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UNITED STATES  
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August 18, 2014

The Honorable Arne Duncan  
Secretary, U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue SW  
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Duncan:

I am writing in support of expediting the University of Wisconsin's (UW) direct-assessment application to the U.S. Department of Education for Federal Title IV aid.

In March 2013, the Department endorsed competency-based education, which was referred to as "a key step forward in expanding access to affordable higher education." In August 2013 President Obama spoke about making college more affordable for middle-class families through innovations such as the UW Flexible Option. Despite endorsements and adherence to Department of Education guidelines, UW has been delayed in moving forward with its UW Flexible Option program. UW's valuable competency based education programs have been used as an exemplary model across the country. In order to ensure that UW's outstanding program is available to students pursuing higher education, I ask that you take necessary steps to process their application expeditiously.

Since January 2014 the UW has worked with the Department of Education on its application to award financial aid on the basis of direct-assessment. A timeline detailing interactions between the Department of Education and UW regarding this direct-assessment application is attached for your review. Last week the university received a third round of questions from the Department. While I appreciate that the Department of Education maintains a rigorous system of accountability in order to ensure program integrity for students, many of the questions in the most recent round have previously been addressed by UW. I strongly encourage the Department of Education to process UW's most recent application update expeditiously.

The UW System and its governing board are fully committed to further developing and delivering a competency-based educational model, which is emerging as a strong model for national consideration. The UW Flexible Option is a competency-based approach to higher education delivered through a public university system using the same faculty, assessing students on the same competencies and awarding the same high quality degrees they could earn through traditional classroom or online programs -- but allowing students to progress at their own speed and earn credit for the knowledge they have mastered through previous work and learning experiences. A software developer, for example, recently completed 30 credits in three months toward a Bachelor of Science in Information Science and Technology.

The university continues to enroll students in this and other degree and certificate programs in the UW Flexible Option format. Interest in the first five programs has been even greater than anticipated. Unfortunately, while the Department is processing the submitted application for Federal Title IV aid, the university is unable to provide these students with the same financial aid available to students enrolled in traditional programs. To its credit, the university has reallocated some institutional resources to provide greater access to this innovative education. However, it is essential that the Department take action soon to ensure bold proposals like the UW Flexible Option do not die in their infancy.

Students and the University of Wisconsin await the Department's decision regarding Federal Title IV financial aid eligibility, which by law, the Secretary can provide to institutions. I thank you for your past support and respectfully request that you take any steps necessary to expeditiously review UW's application so that they can continue offering their innovative programs to students in need of financial assistance.

Sincerely,

Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress