multi-function, “computer numerical control” (CNC) unit that can cut precise threads and mill metal in three dimensions at the touch of a button.

In essence, the Enshu Yuasa is a high-tech hybrid, a combination of the many smaller machines – manual drill presses, lathes and the like – that Mark Blackman has long used to craft custom-made parts for local farmers, oil riggers and manufacturers.

“Manual machines are good,” says Blackman. “But as far as production, they just can’t match” the output of a CNC machine.

There’s a catch, though. Before a CNC unit can produce parts, its human operator must first program the cutting-edge tool with a sequenced string of coordinates that control its actions. That was the problem – not just for Mark, but for his business partner and wife, Miriam Blackman. After buying the Enshu Yuasa in 2014 and using it for two years, “we realized that neither one of us knew how to program it” in a way that maximized its potential, says Miriam, 39. “And that’s why I decided to come to TSTC.”

Self-starters welcome

TSTC is Texas State Technical College, a 10-campus system that operates quietly but efficiently by embracing competency-based education (CBE) and eschewing many of the trappings of conventional higher education.

“We don’t have sports teams and stuff like that,” notes Barton Day, provost of the TSTC campus in Marshall, an east Texas city of 23,000 near the Arkansas-Louisiana line. “But we do offer something that is as common-sense as CBE.”

Miriam Blackman had “never heard” of competency-based education when she set out to find a school near her home that could help her understand the nuances of the Enshu Yuasa machine. But the chance to learn in a competency-based program – one that recognizes practical experience, allows students to progress at their own pace and rejects grades in favor of direct assessments – resonated with a self-starter such as Blackman.

“I like how this program is set up,” she said in April, as she neared completion of her associate degree in computer-aided manufacturing (CAM), one of three competency-based programs on the Marshall campus. “Everything is hands-on. There is not a lot of desk time where you’re sitting there trying to study a book or memorize this equation or that date. It’s easier to learn that way. Setting your own pace, you can set your own schedule. And when you’re done you can move on to the next project.”

The matter-of-fact Day insists that CBE is “nothing new” in higher education – pointing out that the concept has been around for decades. Still, given its success at TSTC and other institutions, he says he finds it curious that the model hasn’t become a larger part of the postsecondary mainstream.

There’s certainly no such hesitancy in the TSTC system, which implemented its first competency-based



Before she learned about TSTC, Miriam Blackman had no idea what a competency-based education program was. She’s sold on it now, though. “Everything is hands-on,” she says. “There’s not a lot of desk time where you’re sitting there trying to study a book or memorize this equation or that date. It’s easier to learn that way.”

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Nathan Cleveland, one of two instructors in the computer-aided manufacturing program at TSTC-Marshall, shows Blackman the finer points of a precision drilling machine. And once he shows her the way, Blackman will take the controls herself. As Cleveland says: "We are not teaching time, we are teaching skills."

program in 2014 and now features CBE on eight of its 10 campuses. In fact, TSTC may soon make competency-based education available on all 10 campuses across its entire range of classes – a catalog that begins with air traffic control, ends with welding technology and offers everything in between, from electrical line maintenance to facilities management.

Tucked into a stand of pines ten minutes southeast of the historic Harrison County Courthouse, the TSTC-Marshall campus is a sprawling mix of classrooms, contemporary laboratories and state-of-the-art industrial workshops. It is, in short, an ideal venue to advance competency-based learning.

"We are not teaching time, we are teaching skills," explains Nathan Cleveland, one of two instructors in the college's CAM program. "Everyone doesn't learn at the same speed. Some students will run out in front, while others are a little slower."

The roots of TSTC go back to 1965, the year Gov. John Connally (wounded two years earlier in the Dallas assassination of John F. Kennedy) established a technical institute affiliated with Texas A&M University on the site of a former Air Force base in Waco. The school separated from Texas A&M four years later, gradually split into separate campuses and was eventually granted status as an independent system by the state legislature.

To date, the TSTC system has awarded badges, certificates and degrees to more than 100,000 graduates, most of them older learners such as Doyle "Grayling" Edwards. Like many students, Edwards landed at TSTC through Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA), a federal retraining initiative that helps "downsized" blue-collar workers develop the skills they need for 21st century manufacturing jobs.

Edwards came naturally to industrial labor. His father, also named Doyle, owned a machine shop and saw to it that the younger Edwards learned the trade while still in high school. After graduation, he joined the family business and forged a father-son partnership that lasted for 25 years, ending when Grayling accepted a job at a U.S. Steel Tubular Products plant. The steel industry pays well, but steady employment is sporadic in an industry buffeted by cheap imports. Laid off again in 2016 at age 63, Edwards decided it was time to launch a new career.

"The world is changing," he reasons. "You have to learn in order to compete." To Edwards, that meant accepting TAA funds to enroll in a TSTC-Marshall competency-based course in computer-aided manufacturing.

The senior Doyle Edwards might have questioned the choice.

"My daddy didn't want a thing to do with computers," says Edwards. "Except he didn't just say 'computers.' He said '**damn** computers.'"

The younger Edwards insists he's "old school," too, though that assessment put him at odds with reality during a recent assignment in Nathan Cleveland's CAM class. Hunched over a computer keyboard, Edwards pecked away, trying to simulate the programming of a

Competency-based education **defined**

Competency-based education (CBE) is being embraced by a growing number of colleges and universities that understand the importance of shifting away from a traditional, time-based (credit-hour) system to one that measures and uses students' actual achievement of learning objectives to award credentials.

Recognizing the burgeoning popularity of CBE – particularly among working adults – its proponents came together in 2014 to form the Competency-Based Education Network (C-BEN) www.cbenetwork.org. The network, which now includes 30 colleges and universities and four public higher education systems, describes competency-based education this way:

"CBE is a flexible way for students to get credit for what they know, build on their knowledge and skills by learning more at their own pace, and earn high-quality degrees, certificates, and other credentials that help them in their lives and careers.

"CBE focuses on what students must know and be able to do to earn degrees and other credentials. ... (It) combines 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, often at a personalized pace."

There is no **one** way to pursue competency-based education. In fact, each school tailors it to meet the specific needs of its students. But the basic design incorporates the following principles:

- Flexible learning at a personalized pace.
- Close faculty oversight of students' progress.
- Specific, clearly defined learning outcomes that students must reach.
- Practical, relevant, and (when possible) workplace-based projects.
- Assessment of the learning that students gained prior to enrollment. By assessing the knowledge and skills that students bring with them – whether obtained in the classroom, the workplace, or life experience – competency-based programs can help orient adult students and smooth the path to program completion.





Barton Day, provost at TSTC-Marshall, is a 30-year Air Force veteran who embodies the college's practical approach to serving its students. "We don't have sports teams and stuff like that," he acknowledges. "But we do offer something that is as common-sense as CBE," an approach that Day insists is "nothing new" in higher education.

high-tech, three-axis vertical mill in an adjoining workshop. He sighed audibly when the simulator flashed a red error message – a signal that beckoned the instructor to Edwards' work station.

"You left the decimal off," Cleveland said patiently, tracing a finger over a faulty coordinate.

"It's a whole different world," Edwards said later, taking a break from the daunting digital stream of numbers and coordinates. "And a lot of stuff to remember. This is one of those things learned better by repetition. You just have to keep going back over everything until you get it right."

The 'Go/No Go' standard

The faculty and administrative staff at TSTC-Marshall borrow a military term to describe the way that Edwards is learning. It's called "Go/No Go."

"There is a strong correlation between military upgrade training and CBE," explains Provost Day, a 30-year Air Force veteran. "(Both) are 100 percent task qualification. It's a 'Go/No Go' standard when you need to complete a task. Either you can do it or you can't. If you get to the

end of task training and you can complete the task in a satisfactory manner, you move on to the next step. If you can't (complete the task), you get retrained to the point that you can."

TSTC has discovered that combining "Go/No Go" with CBE has created an unintended benefit: Fast-track students are doubling back to assist their struggling classmates.

"There's a lot of collaboration," acknowledges Miriam Blackman. "You have the students coming right out of high school. Then you have the students along my lines – those who joined the military, worked some jobs and are coming back to school to learn new skills. You have a lot of experiences, and they're all mashed together. The newer students show you some things that you didn't know, so it all works together quite nicely."

The partnerships with fellow students became a key element in the competency-based process that helped Blackman learn the intricacies of the Enshu Yuasa – details that, as a young woman, she never could've predicted she would need. In fact, as a newly minted high school graduate in Michigan, Miriam saw just four options on her career path: teacher, secretary, nurse or



Instructor Nathan Cleveland points out a programming error to Doyle "Grayling" Edwards, who came to TSTC-Marshall by way of the Trade Adjustment Assistance program, a federal retraining initiative for displaced blue-collar workers. Edwards worked for decades in his father's machine shop and later at steel plant, but after repeated layoffs, he knew he had to take a new direction. "The world is changing," he reasons. "You have to learn in order to compete."



Laurence Johnson, a 43-year-old former Army medic, parlayed his TSTC credential into a good-paying job as a high-tech machinist. He praises the faculty, not just for their teaching skills, but for the support they provided. "They not only helped me with learning," he says. "They were counselors."

housewife. The idea of one day operating a state-of-the-art manufacturing tool didn't even occur to her.

Unsure how to proceed, she enrolled in a small Christian school with no specific objective in mind. When the funding for tuition dried up during her sophomore year, she left college and joined the Air Force. While serving, she combined active duty with academics, taking online courses that earned her an associate degree in applied sciences and a bachelor's in business administration.

In 2011, as her military service drew to a close, Miriam's future came into focus – personally and professionally – with her marriage to Mark Blackman and the decision to run that Texarkana machine shop as a husband-and-wife operation.

It was a solid alliance. From Mark, Miriam learned the basics of machining. In Miriam, Mark gained an associate with a keen business sense. As the business prospered, though, it became clear that an investment in high-tech equipment was necessary for the couple to meet increasing demand for their services. And so, the Blackmans bought the used Enshu Yuasa and, a year later, installed new software to improve its productivity.

The new software helped, but the Blackmans realized they still had a lot to learn about CNC programming before they could use the machine to its full potential. Miriam addressed that problem by enrolling in an advanced manufacturing course on the TSTC-Marshall campus an hour from their home.

The staff and instructors she encountered at TSTC-Marshall were not academicians.

"We're not teachers, and we weren't trained to be teachers," says Cleveland. Some, like Day, brought a military background to campus; many others came to TSTC from manufacturing jobs.

For instance, Cleveland came to education from positions as a production manager at a concrete production plant and a shift supervisor for an area manufacturer. Both jobs paid better than teaching, but Cleveland accepts the pay cut as a tradeoff for the satisfaction his new job affords: seeing students arrive at TSTC with rudimentary skills and graduate into well-paying, high-tech jobs at local factories and machine shops.

The ties between the college and area industries – including business officials seated on the campus advisory board – give TSTC-Marshall students another foothold in the job market. The college also has a self-imposed financial incentive to move students into the workforce: A money-back guarantee for graduates who aren't snapped up by local employers. "We're putting our money where our mouth is," says Randy Haley, associate vice president of student learning.

TSTC-Marshall has yet to pay out on that guarantee.

On the recruiting trail

Of course, with any college or program, one key to success is to recruit students who represent a "good fit." That imperative is magnified in CBE, where self-motiva-



"We're putting our money where our mouth is," says Randy Haley, TSTC-Marshall's associate vice president of student learning. He's referring to the college's money-back guarantee for graduates who fail to land jobs – a guarantee his institution has never had to honor.

tion can be critical. At TSTC, it is Wayne Dillon who plays a major role in getting candidates – young, old and in-between – to come to the Marshall campus. Rare is the school official, corporate board member or person on the street who dodges entreaties from the gregarious, mustachioed Dillon about the virtues of TSTC-Marshall and competency-based education – the program he coordinates for the entire TSTC system.

The first week in April found Dillon attending Harrison County Farm City Week – the annual showcase for Future Farmers of America and 4-H members to demonstrate their agricultural proficiency and show their livestock. Dillon is a Farm City Week regular, showing up each year in multiple capacities of judge, confidante, mentor and advocate for TSTC-Marshall, the school where he landed 16 years ago, at the end of a long career with the Kansas City Southern Railroad.

"I recruit heavily here," Dillon said, standing among a dozen grunting hogs in the Marshall City Arena. "You'll see a lot of these kids walking the halls of TSTC."

However, Farm City Week didn't produce Laurence Johnson, the standout recruit whom Dillon persuaded to join the college's very first CBE program – in computer-aided manufacturing – three years ago. Instead, Dillon

found Johnson in a TSTC-Marshall welding course and quickly orchestrated a transfer to the CAM class taught by Nathan Cleveland.

The son of a teacher who insisted that her six children learn to read by age 3, Johnson left east Texas after high school to attend the University of Nevada-Las Vegas. Law school would have been the next stop had all gone according to plan. But Johnson foundered at UNLV, dropped out and wound up in the Army, where he served as a medic. Years later, having endured “some really bad stuff” during his service, Johnson’s re-entry to civilian life brought with it depression and PTSD. Finally, in 2014, at age 39 and still uncertain about where life would take him, Johnson found equilibrium at the college 17 miles from his home in Jefferson.

“TSTC came along at exactly the right time,” he recalls. “Sometimes you go through a funk and you can’t see what is right in front of you ... (and skilled machining) was right in front of me. I just didn’t see it.”

At TSTC-Marshall, Johnson discovered the support system that had eluded him since leaving the military. He credits the faculty for “answering questions for everyone, even if you don’t have a class with them. They not only helped me with learning, they were counselors.”

A “voracious reader” partial to tomes about economics, Greek history and mythology, the self-taught Johnson says he loves “learning things that don’t come easy.” Like Miriam Blackman, he seemed almost destined to excel in self-directed competency-based education. Johnson cruised through CBE, only to encounter a setback when an early job offer was not commensurate with his TSTC training.

“I didn’t want to run a saw,” he says of the entry-level position. “But then I remembered what (Cleveland) told me about getting your foot in the door.”

Johnson didn’t operate the saw for long. Hawk Fabrication of Jefferson quickly recognized the adaptability of the new employee and elevated Johnson into positions that matched his skill set.

The bouts of depression and anxiety a thing of the past, Johnson, now 43, earns \$16 an hour as a high-tech machinist. “TSTC taught me I can manage anything,” he says.

Blackman was similarly confident last April as she neared the end of a seven-month sprint through computer-aided machining – a class that was already paying real-world dividends. “I’m able to take the stuff I learn here and apply it directly to our business,” she says. “Using our CNC machine, I can write the code and cut our own parts for equipment we’re working on or pieces we’re fixing. Everything here directly correlates to what I do in our personal business.” ■

Wayne Dillon (center), director of TSTC-Marshall’s design manufacturing and transportation division, is heavily involved in recruiting students for the college’s CBE programs. Here, during Harrison County Farm City Week, he talks with Marshall High School agriculture teacher Trey Hilton (left) and Garrett French, a sophomore at Harleton High School.







Amy Archuleta of Salt Lake City, Utah, long had two unrealized life goals: to earn her bachelor's degree and open her own business. Thanks to the competency-based program in business administration at Westminster College, she's now achieved both. As the owner of a new skin-care salon, "I don't have to study anyone else's business," she says. "I can apply what I'm learning to my own."



Westminster College taps into students' entrepreneurial ambitions

SALT LAKE CITY, Utah —
When you hear “Westminster,”
you’re likely to think of the
historic London abbey ...
maybe that prestigious dog
show in Madison Square
Garden – certainly not a
private, liberal arts college
in northern Utah.

Yet, in its own way,
Westminster College is
making a name for itself –
and not just because its

proximity to world-class winter sports training facilities makes it a top college choice among Olympic athletes and hopefuls. The college, with a total enrollment just shy of 2,700, is also the only secular, private four-year postsecondary institution in Utah. (Brigham Young University is affiliated with the Church of Latter-day Saints).

The way Westminster is really setting itself apart, though, is by quietly carving out a reputation as a trailblazer in serving adult students. It's doing that by focusing on competency-based education (CBE), an approach in which students learn, not by earning credit hours in traditional courses, but by completing practical projects and demonstrating specific learning outcomes.

"This is a trend in higher education," says James Hedges, director of innovative learning and the architect of the college's CBE program when it was introduced in 2008. "It is going to accommodate the changing demographics in higher education. And if we want to be successful, we need to be adaptive to that landscape. I could not, moving forward, endorse anything more than this type of learning."

That endorsement is shared by Westminster business major Amy Archuleta, a mid-life student whose academic odyssey was cut short by motherhood, divorce and the unexpected success of an entrepreneurial venture.

A Utah native, Archuleta once envisioned a bachelor's degree as the first step toward a life of luxury in a Manhattan penthouse. But it didn't quite turn out that way. By age 21, she had a husband, two young children and a home far from the bright lights of Broadway. Along the way, she parlayed an associate degree into a position

managing a health clinic. However, her formal education stalled the day she left Salt Lake Community College.

It was at the clinic, after the marriage ended, that Archuleta – a single mother trying to make ends meet – met Mark Cacciamani, an idealistic family-practice physician looking to do more than treat sore throats and other minor maladies.

The doctor and the office manager began to date, married and then became partners in a business venture that reshaped a time-honored medical tradition to fit the 21st century. The venture – House Call Doctors – flourished through word of mouth. "We never had to advertise," says Archuleta. "I knew the back end of the industry; he knew how to be a doctor. It worked out great."

Dusting off a dream

In fact, it worked out so well that, 10 years later, House Call Doctors attracted a suitor willing to pay Archuleta and Cacciamani a hefty price for the business. The couple agonized long and hard before turning down the offer. But that process moved Archuleta to act on a pair of deferred dreams: starting a business of her own, and completing college – a task that was disrupted by early marriage and motherhood.

"I always knew I wanted to continue my education," Archuleta says. "I guess more than anything I wanted the credentials after my name – something that said I am certified, that I'm good at what I do."

With her two children from the first marriage in their

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Dax Jacobson, an associate professor of management who directs Westminster's competency-based programs, highlights the telling difference between traditional business students and those in CBE programs: "Instead of sitting in class, the CBE students are doing it on their own."



James Hedges, director of innovative learning at Westminster, created the college's CBE program when it was introduced in 2008. He's a committed advocate for competency-based programs, which he says can "accommodate the changing demographics in higher education." He adds: "I could not, moving forward, endorse anything more than this type of learning."

Lisa Gentile, Westminster's provost, sees competency-based programs as much more than a way to improve the logistics of higher education. "To me, it's a social justice issue," she says. "I believe anyone who wants an education should have one. And (CBE) helps to make that possible."



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20s, the son born to Archuleta and Cacciamani no longer requiring constant care, and the decision on House Call Doctors behind them, Archuleta concluded: "Now is the time for me to go back to school."

To meet that objective, Archuleta sought a four-year degree program that fit her needs. In other words, it had to accommodate the busy schedule of a small business owner and 43-year-old mother with zero interest in "a traditional school setting where I'd be sitting in a classroom with a bunch of 20-year-olds."

The search ended on the 32-acre Westminster campus in Sugar House – a neighborhood of single-family homes and funky boutiques 10 minutes south of Temple Square in downtown Salt Lake City.

The competency-based Bachelor of Business Administration program appealed to Archuleta, in part, because it included a prior learning assessment – a detailed review of what she had learned through her business experience. This put her on a fast track toward a degree, sparing her from the baggage of mandatory preparatory classwork.

The program Archuleta entered in August 2016 had changed significantly since 2008, when Westminster introduced competency-based education in a certificate program in leadership. The school has since added the bachelor's degree in business administration, a four-year nursing degree and graduate degrees in business administration and strategic communication.

Provost Lisa Gentile says Westminster's commitment to a self-directed, competency-based pathway is about far more

than increasing enrollment or making schedules more flexible.

"To me, it's a social justice issue," Gentile said in a May interview in her Bamberger Hall office. "I believe anyone who wants an education should have one. And (CBE) helps to make that possible."

In competency-based education, students earn their credentials – from certification to baccalaureate degrees – by completing "sequence projects," a variant of conventional independent study.

"The learning objectives (for CBE students and students in comparable traditional online and classroom courses) are the same," says Dax Jacobson, an associate professor of management who serves as the college's director of competency-based programs. "But instead of sitting in class, the CBE students are doing it on their own."

Associate Professor Curtis Newbold typically works with students between age 30 and 35 in the Master of Strategic Communication degree program. "These are smart, ambitious people with full careers," he says.

Strategic Communication differs in some ways from competency-based programs in areas of study that tend to be more prescriptive or tightly focused, such as nursing or business. Hedges says Westminster's communication program is consistent with the liberal arts reputation that the college has earned over its 142-year history.

"Liberal arts is about critical thinking and teamwork – as is CBE," Hedges points out. "What better place is there to combine the two than in communications?"



Spa owner Amy Archuleta says she was attracted to the Westminster program because it fit well with her busy schedule as a small business owner and mother. She also admits that, at age 43, she had no interest in entering "a traditional school setting where I'd be sitting in a classroom with a bunch of 20-year-olds."

Customized courses

As an established communications professional in Baltimore and Vermont, Utah native Melissa Brooke could have leveraged past experience into a well-paying job after she and her family returned to the Salt Lake Valley four years ago. Brooke, 50, who came back to the area with her physician husband and two school-age children, kept a toe in marketing through part-time and voluntary positions in her new home in Park City, the skiing mecca that plays host each year to the famed Sundance Film Festival. Still, she recognized that, in a field perpetually transformed by technology, even a brief layoff could jeopardize her effort to regain full-time employment.

For Brooke, the Westminster “customized” learning model hit every item on the priority list.

A collaborative effort – the first of several “sequence projects” – heralded Brooke’s return to higher education.

Student teams in the introductory project are steered toward nonprofits, such as a recent one that dispatched a

team of communications students to devise a marketing strategy for immigrants seeking a foothold in Salt Lake City’s dining and food truck scene. In another such project, Brooke and two teammates were tasked with raising the profile of a small research office on the Westminster campus – the little-known, two-person Great Salt Lake Institute.

No one questioned the institute’s expertise on matters such as the “microbial composition of (Great Salt Lake) stromatolites, and lake microbial mercury methylation.” But in terms of public outreach, the institute did little beyond issuing position papers and guiding high school and college students’ field trips to the famous lake.

Brooke brought a “tenured perspective” to a team that spent the summer developing strategies to build awareness of an office and its researchers – a quirky pair who often wear pelican-billed baseball caps as a tribute to that Great Salt Lake migratory bird.

Rechristening the institute became the top priority of Brooke and her colleagues. They struggled to find a



marketable moniker for an academic institute committed to esoteric analyses of a body of water that Brooke says locals often dismiss as a “dead, stinky lake.”

The challenge proved daunting. But after several weeks, Brooke and her team came up with a new name, which institute officials are considering and may unveil in April as part of the institute’s 10th anniversary celebration.

With the rebranding project completed, Brooke turned to the next step in earning her degree: a series of individualized tasks that build toward a capstone – a project designed to enhance a student’s workplace or, in the case of an entrepreneur, his or her own business.

“My friends always ask, ‘Why are you going back to school at your age and with your level of experience?’” says Brooke, who enrolled in the Westminster master’s program in January. “I tell them, ‘It’s a great way to really sharpen your skills and rethink where you’re headed.’ I’m trying to essentially rebrand myself, refresh my career and open up a new chapter. The competency-based program is the perfect way to do that.”


Discipline is required

For all of the benefits that CBE affords, Westminster officials emphasize that the model isn’t for everyone.

“You have to take ownership,” notes Ryan Lewis, director of Graduate and Adult Program Services. “That takes a certain amount of discipline.”

Gentile says the competency-based programs hold a special appeal for females in Utah, a state where the post-secondary education of many young women lapses when they leave for two years of service as Mormon missionaries and often return to marriage and motherhood. For working mothers, competency-based education offers a practical solution to squeezing college-level studies into an already-packed calendar.

Flexibility definitely influenced Amy Archuleta’s decision to enroll in Westminster’s program. The payoff came in course work that repeatedly introduced her to terminology and practices she could apply to the launch of her new business – Spa Trouvée on 9th, an upscale salon



Melissa Brooke, 50, was already an experienced marketing professional when she enrolled in Westminster’s Master of Strategic Communication program. “I’m trying to essentially rebrand myself, refresh my career and open up a new chapter,” she explains. “The competency-based program is the perfect way to do that.”

providing medically approved skin-care enhancement. Her lessons in marketing helped Archuleta identify a prime location at the edge of Central City, prepare the direct-mail coupons that brought scores of customers to the store during its opening week, and even devise the shop's interior design.

The knowledge gained in her studies also came into play when a bank official referenced an "opportunities and threats" clause in the loan application. Archuleta says she didn't have to pay an attorney to define the clause (a standard analysis of strengths and weaknesses found in business contracts), explaining: "I already knew what it was because I'd learned about it" through her degree work. "I don't have to study anyone else's business," she adds. "I can apply what I'm learning to my own."

Archuleta's educational experience – hands-on, practical and applicable – illustrates a fundamental strength of competency-based education, a learning model that Westminster officials consider vital as higher education shifts to better serve adult students. As Ryan Lewis says: "CBE helps you to learn in a way that the real world works."

Westminster's program, though flexibly paced, does adhere to a traditional semester timeline. However, rather than earning traditional grades for their work, students' projects are judged according to three basic standards:

- *Does Not Meet Expectations.*
- *Meets Expectations.*
- *Exceeds Expectations.*

The goal is for students to keep working at a project until they reach mastery – "until they (fully understand) the concept they're trying to learn," Lewis explains.

That philosophy gets two thumbs up from Emily Quinn, a second-year student in the Master of Strategic Communication program.

"Most of the time when you fail in school, you move on and forget about it," says Quinn. "But if a (CBE project) doesn't work, you just keep working on it. It's like real life."

The push for excellence – coupled with the personal attention afforded each CBE student – does come at a cost.

"It is not a cheap model of education," admits Gentile, the provost of a school with an average annual price tag a little north of \$40,000. "It is not one-curriculum-fits-all. It is very labor-intensive, and figuring out the teaching loads is still a lot of work."

Lewis, who moved into his current position in 2015 after 18 years as a Westminster IT specialist, believes the return on investment in the program makes it worth every penny for students. "We wanted an individualized online model that guaranteed they wouldn't get lost in the crowd," he says.

Westminster works hard to prevent that sort of student disappearance – but not with Emily Quinn. No need. She's a young woman who could never be overlooked.

Different ... and determined

As Quinn unabashedly tells the nearly 4 million viewers of her YouTube videos, she is an "intersex" American – part of the estimated 1.7 percent of the population who are born with genetic anomalies that fall outside the traditional binary conception of the male or female body.

As she says in a video filmed last year: "When I told my friends I was making a YouTube channel about intersex issues, they said, like, 'Wow, that takes a lot of balls!' And I was, like, 'Thanks. Good thing, because I've got 'em!'"

As explained by an advocacy group called interACT, the variations that define an intersex individual can be manifested internally or externally and in several different forms, including males born with ovaries and – as is the case with Quinn – females with internal testes. The characteristics are often identified at birth, but determinations made during puberty are fairly common.

The interACT group promotes compassion, understanding and education, and it strongly supports the idea of allowing children with atypical sexual characteristics to make their own decisions about corrective surgery when they are old enough to resolve the question for themselves.

The birth of an intersex child has long been a circumstance addressed quietly within families. In her role as the national youth coordinator for interACT,



Ryan Lewis, Westminster's director of Graduate and Adult Program Services, acknowledges that competency-based education isn't for everyone. "You have to take ownership," he says. "That takes a certain amount of discipline."



Emily Quinn, a second-year student in the Master of Strategic Communication program at Westminister, spends much of her time on the road, speaking on behalf of interACT, an advocacy group for intersex individuals.

Quinn travels the country to push the discussion out of living rooms and into the public spotlight. And to help her do that, she turned to the Westminister graduate program in strategic communication.

Quinn's first conversation with another intersex person didn't occur until she was 24 and living in Los Angeles, having parlayed an undergraduate degree in animation into a job with the Cartoon Network. When she consulted on a project to introduce an intersex character in a MTV production, she decided to go all in and become a full-time advocate.

"I knew animation," Quinn recalls. "But I didn't know much about management and marketing."

For her, the Westminister program had two things going for it. First, it's flexibly paced, so it "fit the lifestyle" of someone who travels around the country delivering interACT talks and conducting counseling sessions. (Quinn relocated to Rhode Island this summer to be closer to the organization's headquarters in Sudbury, Mass.) Second, there's a personal connection: Quinn's father, Chris, is a professor in – and chairman of – the university's music department.

Her capstone project is both near and dear – personal and professional.

"I'm self-branding," Quinn says, poking fun at herself. "I chose myself as a client." Turning serious, Quinn says she views her studies as a practical pathway for her to address a deeply personal issue.

"It's emotional," she admits. "But the only way (intersex advocacy) will work is by addressing it strategically. I'm learning to tell stories for a marginalized community."

As competency-based education nears its second

decade on the Westminister campus, Director Hedges is steering the program through the first of what he foresees as multiple partnerships with the private sector.

"One of my jobs is to now go to companies to ask: 'What do you need?'" says Hedges.

The Discover partnership

Discover Financial Services was among the first to respond to that question, asking Hedges to submit a proposal for a company-college alliance. First, the firm spelled out what it didn't want: a traditional, company-subsidized tuition-reimbursement program that would pay for college credits earned in a general business program. What it *did* want was a customized undergraduate degree program in business administration that would help its employees meet specific needs at Discover operations in Salt Lake City.

"As long as the numbers work, we'll make it work," Hedges promised. And the numbers came together.

Next spring, the first cohort of Discover employees – 18 students – will complete their basic education requirements through Salt Lake Community College and begin competency-based studies with the Westminister business faculty. Discover has already converted two conference rooms in its Salt Lake City facility into classrooms.

To Hedges, the Westminister-Discover partnership is but another window into the unlimited potential of competency-based education – a trend that he calls "absolutely the most rewarding educational experience I've been a part of." ■

UW-Milwaukee 'Flex' program helps nursing students chart career success

BOULDER JUNCTION, Wis. —
Linda Thayer's goal was clear: She knew she needed a BSN — a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing — to advance in her career. The prospect of extra work didn't scare her a bit. For one thing, Thayer had already upgraded her credentials 10 years earlier — making countless hour-long trips to the nearest





Nurse Linda Thayer took less than six months to earn her bachelor's degree in UW-Milwaukee's Flex program. Flex fit Thayer's busy lifestyle and made it possible for her to pursue her education without leaving her rural hometown.

community college for the courses she needed to make the transition from dental hygienist to nurse. For another, she was no kid. At age 52, she'd already spent a decade juggling multiple responsibilities: working full time as a licensed practical nurse in a dialysis clinic, acting as caregiver for an aging parent, all while serving as commander of her town's volunteer ambulance service.

No, Linda Thayer wasn't intimidated. She knew where she needed to be. Her problem – quite literally – was how to get from here to there.

For Thayer, "here" is Boulder Junction (population 932) ... a popular fishing spot in the lake country of far-northern Wisconsin ... the self-proclaimed "musky capital of the world" ... a zero-stoplight town 22 miles from the nearest McDonald's ... a rural outpost where, as Thayer deadpans, "educational opportunities are somewhat limited."

Don't misunderstand. Thayer loves living in Boulder Junction, a lakeside town that bustles with tourists in summer and basks in rural tranquility the rest of the year. But a mecca of higher education it is not. The nearest

state-supported brick-and-mortar institution offering a BSN, the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, is 180 miles southeast – not a viable option, given Thayer's other responsibilities. Nor was she inclined to pursue a BSN through traditional online course work. What Thayer needed was a self-directed program that allowed her to stay close to home.

She found it in the University of Wisconsin's Flexible Option, an innovative, competency-based education (CBE) program that was forged five years ago in the offices of UW-Extension – the arm of UW system that focuses on continuing education and on research and business outreach.

In 2012, UW-Extension Dean David Schejbal, handed his boss, the chancellor, a white paper outlining the CBE model. Schejbal knew the idea was a bit radical. In fact, he knew that the program, if implemented, would be the first of its kind at a publicly funded university.

The response, then, wasn't a total surprise. "This is crazy," exclaimed the chancellor, who's now in another leadership position in the UW system. Schejbal persevered, urging a closer read – a second look that resulted in what Schejbal called "a 180-degree reversal."

"He wasn't just open to the idea," Schejbal recalls. "He became a champion."

In late summer of 2012, Aaron Brower was brought in as UW-Extension's provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs. Together, he and Schejbal began stitching together the program that evolved into the UW Flexible Option.

A unique opportunity

The evolution of "Flex" was not without a few hiccups.

Harboring misgivings about MOOCs – Massive Open Online Courses, as popularized by Stanford University and MIT – and the negative publicity attached to for-profit colleges and universities, the Wisconsin Board of Regents moved slowly to adopt the proposal detailed in Schejbal's white paper. And the author understood the board's uncertainty.

"It wasn't just that there was nothing like it in Wisconsin," Schejbal recalls. "There was nothing like it across the country."

The Board of Regents ultimately signed off on Flex, but not before securing assurances that the program would not, as Brower put it, "wreck the UW brand." With the blessing of the board in 2013, Brower and the extension team began pitching the competency-based option to UW campuses statewide. UW-Milwaukee and the system's 14 community colleges signed on.

In the Flexible Option, the administrators in Milwaukee saw an opportunity to add a personalized distance learning structure to its BSN program – a move designed to appeal to working adults such as Linda Thayer.

Unlike a traditional baccalaureate program – which would've awarded Thayer academic credit *only* for the courses documented on her community college transcript – the Flex program seeks to credit learning more broadly.



Aaron Brower is UW-Extension's provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs. Five years ago, he and UW-Extension Dean David Schejbal worked together to create the Flex program, which Brower then pitched to UW campuses throughout the state. Flex is now offered at UW-Milwaukee and 14 community colleges.

This effort starts when students apply for admission, through a process called prior learning assessment. Flex administrators pre-screen applicants to gauge the learning – the competencies – that students have accumulated in the classroom, workplace and life itself. Those proficiencies are then integrated into individualized learning protocols – personalized plans that allow qualified Flex students to skip what would otherwise be “required courses” and work toward a degree at a self-directed pace, not one dictated by the

traditional academic calendar.

The program seeks to serve the approximately 1 million Wisconsin residents who have earned some college credits but fallen short of a degree.

“For them, Flex is perfect,” says Mark Mone, chancellor at UW-Milwaukee, which serves 27,000 students on a campus just blocks from the Lake Michigan shoreline.

Laura Pedrick, special assistant to the provost and executive director of UW-Milwaukee Online, agrees that pre-enrollment assessment of prior learning eliminates



Linda Thayer isn't just a full-time nurse. She's also the primary caregiver for an aging parent and serves as commander of the volunteer ambulance service in the tiny lakeside town of Boulder Junction, Wis. Though she relishes the rural lifestyle, Thayer admits that “educational opportunities are somewhat limited” in her hometown.

redundancy and helps today's students progress more quickly.

"At the end of the day, what is more important, adherence to a traditional model for its own sake, or measuring what students know?" Pedrick asks. "The traditional student straight out of high school is no longer the norm in higher education."

Another Flex innovation is to replace the semester format with "subscription periods" of three months in length. Instead of courses, students master "competency sets" (groups of related learning outcomes and skills), and complete capstone projects and other non-graded academic activities.

Each student in the Flex program has access to a designated UW-Milwaukee instructor. Students also are supported by "academic success coaches" who help them address issues – often non-academic issues – that can hinder their progress.

Flex is also affordable: A three-month subscription for the BSN program at UW-Milwaukee runs \$900 for a single competency set or \$2,250 for the "All You Can Learn" option, which enables students to take as many sets as they are able to master in a single subscription period.

Kim Litwack, dean of the UW-Milwaukee College of Nursing, says there is a correlation between cost and the flexibility of the program.

"This is a different mode of learning," she explains. "(As a faculty member), you are not in the classroom teaching, you are providing resources and structuring."

The perspective of Jim Bumby is enlightening.

Bumby, a UW-Milwaukee nursing instructor, co-teaches a leadership course that is offered both in a classroom setting and in the Flex model. The contrast is clear.

Flex allows "students to develop an assignment and analyze it," Bumby says. "As working nurses, they know how to handle it. Whereas in the classroom, you have to provide a lot of context and feedback."

Nursing program fills a need

UW-Milwaukee's development of the BSN Flex Option followed a 2011 report from the influential Institute of Medicine that recommended that 80 percent of the nation's registered nurses earn a BSN by 2020. A recent study shows that a little over 44 percent of nurses working in Wisconsin have no more than a two-year degree.

Mary Olukotun, a 24-year-old Milwaukee resident who came here from Nigeria with her family at age 9, once fit that profile.

Olukotun can't recall a time when she didn't want to be a caregiver. That calling led her to Waukesha County Technical College, where she earned an associate degree in nursing, and then, in 2013, into a full-time job in health care.

It took only two years on the job to prove to Olukotun that she needed a BSN to move her career forward. The UW-Milwaukee Flexible Option "came naturally" to Olukotun, an introverted self-starter who was finding her way at a new and stressful job at a Milwaukee hospital.

Mary Olukotun immigrated from Nigeria with her family when she was just 9 – but even then, she knew she was destined to be a caregiver. In 2013, she earned an associate degree in nursing from a technical college. But just two years after taking a nursing job in a Milwaukee hospital, Olukotun knew she needed a bachelor's degree. The Flex program helped her fill that need in just 16 months.





"Sometimes, a professor can detract from your focus," says Olukotun. "I definitely like setting my own pace. I'm the type of student who likes to go to class prepared, and it's frustrating when you get to class and have to work at the pace of other students who aren't prepared."

Flex allowed Olukotun to earn her bachelor's degree in just 16 months – and she's not finished yet. She is pursuing a Doctor of Nursing Practice degree at UW-Milwaukee, though the graduate program is not yet offered as a flexible option. Her long-term goal is to work in public health as a nurse practitioner specializing in the medical needs of women and children.

The original architect of the Flex program, UW-Extension Dean David Schejbal, says students like Olukotun support the vision he sketched out in his white paper five years ago.

"Like the rest of adults juggling all kinds of personal responsibilities, (Flex students) live in fits and starts," Schjebel says. "So they have to consume education in the same way. The Flex Option offers students the option to start and stop when life gets in the way."

The philosophy is ideal in a program whose students

are older (average age 34), predominantly female (57 percent) and overwhelmingly working full-time jobs and raising families.

One such student is Beth Haftoglou, a 38-year-old Madison native.

As a young woman, Haftoglou thought she had it all figured out. After high school, she left her hometown to study at the University of South Carolina. Four years later, bachelor's degree in biology in hand, Haftoglou returned to Madison, tacked a two-year nursing degree onto her resumé and took a nursing job at William S. Middleton Memorial Veterans Hospital.

The years passed. Haftoglou married and started a family, and it became increasingly clear that, "if I wanted to make any progress in nursing, I needed the BSN." She and her husband decided to postpone the addition of a second child until she got it.

The search for a suitable program led Haftoglou to Flex, an opportunity that "made sense" for a working mother who likes to "get things done quickly. I'm very Type A. I can get (an assignment) done in a week if I want to."



Laura Pedrick (left), special assistant to the provost and executive director of UW-Milwaukee Online, meets with Lisa Muhlbauer, who directs the school's RN-to-BSN programs. Pedrick voices the defining question for competency-based programs: "What is more important, adherence to a traditional model for its own sake, or measuring what students know?"

Beth Haftoglou, 38, chose the UW-Milwaukee Flex Option as her route to a bachelor's in nursing. She planned to finish the program in a year, but her timeframe stretched to 26 months, thanks in part to illness associated with her pregnancy with daughter Penny, now 18 months. During her difficulties, Haftoglou's counselor advised a much-needed break, pointing out: "That's why they call it Flex."



She enrolled in Flex and almost immediately met her match – an unexpected pregnancy complicated by “profound” morning sickness. Struggling with her studies, Haftoglou sought the counsel of an academic success coach who advised her to take a temporary break. “That’s why they call it Flex,” the coach reminded her.

Haftoglou entered the program intending to finish in less than a year, and the time line ultimately stretched to 26 months, thanks to the obligations imposed by two small children and a full-time job. She earned her BSN in April. But were it not for the Flexible Option, morning sickness would have likely derailed her at the outset.

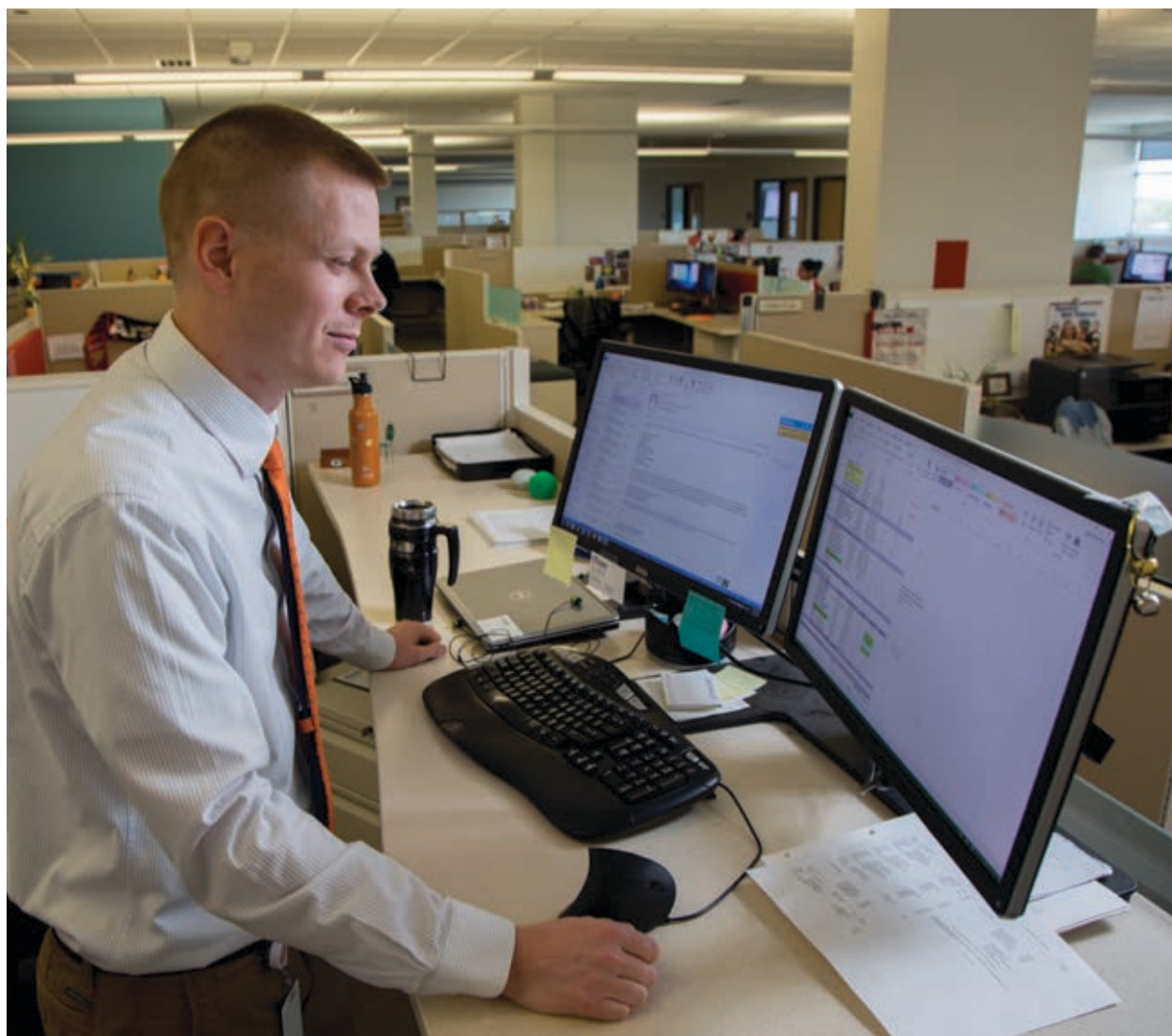
“I don’t think I could have done it in a structured program,” says Haftoglou. “(Flex gave me) control of my own destiny; I created my own path. And because the program is so flexible, I didn’t have to stop the momentum.”

The coach Haftoglou turned to when faced with a barrier is one of the things that sets Flex apart from traditional online learning. The Flex program features

seven such coaches – three assigned to the nursing program and four others who aid students in UW-Milwaukee Flexible Option programs that confer bachelor’s degrees in information science and in diagnostic imaging.

Blake Bishop is one of the three academic success coaches assigned to work with BSN candidates. (The coach who advised Haftoglou has since left the program.) A marketing major who made an early-career switch to student services, Bishop on most days acts as a quick-fix intermediary to help students navigate the IT department, the library and other non-academic resources at UW-Milwaukee. But he also has been summoned to address family unrest, the death of a spouse and other matters that typically fall outside a university’s purview.

“Sometimes I feel like a traffic cop, sometimes I feel like a therapist,” Bishop says. “And sometimes I feel like a project manager because every single day is so different.”



Student Services staff member Blake Bishop one of the three academic success coaches assigned to work with BSN candidates. “Sometimes I feel like a traffic cop, sometimes I feel like a therapist, and sometimes I feel like a project manager,” Bishop says. “Every single day is so different.”

Flexing his way to Google

Jamie Dear was living in Seattle with his wife and a newborn when Flex surfaced in his search for a bachelor's program that would allow him to upgrade his associate degree in business.

Dear, whose wife is a Milwaukee-area native, says the combination of UW-Milwaukee and competency-based education represented "the perfect mix of flexibility and the strength of name." In less than a year, he emerged from the program with a bachelor's in Information Science and Technology Business.

"It was a difficult ten months, for sure," Dear recalls. "But I didn't have to follow a schedule telling me it was time to take a summer break, a spring break or a winter break. I just moved right through it."

Dear and his family have since relocated to northern California, a move prompted by the opportunity to join a Google training program. Dear, 26, says that prestigious opportunity materialized, in part, because Google officials recognized the self-discipline required to complete the UW-Flexible Option.

For all of its early success, Flex has experienced growing pains. It's not easy to align a direct-assessment, project-driven, self-paced educational model with a traditional system organized around semesters and grade-point averages. In fact, Pedrick likens the restructuring of student information, financial aid, learning management and other internal systems to "the moon launch of higher education." She adds: "(CBE) is designed to be much more flexible and to move us away from those traditional ways of doing things."

For instance, although the higher education community is acquainted with quantitative measurements, UW-Milwaukee had to adjust its systems significantly to make an essay-focused, direct-assessment model compatible with the traditional means of measuring student progress. Elimination of computer-graded exams also increased the work load for Flex instructors.

Some, like Bumby, took it in stride.

"I'm fortunate. I can speed read and that really helps," says the co-instructor of the leadership course who combines teaching with his own work toward a Ph.D. in nursing. "I like the convenience because I can get a lot of work done on my own time."

Litwack, the dean, says the nursing school now makes it clear to prospective faculty that Flex "runs seven days a week, 24 hours a day. There is no winter break, no spring break, no summer break."

UW-Milwaukee and UW-Extension officials underscore the fact that Flex, as a relatively new program, is a work in progress. They're committed to ongoing evaluation and improvement of the program, particularly in light of questions that the U.S. Department of Education has recently raised about competency-based education in general.

For instance, a 2016 memo from the department warned: "Institutions offering (CBE) programs must ensure that regular and substantive interaction (between students and faculty) is occurring ... at the risk of being labeled a correspondence course."



Jim Bumby, a UW-Milwaukee nursing instructor, co-teaches a leadership course that is offered both in a classroom setting and in the Flex model. He says Flex allows "students to develop (an) assignment and analyze it. ... In the (traditional) classroom, you have to provide a lot of context and feedback."

UW-Milwaukee responded to the memo by requiring each Flex student to submit a monthly progress report to his or her assigned instructor. In addition, the nursing school has commissioned a report that analyzes the performance of Flex students and compares it to that of UW-Milwaukee students enrolled in similar online courses that are not connected to Flex.

The study, yet to be peer reviewed, found Flex nursing students during the first two years of the program scored slightly higher on core competencies than the students taking similar, non-Flex courses.

"Taken on the whole, these findings do not support the idea that non-term, direct assessment programs are categorically of lower quality when compared to more traditional programs," the study's authors wrote. "Indeed, these findings suggest that programs such as the UW Flexible Option that have deeply incorporated robust assessment strategies and high-quality student support may serve their students as well or better than those in other teaching environments."

Still, no study was needed to convince Beth Haftoglou, Mary Olukotun, Jamie Dear and Linda Thayer that Flex was right for them.

For her part, Thayer enrolled in the UW Flexible Option last November, adding it to her duties as a dialysis clinic nurse, caregiver and head of the town ambulance squad. In April, not six months after enrolling, she completed the program and earned her BSN. UW officials call it the fastest turnaround in the Flex program's three-year history.

Thayer took the accomplishment in stride.

"Once I decide to do something, I do it," she says. "They weren't so sure I could get it done so quickly... but they believe it now." ■



Lumina Foundation
P.O. Box 1806
Indianapolis, IN 46206-1806
www.luminafoundation.org

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Writing: Steve Giegerich • Editing: David S. Powell • Editorial assistance: Ruth Holladay
Photography: Shawn Spence Photography • Design: IronGate Creative • Printing: Think Patented