

# THE EVOLUTION OF DISTANCE LEARNING



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# Introducing the New Learning Experience

Education is at an inflection point. We are facing major challenges. Among them is the skill mismatch. There are 75 million young people who are unemployed or underemployed, yet 57% of employers in the US report that they can't find qualified applicants. At the same time, the profile of your average student has changed drastically—she is no longer the 18-22 year old living on-campus. The roots of our higher education system were developed during an entirely different era – serving a less broad constituency with a less complex set of necessary outcomes and fewer consumer-oriented expectations.

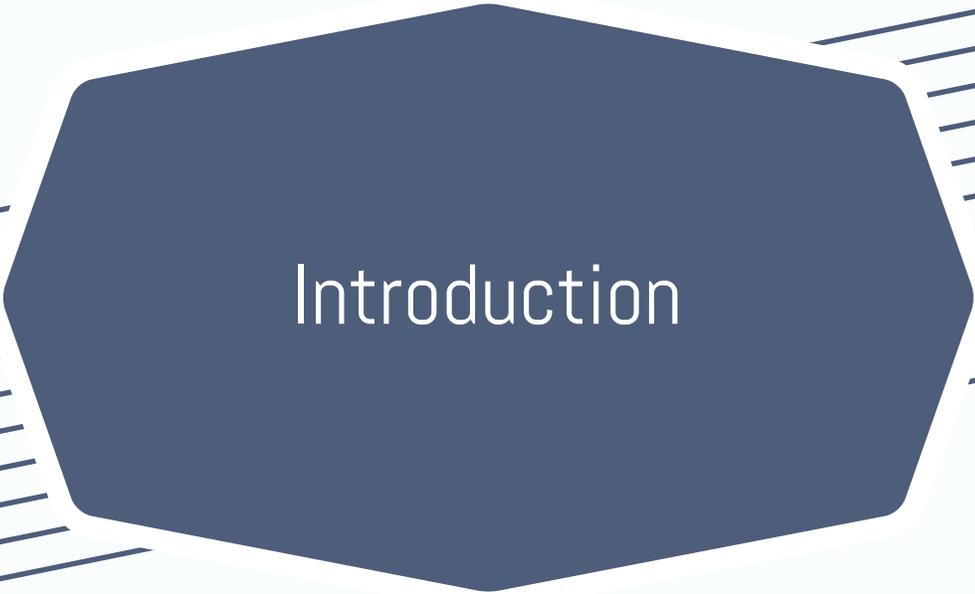
Let's pause for a minute to think about who this new learner is, and how we can better serve them. At Blackboard, we have an unmatched footprint in educational technology and therefore, our lens is broader than any other company's. What we see across K-12 communities, higher education institutions and the governments and corporations with whom we partner every day is a true shift in the role of the learner.

Students today take more ownership over their learning than ever before. We're finding that they are eager for real-world application of their learning at every level, they are viewing their time as a commodity and carefully spending it on what matters the most, and, with this, they are evaluating their overall ROI on education. This means that today's student is not afraid to switch institutions at a moment's notice. **But what we also see is the immense stress these shifts are putting on the institutions that serve the new learner.**

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Because the focus on the success of learners and the institutions that support them is so central to effect change in education, we have developed a new approach to how we build and design—it's called the New Learning Experience. Based on feedback from over 5,000 students, educators, and IT leaders, we have re-engineered our entire portfolio to meet the needs of the learner and to help you facilitate more engaged learning. This approach is predicated on the belief that technology can make a difference and, when planned and built on meeting the needs of the evolving learner, it can be a powerful differentiator for your institution.

Sincerely,  
Katie Blot  
Senior Vice President, Corporate Strategy and Industry Relations  
Blackboard, Inc



# Introduction

Distance learning has gone from novel to normal. Students are enrolling online in record numbers, and in a broad range of programs. Many students enrolled in traditional campus settings are also taking online or hybrid courses.

Yet online education is changing dramatically. Even as much of the hype about MOOCs ended up being just hype, MOOCs proved some of the educational and business models for new approaches to online education. Online programs are also evolving to target both macro and micro communities of students, and are turning up at every kind of college. These programs create demands for thinking about teaching, learning and the economics of higher education in new ways.

The news articles in this compilation explore some of the new trends and strategies being used in higher education today as a new generation of distance learning programs is created and evolves. *Inside Higher Ed* will continue to cover these issues, and welcomes your thoughts on this compilation and topics for additional reporting.

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## Distance Ed Myths Debunked

By Carl Straumsheim

Do you think most fully online students are enrolled at for-profit institutions? Read on.

**I**n fall 2013, one in every eight students enrolled at colleges and universities in the U.S. studied exclusively online. One in every four students took at least one online course.

Those and other findings, released in March 2015 in a three-part analysis by the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET), suggest distance education is more pervasive in higher education than previously imagined, and may help debunk some of the common myths surrounding the medium. While other reports have noted that distance education in fall 2013 posted its smallest year-over-year enrollment increase in more than a decade, a peek at the underlying numbers reveals shifting balances of power and examples of institutional success.

“The fact is when you look at the

overall data, there is no significant growth, but when you look at the sectors, there are stories there,” said Terri Taylor Straut, a veteran of the distance education industry who conducted the analysis for WCET.

The organization, a part of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, helps member institutions improve their online education programs.

Straut looked at data captured by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, or IPEDS, the federal government’s higher education data collection program. The government first began asking colleges and universities about students enrolled in distance education courses in fall 2012, making the fall 2013 data the first point of comparison researchers can use to piece together trends from year-over-year numbers.

“The thing that remains constant between the data last year and the data this year is while there’s this perception that for-profits are out to take over this whole marketplace, it’s just not true,” Straut said. Most of the fully online students, she said, are enrolling at their local public two- or four-year institutions.

In fact, the 856,933 students studying exclusively online at for-profit institutions in fall 2013 represented less than one-third, or 32 percent, of that entire group. Public institutions enrolled nearly half, or 48 percent, of the students taking all of their courses online.

Based on how the sectors grew and shrank from 2012 to 2013, public institutions could soon enroll half of all the students studying exclusively online. According to the analysis, for-profit enrollments fell by 8.3 percent year over year, while enrollments at public and private nonprofit institutions grew by 2.4 percent and 8.9 percent, respectively. At 0.2 percent, the overall growth in distance education enrollments masks those shifts.

Out of curiosity, the researchers singled out two nonprofit institutions -- Arizona State University and Southern New Hampshire University -- whose billboards and advertisements have become common sights along highways or on television. Those campaigns appear to have paid off. From 2012 to 2013, SNHU’s online enrollments

Distance Education Enrollment Changes, 2012 to 2013

|                     | Fall 2013 | Fall 2012 | % Change |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Public              | 1,281,880 | 1,251,398 | 2.4      |
| Private, non-profit | 520,390   | 473,941   | 8.9      |
| Private, for-profit | 856,933   | 928,087   | -8.3     |
| Total               | 2,659,203 | 2,653,426 | 0.2      |

grew from 10,679 to 20,701 -- an increase of 94 percent. ASU also saw a bump of 34 percent.

"I'd love to know at what cost," Straut said. "Billboards cost money, and TV ads cost money."

Straut suggested that the media's focus on the for-profit sector of higher education may have created a false impression that most students pursuing an education online enroll at those institutions. "Over the last 20 years, there's been a whole lot of hype, but the fact is, learners are going to look nearby before they decide they're going to spend their money or use [federal financial aid] at a fully online program far away," she said.

The same is true for international students, according to the analysis. While massive open online courses have found a market in students

outside the U.S. willing to pay for credentials that complement their education, colleges and universities reported they only enrolled about 26,600 international students in fully online programs in fall 2013 -- about 1 percent of the 2.6 million students enrolled in such programs.

Russell Poulin, WCET's director of policy and analysis, said the numbers -- and conversations he has had with educators based at institutions outside the U.S. -- indicate that skepticism about fully online education is not a uniquely American phenomenon.

"It is surprising that with all the talk about the ability that we could go out and enroll all these students... traditional distance education from U.S. colleges has made less of an impact in the international market than one would think it would be

capable of doing," Poulin said. "The idea of a fully distance course -- never mind a program -- is still something that has not gained full acceptance yet."

Poulin and Straut acknowledged that data-reporting issues could still be causing some anomalies, and that the numbers from 2012 provide "a shaky base for comparison." In 2014, researchers found that some institutions were under- or overreporting several thousands of students to the federal government. Poulin said the data are "probably picking up the bulk of the trends."

In an apparent improvement from the 2012 data, for example, about half as many public institutions in 2013 reported that they didn't know where their fully online students resided. But there were also confusing examples of institutions that in 2012 knew where their distance education students were located and in 2013 moved them into the "unknown" category, Straut said.

"The systems haven't caught up with the reporting requirements," Straut said. "People don't like to talk about that, because they want to believe that it's good data." ●

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## MOOCs for (a Year's) Credit

By Carl Straumsheim

Arizona State U, in partnership with edX, will award a freshman year's worth of academic credit through massive open online courses.

**A**rizona State University, in partnership with edX, this fall will begin to offer credit-bearing massive open online courses at a fraction of the cost of either in-person or traditional online education.

ASU's faculty members will create about a dozen general-education MOOCs, the first of which -- an introductory astronomy course -- were due to launch in August 2015. Anyone can register for and take the MOOCs for free, but those who pay a \$45 fee to verify their identity can at the end of each course decide if they want to pay the university a separate, larger fee to earn academic credit for their work.

By fall 2016, ASU anticipates it will offer enough MOOCs so that students can complete their entire freshman year online through what edX and the university are calling

the Global Freshman Academy.

After completing the courses, students can receive a transcript from ASU showing that they have earned enough credits at the university to transfer to a different program or institution as sophomores. Since the university stresses the MOOCs are just a new form of delivering courses it already offers, the transcripts won't specify which type of course -- in-person, online or massive online -- students enrolled in to earn the credit.

"What this does is it really opens up new pathways for all students, no matter where they are in the world," edX CEO Anant Agarwal said in an interview. "There are no admissions requirements -- no SAT scores, no GPAs, no recommendation letters."

Those students could be in high school, knocking out a handful of

general-education requirements before setting foot on campus, Agarwal suggested. They could be future international students in the U.S. Or they could be students who considered going to a community college to complete core requirements but preferred taking the courses online.

Performing well in the Global Freshman Academy, Agarwal said, could be a gateway to a two- or four-year degree. "If a baseball team is able to see how a player will perform in the first innings of a professional baseball game, that is the ultimate test," he said. "You don't have to see how they perform in the minor leagues."

MOOCs have existed almost exclusively outside the credit hour since their major providers were founded in 2012. Video lectures, quizzes and other content initially made for MOOCs may have found their way into for-credit courses, but the full MOOCs themselves have merely complemented, not supplanted, traditional higher education, as some initial predictions envisioned. Many MOOC providers have therefore offered identity-verified certificates for a small fee to increase the perceived value of MOOCs to both learners and potential employers.

The closest example of a MOOC-powered degree program may be Udacity's partnership with the Georgia Institute of Technology on an affordable online master's

degree in computer science. That program, however, is neither massive (the institute admitted 401 students in its first cohort) nor open (it uses the same admissions criteria as the face-to-face program).

Wednesday's announcement, Agarwal said, is edX's response to the two major points of criticism that have dogged MOOCs: that the completion rates are too low, and that the courses mostly benefit learners who have already earned advanced degrees.

"In one fell swoop, we can address all these challenges," Agarwal said. He spoke of an "undercurrent" at edX -- that the MOOC provider is "truly not fulfilling [its] mission until we can break through to credit."

EdX is likely not the only provider of alternative credentials with that goal in mind. Lawmakers have recently increased their push for those providers to have pathways not only to accreditation, but also to federal financial aid.

Agarwal described the Global Freshman Academy as a next logical step for edX, which is discussing similar initiatives with other unnamed institutions. The MOOC provider began with individual courses taught by high-profile faculty members at elite universities, then, as its catalog grew, bundled those courses together into sequences known as XSeries.

"Learners are looking for more and more coherent bodies of learning that span larger and larger amounts of time," Agarwal said. Asked if edX planned to continue in that same direction, perhaps building on the Global Freshman Academy to offer full degrees through MOOCs, Agarwal laughed and again resorted to the baseball metaphor.

"We've just gotten to first base here, and now you're asking me about getting to home plate?" he said.

## ASU's Angle

The Global Freshman Academy adds a third option for students who wish to enroll as freshmen at ASU. In addition to the roughly 10,000 freshmen who attend the university in person, ASU offers certificate and degree programs through its online arm, ASU Online, which enrolls about 13,000 students in total.

Philip Regier, university dean for educational initiatives, said the university is "not worried" that the Global Freshman Academy will result in empty lecture halls or abandoned online forums.

"People always worry about cannibalizing the current population of students," Regier said. "The way we're thinking about it is we're making the whole pie bigger. It's not as though the pie is a fixed size and we're taking larger and larger slices out of it."

The different modalities attract different kinds of students, Regier said. For example, nearly all ASU Online students come to the university with 25 or more credits already completed, meaning they are likely to have already taken courses equivalent to the general-education MOOCs. If it turns out many rising freshmen or ASU Online students choose to take the MOOCs, he said, the university will not discourage them from getting a head start on their studies.

"What we're trying to do is get people who would otherwise not have had access to freshman general-education studies, provide them with that access so they can go on to be successful and graduate," Regier said. "The end goal is graduating educated university students, which this country is increasingly dismal at doing."

ASU is at least undercutting itself on price. The university has agreed to charge students taking the MOOCs no more than \$200 per credit hour. Students at ASU Online, in comparison, pay \$480 to \$543 per credit hour. In other words, earning credit through MOOCs may be less than half as expensive as a traditional online or in-person course.

ASU and edX have yet to finalize details of how they will share tuition revenue, although an eventual agreement may resemble the contracts the MOOC provider

has signed with its other university partners. "I think it's 50-50," Regier said. "The split between ASU and edX won't be dissimilar to that."

Multiplied by tens of thousands of students, that's a lot of tuition revenue. ASU has begun to set some enrollment targets, Regier said, adding that "we would expect maybe 25,000 to enroll in some of the courses." The key question, however, is how many of those students choose to pay to verify their identity, and then how many of those go on to pay for credit, he said.

"There are a lot of uncertainties here," Regier said. "Do we know what the answer is? No."

### 'Same in All Essential Respects'

Another unanswered question is how to build a course that effectively evaluates tens of thousands of students at the same time. Mastery in some courses -- math, for example -- is easier to track through multiple-choice tests or automated grading, but those tools won't necessarily work in a freshman composition class.

"When you have 50,000 students versus 50 students, the methods of evaluation and the methods of assessment will change, but we will have both formative assessments and summative assessments at the end of the course," Regier said. "We haven't figured out what we're



going to do in every course yet, and we know every course is going to be different."

The challenges each planned course present explain ASU's road map for the Global Freshman Academy. After the first course launches in August, the university has committed to introducing two new courses each in October, January, March and next summer, Regier said. Freshman composition will probably be one of the last to launch. Right now, he said, the university is planning on having "actual people" grade however many thousands of student essays such a MOOC would produce.

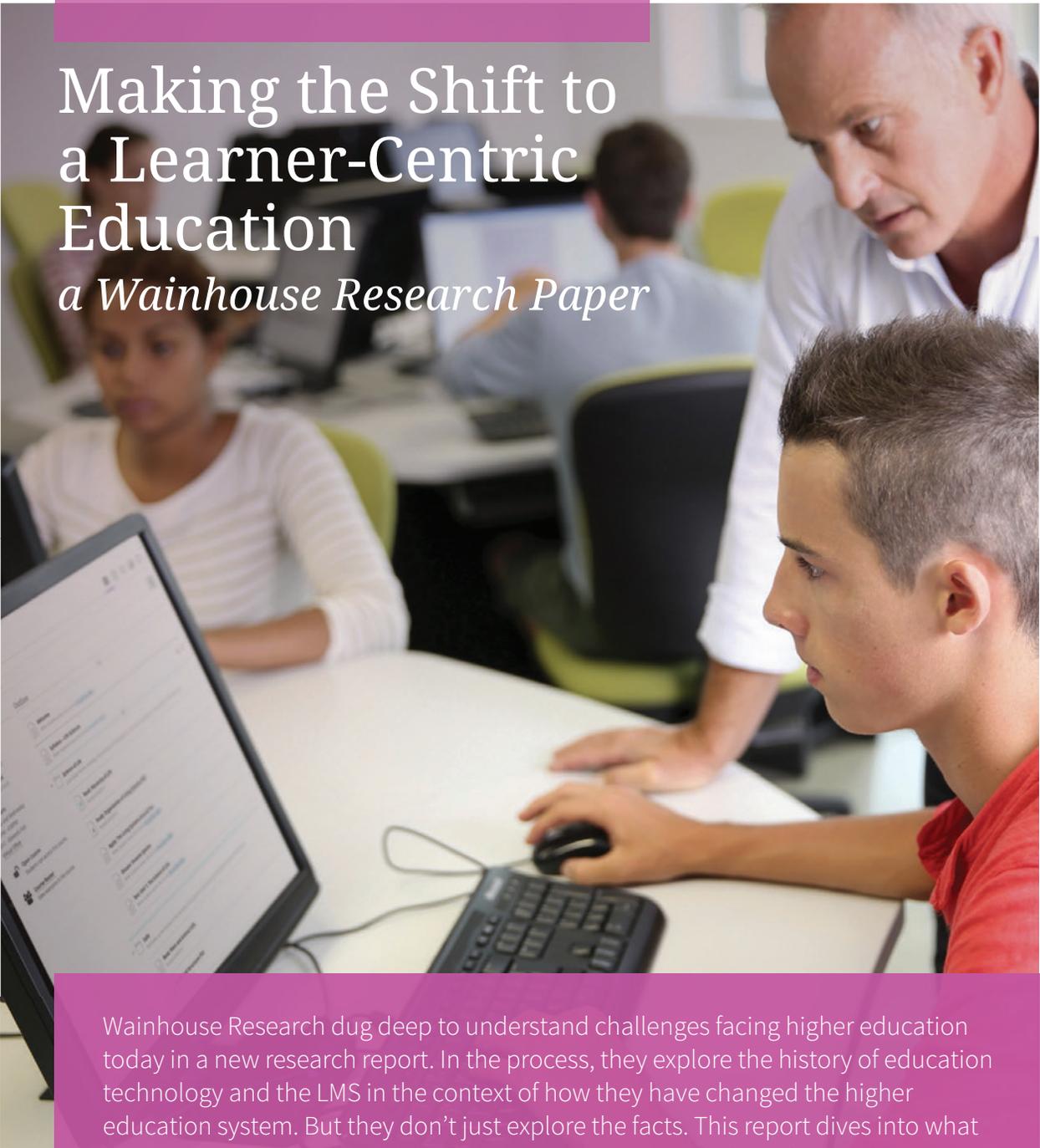
Generally speaking, Regier said, each course will last seven and a half weeks and will be led by a "master teacher" working with a team of university teaching assistants, who will be responsible for answering student questions.

"What we aren't going to do is put a course online that is an automaton

-- in other words, when the student engages with the course, there's no interaction, no chance to have a question answered by a human," Regier said. "Technology has made us more efficient at delivering courses, but there's still a need for human interaction, and that won't go away because we're offering an open online course."

The prospect of one professor teaching tens of thousands of students, however, drew criticism from the Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

"Massive open online courses can't provide that same invaluable relationship students and faculty develop over time and the flexibility in instruction needed to help all students achieve success," Weingarten said in a statement. "There's no substitute for the educational and personal development students undergo in their first two years in college. This



# Making the Shift to a Learner-Centric Education

*a Wainhouse Research Paper*

Wainhouse Research dug deep to understand challenges facing higher education today in a new research report. In the process, they explore the history of education technology and the LMS in the context of how they have changed the higher education system. But they don't just explore the facts. This report dives into what we can expect to start seeing in the next 10 – 15 years: a holistic, learner-centric online environment where student success prevails above all else.

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plan mistakes convenience and profits for quality and engagement and in doing so, ignores students' individual learning needs and stunts this growth."

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, said the assignments that ASU faculty members create may serve as an indicator of the quality of the MOOCs.

"Ill-designed general-education programs invite students to get general education out of the way as quickly and as cheaply as possible," Schneider said in an interview. "The message to students is none of this really matters -- get past this and work on your major."

In many MOOCs, students watch a brief video, complete a quick assignment and repeat, and the courses feature little interaction beyond a discussion forum. Schneider recommended a more "hands-on" approach that ties course objectives to qualities, such as critical thinking and problem solving, that are required in upper-level courses and future careers.

"The fact that it's a MOOC does not automatically disqualify it, but... it does suggest it is aiming at huge participation levels, which raises the question of how exactly students will be doing those hands-on, problem-centered assignments through which they would have the opportunity to practice and develop the skills they would need for their lives beyond college," Schneider said.

Blueprints for many of the MOOCs already exist in courses offered through ASU Online, but also in the courses taught face-to-face, Regier said. While the assignments and methods of evaluation may differ, he said, the courses -- no matter the mode of delivery -- will be "the same in all essential respects." As a result, the university does not "anticipate any issues" concerning accreditation.

"All this is, is a different modality to receive the same kind of competencies," he added. The Western civilizations course launching in the fall, for example, will be a new method of delivering HST 102, currently offered in-person and through ASU Online.

Justin Reich, the Richard L. Menschel HarvardX Research Fellow at Harvard University, said the Global Freshman Academy could potentially boost MOOC enrollments and cut costs for students if used as a dual enrollment option.

"If someone can find a way to attach college credit to a MOOC, and that credit is widely accepted at other institutions, then that could certainly accelerate enrollment in credit-bearing MOOCs," Reich said in an email. "It also might make issues of participant identity validity and cheating come to the surface quickly."

In addition to ASU Online, Regier pointed to the partnership with Starbucks as an example of how the university has worked its way up to being able to offer credit-bearing courses to massive audiences.

"It's just like bodybuilding," Regier said. "If you go out and try to bench-press 250 pounds on your first day, you're going to have a problem, but you can develop your capacity to do that over time." ●



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[HTTPS://WWW.INSIDEHIGHERED.COM/NEWS/2015/04/23/ARIZONA-STATE-EDX-TEAM-OFFER-FRESHMAN-YEAR-ONLINE-THROUGH-MOOCs](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/04/23/arizona-state-edx-team-offer-freshman-year-online-through-moocs)



## Online M.B.A. Reboot

By Carl Straumsheim

U of Southern California becomes the latest institution to launch an online M.B.A. program, joining what program directors describe as a market in an “experimental phase.”

The University of Southern California's new online M.B.A. program is the latest entry in a renaissance for such degree offerings, a development program directors say has been made possible by advances in technology that connect students and professors online.

The USC Marshall School of Business will launch its program in fall 2015, marking the first time the university has offered the degree at a distance. Students in the 21-month program, which is split into five semesters, will tackle one course of three to four topics at a time, covering much of the required readings and assignments at their own pace but checking in with classmates and professors during weekly live online sessions. Unlike programs at other universities, which include regular campus

visits, USC's online students will only come to campus once.

USC's balance between asynchronous and synchronous content is the most recent attempt to find a ratio that works for an online M.B.A. With the announcement, the university joins institutions such as Carnegie Mellon University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which in the past four years have begun to offer their selective M.B.A. programs online. Program directors at those universities say distance education and the technology to support that mode of delivery offer too many opportunities to justify simply recording a lecture and posting it online, but their opinions diverge on the importance of face-to-face meetings, the role of outside firms, pricing and pace, among other components.

“If we don't think that our job is

to replicate the lecture experience but find a new and in some respects improved experience, what does that mean?” said John G. Matsusaka, Charles F. Sexton Chair in American Enterprise at USC. “We really believe there's a set of students out there who prefer to learn in this mode. Of course there are some student that are going to prefer the residential option. Our view isn't that one is better than the other.”

Dan Bursch, program director of the online M.B.A. program at UNC, called USC's announcement a “validation.” UNC launched its online M.B.A. program, MBA@UNC, in 2011, and in less than four years, its enrollment has grown from 19 to about 630 students.

Bursch said the Kenan-Flagler Business School at UNC views itself as one of the first -- if not the first -- school to use the terms “asynchronous” and “synchronous.” In the years since MBA@UNC launched, Bursch said he has seen several universities “imitate and duplicate what we are trying to do.”

The fading “stigma” surrounding the quality of online education is partly to thank for that development, Bursch said, but so are advances in technology -- particularly in videoconferencing. Many M.B.A. programs pride themselves on small cohorts and curricula that emphasize group work, so just a few seconds of lag would be a

major interruption. Conversations about an online M.B.A. program at UNC began as early as 2005, Bursch said, but at that time, “the school said we weren’t in a place where we felt that we could duplicate everything we do on campus.”

With the introduction and refinement of software such as Adobe Connect, Google Hangouts and Skype, UNC returned to the idea in 2010. “The ability to have live classes every week is really what set things in motion,” Bursch said.

## Similar, but Different

Carnegie Mellon spent five years waiting for a similar breakthrough. The financial crisis left the university’s business model for online M.B.A.s “more or less dead,” said Robert T. Monroe, director of the part-time program there. The university’s old program was entirely corporate sponsored, with companies paying more than \$100,000 to set up clunky videoconferencing systems so professors could beam courses to their locations. As the economy tanked, partnering companies pulled out. In 2008, the business school killed the distance education program.

“Instead of scrambling to try to keep that one going, we decided to use that opportunity to take a step back and see how things had changed in the 20 years since we

started it,” Monroe said. “We saw there was an opportunity, but that it was going to be an individual opportunity.”

Carnegie Mellon rebooted the program in 2013. Officially named the Tepper School Online Hybrid M.B.A. (“because we haven’t been able to find the right word to describe it,” Monroe said), the program splits course content about equally between asynchronous content, live online sessions and intensive in-person conferences.

Each mini-semester, of which there are six a year, begins with a weekend in Pittsburgh or at Carnegie Mellon’s locations in New York and Silicon Valley. During the following weeks, students work independently on course modules and attend a weekly 75-minute live online session.

“For us, the one-third, one-third, one-third breakdown of what was previously 100 percent live class works well,” Monroe said. “We came up with a new model that we felt is as good as on-site and gives you a complete experience.”

At 32 months, Carnegie Mellon’s program takes longer to complete than USC’s 21 or UNC’s average of 27, and includes the most face-to-face content. Matsusaka, meanwhile, said USC’s faculty members made a point of making as much of the content as possible available to students on their own time.

“If you’re going to do this, you

can’t ask [students] to come to campus a lot,” Matsusaka said. “I’m sure that’s appealing to some, but our sense of the market is the typical person wants more flexibility.”

UNC, in comparison, requires students to attend two “immersion weekends” on their way to completing the 66-credit program. The university has hosted in the weekends both in the U.S. -- in Chapel Hill, San Francisco and New York -- and abroad -- in Mumbai and Johannesburg -- since the program launched.

Monroe said Carnegie Mellon’s weekend sessions were created with the idea that students would be able to balance their careers, studies and family lives in mind. “It’s very, very expensive for a student to leave work for two years to get an M.B.A. -- especially from the more selective schools,” Monroe said.

“The ability to both go to a selective program and keep working is a big deal. That’s going to be very appealing to a lot of people.”

An M.B.A. from a selective university can easily cost more than \$100,000. To stress the idea that its program is the same no matter the form of delivery, Carnegie Mellon charges all part-time students the same for tuition: about \$120,000. At UNC and USC, however, the online option comes with a discount.

USC's online students will pay an estimated \$88,502 for tuition, down from the residential program's \$108,504. At UNC, out-of-state students in the residential full-time M.B.A. program pay \$111,092 for tuition, while MBA@UNC drops the price to \$96,733.

"We spent a lot of time trying to think about what's the perfect price," Matsusaka said. "What do we need people to know to feel we've been able to give them a USC degree, and what does that take? Clearly you don't want to go in and be the most expensive guy."

## Finding Students

USC has yet to enroll its first students in the online M.B.A. program, but officials there have an idea who the program may appeal to. The ideal student, Matsusaka said, graduated with a bachelor's degree in computer science and went to work for a company such as Google for five years.

Now 30 to 34 years old and ready to climb the career ladder, the student realizes he or she needs to learn about accounting or leadership but sees the prospect of leaving work for more than two years as unacceptable, he said.

"It occurs to me there might be an untapped market of people who prefer this delivery," Matsusaka said. "Unless your eyes are closed, you have to realize that a lot of people live a lot of their



A professor hosts a live online session with M.B.A. students.

lives and have a lot of meaningful experiences online."

Results from the first year and a half of cohorts at Carnegie Mellon show about 60 percent students come from an area within a few hundred miles of Pittsburgh, Monroe said. The West Coast is home to another concentration of students.

UNC's enrollment data is "pretty varied," Bursch said. Students in the program reside in 47 states and 35 countries, with most groups in major cities, but also in rural areas where students would have to travel far to the nearest program.

"When people and schools that want to do this talk about the online M.B.A., they use the word 'flexible' a lot," Bursch said. "However, to me, the key word is really 'accessibility.' Until 2011, if you wanted an M.B.A. from UNC, you had to pick up and move your family to Chapel Hill."

As the universities that offer

online M.B.A. programs are able to market to students who live increasingly farther away from campus, they find both a larger pool of potential students and new competition. Marketing, the program directors said, will likely play an important role for programs to stand out in an increasingly crowded field.

Both UNC and USC have chosen to work with outside firms to help with that task. USC picked All Campus, a firm specializing in online enrollment. UNC took the partnership a step further, partnering with the online "enabler" company 2U (then known as 2tor) to build the program. Bursch said the partnership let the business school spend its time on adapting the curriculum, outsourcing the technical aspect to the online enabler.

"We like to say we practice what we preach here at the business school," Bursch said. "When you

partner with an expert in the field, you'll produce a better product."

The program directors said they expect more universities will launch online M.B.A. programs in the near future. All three described the market as being in an "experimental phase" that will remain unsettled for several years.

The institutions threatened by that development, Monroe

suggested, may be those that place too much emphasis on location.

"If you're an M.B.A. program whose primary point of distinction is that you're physically located somewhere that makes it easy for students to get to, you're going to seriously have to think about what your differentiator is when there are a lot of good online options available," Monroe said.

On the other hand, he said, launching an online program is more of an "incremental step" than Carnegie Mellon had anticipated. With email, lecture capture and learning management software already in place, Monroe said, "We found we were already doing 70 percent of it." ●



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## All-MOOC M.B.A.

By Carl Straumsheim

U of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign partners with massive open online course provider Coursera to launch a low-cost online M.B.A.

As with any MOOC, the content is available for free. Learners who wish to earn a credential but have no need for academic credit can pay a small fee, \$79 a course, for an identity-verified certificate. Students can also apply to the College of Business and, if accepted, pursue the full M.B.A. degree. Finally, students can choose to take the courses individually for credit, postponing a decision about whether to go for a degree until they are well into the program.

"That's why we call it fractional learning," said Rajagopal Echambadi, associate dean of outreach and engagement. "Think of it as Lego blocks."

The iMBA announcement, in May 2015, came less than two weeks after Arizona State University and

**T**he University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has chosen an unusual partner for its online M.B.A. program: massive open online course provider Coursera.

The program, known as iMBA,

will deliver most of its course content through Specializations, Coursera's term for course sequences. Students will be able to take those sequences in four different ways -- two that award credit and two that don't.

edX, another MOOC provider, unveiled plans to offer a year's worth of credit through massive open online courses. A Faculty Senate committee at Illinois approved the plans during a meeting Monday night, placing the iMBA program on track to launch next spring.

Illinois is one of Coursera's most prolific partner universities, having created dozens of MOOCs since joining in 2012. Administrators at the College of Business, which this year celebrates its 100th anniversary, approached Coursera last year about "giving something back," said Daphne Koller, one of Coursera's co-founders. Together, they spent months developing an M.B.A. program whose individual courses would work as free, stand-alone MOOCs but also add up to a degree worth the price tag, she said.

The university plans to price the 18 courses at about \$1,000 each. With the added cost of the identity verification fee, the total cost of the degree will be about \$20,000, Echambadi said. The university does not have an existing online M.B.A. program, but it charges in-state students in the part-time

M.B.A. program about \$9,000 a semester and full-time students about \$22,000 a year for tuition. The



MOOC offerings will cost the same for residents and nonresidents of Illinois.

Being admitted to the college grants students access to the university's content management system, where they will find case studies, exams and office hours with faculty members. Coursera will host asynchronous content such as recorded lectures and quizzes, and all students -- regardless of the credential they pursue -- will interact on the online forums. Echambadi said he expects the content on Coursera will total about 20 percent of the course work for credit-seeking students.

The low price may help the program stand out in market growing increasingly crowded as more selective institutions launch their online offerings. Echambadi also said he hoped splitting the program into Specializations will attract students interested in "knowledge for knowledge's sake" -- those who may only want a Specialization in accounting or digital marketing, for example.

Of the thousands who take the MOOC for free, the university expects to enroll four cohorts of about 50 students each in the degree program and an additional 200 to 300 non-degree-seeking students next spring.

Despite the reduced price and the new form of delivery, the program will use the same content and faculty. Echambadi said the



Rajagopal Echambadi

business school therefore will not seek prior approval from its accreditor, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, for what it sees as "an existing program in a new vehicle."

The university will share revenue from credit-seeking students with Coursera, but the terms have not yet been finalized, Koller said.

One partnership does not mean Coursera is entering the online "enabler" business to compete with companies such as 2U or Pearson, however. For example, if a university asked the company to host a degree program capped at 150 students, she said, Coursera would likely respond "that's not the business we're in."

Marketing is one of the main reasons why universities agree to share sometimes as much as half of their tuition revenue with enablers. With a user base of nearly 13 million, Coursera will be able to provide potential students more "organically," Koller said.

“We don’t have to fish for students -- they come.”

Finding a way to earn credit through MOOCs “hasn’t been a priority for us,” Koller said. The company this spring indicated it has built a business model out of Specializations, on-demand content and partnerships with the private sector -- priorities that

target adults looking for continuing education. “Right now, that’s the place where we see a tremendous opportunity for change,” she said.

Asked why it has taken a Coursera partner three years (the company launched in 2012) to offer a degree through MOOCs, Koller said she “sometimes laughs with a little bit of chagrin” in response to

one of the most common criticisms against MOOC providers -- that they haven’t revolutionized higher education overnight.

“The fact that it’s been online three years and counting, I think, has been pretty remarkable. I would expect to see a lot more of these [initiatives] over the next two years.” ●



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## Small College, Big Online Partners

By Carl Straumsheim

Champlain College continues to expand in the adult learner market, landing a high-profile partner with the federal government. Does it provide a model for small private colleges to succeed online?

Champlain has purposely split itself in two. There is the college, a small campus of about 2,000 traditional-age students in Burlington, Vt., across the street from the University of Vermont. Then there is the online college, a certificate and degree provider for more than 1,000 working adults.

The split is most evident in how students pay for their education, as well as what they get for their money. At the physical college, undergraduate students in 2014-15 pay \$37,436 for tuition (graduate students pay between \$660 and \$1,080 per credit hour) and take classes taught by full-time faculty. Online, students get a roughly 70 percent discount to study on their own time in courses directed by full-time faculty but taught by “professional practitioners” who work as adjuncts.



Champlain College is making a surprising play in the online adult learner market, slashing its private college tuition rates for corporate partners to compete for their employees’ tuition assistance dollars.

The college landed a big-name

partner in April 2015, securing a nonexclusive partnership with the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. The partnership means more than two million federal employees and their family members can take Champlain’s online courses at reduced rates.

Champlain is growing its online college through truED, a subscription model it launched about 18 months ago. While the college has offered online courses since 1996, truED targets corporations, nonprofits and government agencies with a low-risk proposal: a one-year renewable memorandum of understanding stating that partners will point their employees to Champlain and keep the college up-to-date on their talent development efforts. In comparison, many online education providers target individual learners with extensive (and expensive) marketing campaigns.

“If colleges and universities are going to thrive in the new economy, we have to break down the walls between industry and higher ed,” Jayson Boyers, vice president of continuing professional studies, said in an interview. “This is Champlain College stepping forward saying, ‘you can do this.’”

By effectively making its partners market Champlain to its employees, the college is able to cut down on the cost of acquiring students -- particularly direct marketing costs, Boyers said. Those savings allow Champlain to offer its programs at a steep discount. While a 70 percent cut sounds dramatic, the reduction means a bachelor or master’s degree costs between \$10,000 and \$12,000, and a certificate about \$3,000. The subscription fee ranges from \$250



Champlain College

to \$800 per month depending on how many courses a student takes. Since Champlain is not partnering with an online enabler company, it does not have to share the tuition revenue.

For a small, private nonprofit college with only regional name recognition, deeply discounted tuition rates are a requirement to be able to compete with other online education providers, said Kenneth E. Hartman, a former president of Drexel University Online who now works as an analyst for the consulting firm Eduventures. While such discounts are “nothing new,” he said, 70 percent qualifies as “above the norm” comparatively.

“What Champlain College is doing is a smart move because they’re in a highly competitive environment -- particularly in the online undergraduate completion sector, where students are oftentimes looking for the best financial deal they can get,”

Hartman said. “If you’re not a nationally renowned institution, you’re going to have to look to these types of partnerships to do exactly what this college is doing.”

## Corporate Alliances

Since the launch of truED, Champlain has formed dozens of alliances with companies such as AT&T, Cigna and Ben & Jerry’s. Its online enrollment is approaching 1,500. The college plans to grow the number of partners to 100 and its online student population to 5,000, Boyers said.

Yet it was Champlain’s 57th partnership -- the U.S. Office of Personnel Management -- that caught the attention of many observers of the adult learner market. The college announced the partnership in April 2015.

Boyers was coy about how Champlain picks its partners. The college created a list of potential partners based on where its

programs and the companies' needs intersected and "began knocking on doors," he said. Champlain has yet to see a partner choose not to renew the one-year commitment, although many partners have not been truED members for a full year, said Boyers.

"We have a wheelhouse of where we feel like we can make a difference," Boyers said. "We're not the right partner for every company." The college has been approached by hospital systems interested in a master's degree in nursing, for example, but has rejected the offers. "That's not who we are," he said. "That's not a program that fits well with what we do."

The college's partnership with the federal government provides some insight into how Champlain approaches targets on its list. To convince the agency that the college was a good fit for federal employees, Champlain built its pitch around a recent report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office, which found

that the workforce faces "mission-critical skills gaps" in areas such as cybersecurity, human resource management and broadly in STEM fields.

"The schools we partner with must have a curriculum that addresses the current needs in governmentwide mission-critical occupations," the agency said in a statement. "Ultimately, these educational partnerships are a win-win for agencies and employees alike, because they close federal mission-critical skills gaps and help federal employees pursue higher education."

Champlain's partnership with AT&T, meanwhile, was more narrowly focused. "Our existing relationship with Champlain was created to specifically provide cybersecurity courses to our employees," a spokeswoman for the company said. "We were impressed with their cybersecurity curriculum and thought it would be an asset to our [development] programs."

Champlain's partnership with the OPM is not an exclusive one

-- a decision that the agency said grants employees "freedom of choice." The University of Maryland University College partnered with the agency in 2014, charging students about \$375 a credit -- a 25 percent discount on out-of-state tuition.

Neither institution expressed concern about competing for federal employees. "The federal workforce is more than two million strong, so there is certainly room for growth for UMUC and for Champlain," Robert Ludwig, a spokesman for UMUC, said in an email. UMUC so far has enrolled about 1,200 students, amassing savings of more than \$765,000 in the first year, he added.

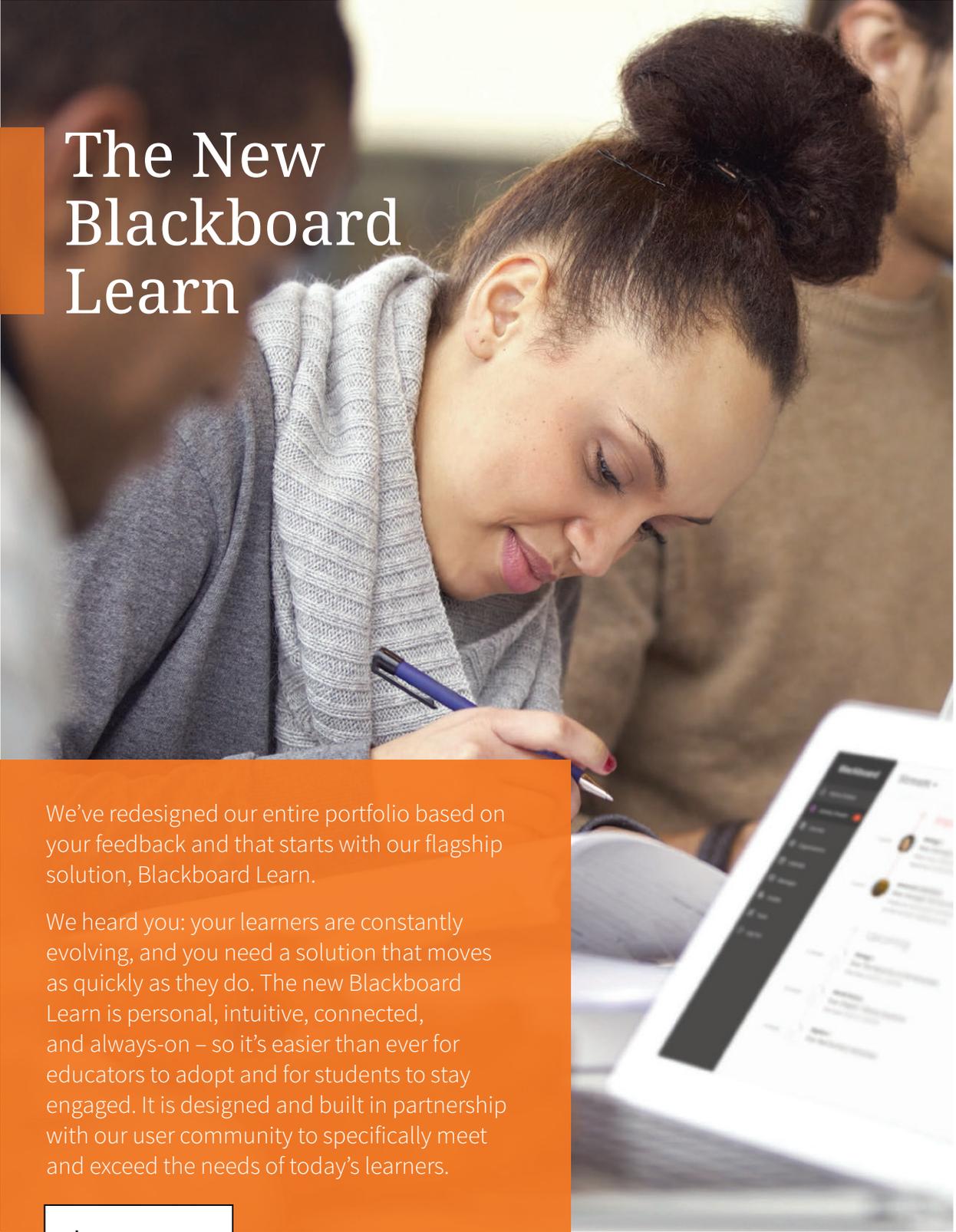
Boyers was also optimistic about Champlain's opportunities for enrollment growth, even though UMUC has decades of experience in the adult learner market and enrolls tens of thousands of students. "We don't have to be an exclusive partner," he said. "We will fill a need. The students who will benefit from us the most will find us." ●



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## Taking the Arts Online

By Carl Straumsheim

Ed-tech start-up Kadenze launches an online education platform specifically created for creative arts courses.

Online learning platforms are out of tune with creative arts education, according to the ed-tech start-up Kadenze.

Its platform, which launched in June 2015, aims to become a hub for online courses in art, design, music and other disciplines underrepresented online. Those courses have proven challenging to teach to an audience in dozens, let alone the hundreds or thousands, as faculty members struggle to translate face-to-face instruction to an online setting or evaluate students based on highly personal work. As a result, massive open online course platforms often feature lineups heavy on courses in which student performance can be determined with quizzes and peer-graded writing assignments.

"It's great that you can learn math and engineering and all these things that are out there,"

said Ajay Kapur, Kadenze's CEO and co-founder. "We want to bring creativity into the mix."

Art schools and departments, Kapur said, have been "left out" of the rise of MOOCs and other forms of online education, so Kadenze (pronounced kah-den-zay) is forming a loosely defined network of art schools interested in advancing online creative arts education. Its launch partners include Princeton and Stanford Universities, California College of the Arts, the California Institute of the Arts, Cornish College of the Arts, Emily Carr University of Art and Design, Goldsmiths University of London, Otis College of Art and Design, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Seoul Institute of the Arts, the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Saint Joseph in Macau, among others.

Some of those institutions -- including CalArts, CCA, Otis College, SAIC, SeoulArts and Saint Joseph -- will offer for-credit courses through Kadenze priced at \$300 a credit hour. Students not pursuing credit can opt for a \$7 a month membership fee, or view the course content (but not participate) free. Of the 21 courses planned for launch -- 4 of which will start right away -- 9 offer credit. Students who opt for credit will receive a transcript, but the credit may not transfer to a different institution. Nor are there any set pathways to enrollment.

The art schools will get "a percentage" of the revenue, Kapur said, but he did not specify how much.

Jeannene M. Przyblyski, provost at CalArts, said the college will offer credit to students it does not currently enroll -- in other words, as a form of extended education.

"From the outset, we were always really interested in the notion of a MOOC as a social community, and then the question is, how could that social community be a creative community?" Przyblyski said. "People think about artists as being alone in their studies. That's a part of it... but the fact of the matter is that it isn't really art until it's out in the world and people respond to it."

Kadenze is positioning itself as a cross between a MOOC provider and an online program



management company. Like Coursera or edX, Kadenze will offer free versions of the courses offered on its platform, but like a 2U or Academic Partnerships, the company also offers instructional designers and animators to help its partners with the production aspect of online education.

The platform also comes with tools and features developed to benefit students and faculty members of the creative arts. For music students, that might mean the ability to upload uncompressed audio files, for art students, a personal portfolio to showcase their work.

Perry R. Cook, professor

emeritus of computer science and music at Princeton and executive vice president of Kadenze, added that an upcoming introductory programming course will use machine grading to run student-written code to automate part of the evaluation process and simultaneously detect plagiarism.

“These are all built-in tools that we created from scratch, because they weren’t anywhere else,” Cook said.

Anecdotes from faculty members behind some of the first courses that will be made available on the platform suggest Kadenze has been willing to build infrastructure on a course-by-course basis.

Christopher D. Chafe, director of the Stanford Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics, said Kadenze was willing to invest “top-notch resources” in the courses the center will offer on the platform.

For example, Chafe’s online jamming course, which will debut late in 2015, needs to be optimized for students to connect together over the Internet.

“Optimization is going to have to take into account a whole bunch of factors -- the equipment they’ve got, the time zone they’re in, their music interests,” Chafe said. “I could never really have taught this as a classroom course.” ●



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## Women Supporting Women Online

By Carl Straumsheim

Bay Path University, a women's college, has expanded its enrollment by moving beyond its traditional student population. Can it find success online?

**B**ay Path University is having to adjust downward the number of students it believes will want to study online through its American Women's College, but university leaders say they see fully online education as one of many endeavors that will help Bay Path remain a financially sound women's college in the future.

Bay Path, a private university in Longmeadow, Mass., had hoped to enroll as many as 5,000 adult women in the first five years of the fully online college, which launched in 2013. With roughly 450 students on track to begin studying in fall 2015 and a total online enrollment of about 800, the university is less than one-fifth of the way there.

"We overestimated the enrollment," said Carol A. Leary, the university's president. "At the end of our first year, we realized that our marketing dollars were going to

be much more significant than we ever anticipated. With each year and with more and more colleges entering the online market -- which we probably underestimated -- we did not put into the amount of money for marketing to get to 4 to 5,000 students."

Leary said the university is now taking a more "realistic" approach to growing its online enrollment, and that it has scrapped its initial enrollment estimate. "But it will get to 4-5,000," she added. "I can guarantee it, because you'll have more and more digital natives wanting this kind of education in the future."

The university now expects it will break even on its online venture after four years, Leary said.

The ongoing saga of Sweet Briar College's troubles and the moves by many women's colleges to become fully coeducational, has many small women's colleges

wondering how to stay viable. According to an *Inside Higher Ed* survey, few business officers across all sectors of higher education believe their institutions will shut down in the next five years, but the concern is more palpable at private nonprofit colleges and universities like Bay Path: 27 percent of those respondents fear they may have to close "in the coming decades."

The slower than anticipated growth of the American Women's College is by no means a death knell for Bay Path, however. The institution has gone from junior college to college to university in less than 30 years, and has been recognized as one of the fastest-growing small colleges in the region.

"Bay Path over the last 20 years has had to realize ... that to remain a vibrant, viable women's college, we had to diversify," Leary, who became president in 1994, said. The university didn't launch online programs "out of need," she said. "It was out of mission and the decision that this would be a good way for women to get a college education."

The university has grown its enrollment to more than 2,300 by fragmenting itself into colleges and programs that attract different student populations. It still has a traditional all-women core of about 700 undergraduates, but accepts both men and women into its graduate programs, the first of which launched in 1999.

Nontraditional students either enroll in the One Day a Week College or online in the American Women's College.

Leary said the One Day a Week College has been a "key driver" in financing advanced degrees and the university's expansion into the online undergraduate market.

In the late '90s, Leary and other administrators decided to look at how the university was serving adult women, finding that some students spent as much as a decade on a one-class-a-semester grind to a bachelor's degree. One Day a Week College launched in 1999, offering six accelerated six-week sessions a year with courses crammed into two five-hour Saturday sessions.

The reasoning behind the decision, Leary said, was that adult women whose family obligations kept them from pursuing an education would be more likely to be able to set aside time -- finding a caretaker for children, for instance -- on one day a week rather than multiple nights.

More than 2,500 women have graduated from the One Day a Week College since. When Bay Path in 2013 formulated the plan for the American Women's College, it borrowed from its existing approach to educating adult students.

Students in both colleges pay \$400 a unit, each worth three or four credits. That means the total cost of an online degree is \$48,000, or about one-third of what

residential students pay. Undergraduates studying on campus beginning this fall will pay an estimated \$127,140 in tuition over four years, based on this year's estimated cost of attendance.

The online college also copied the One Day a Week College's structure of six-week units, which means students can graduate with a bachelor's degree in three years. Their degree offerings are also similar, with options such as business, criminal justice and other programs that are popular among adult students.

More challenging, however, is the task of translating the characteristics of a women's college to an online environment. Leary described the university's goal as promoting a culture of "women supporting women online."

"You have to get the emotion of what happens on ground in the online environment," she said.

The university hopes to accomplish that through a combination of courses (all students are required to take courses in the Women as Empowered Learners and Leaders program, or WELL, which introduces them to college-level studies and leadership skills) and data.

Bay Path last October received a \$3.5 million First in the World Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, which the university



is using to build a data warehouse and tools that collect student data from different platforms. By combining data from its learning management and administrative systems, the university hopes in the future to be able to predict student behavior and immediately alert advisers or instructors when a student shows signs of falling behind, said Amanda J. Gould, chief of operational effectiveness and student success.

That functionality should become available this fall, Gould said. Over time, the goal is for students to have access to their own "dashboard" of data, which she said could empower them to be proactive about furthering their education.

The university is also using the grant to create courses that adapt to students' progress. About 40 such courses will roll out over the next four years, Gould said.

While those initiatives are not yet in place, the American Women's College is reportedly getting high marks. In an internal survey of student satisfaction, students in that college had the highest satisfaction and response rates.

“What we hear from our graduates and students is that they lean on each other and they need encouragement,” Gould said. “That’s what drives the infrastructure that we’re building.” ●



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## Antiskimming Software

By Carl Straumsheim

Business professors find another use for software created to help them teach case studies: preventing students from skimming.

In 2015, NYU Shanghai began using ForClass, developed by the start-up of the same name. The platform supports what some instructors in reading-intensive courses have been doing for years: requiring students to answer questions about assigned reading before class to show they have gotten through the texts.

ForClass then gathers that data, collected from open-ended, true-or-false and multiple-choice questions embedded in the reading, in a dashboard. Before class, faculty members can review the data to identify interesting responses, concepts students may be struggling to grasp or students who didn’t do the work. Once in the classroom, the instructors can display word clouds of responses, zoom in on individual answers and hopefully invite more students to participate in class discussions.

In effect, the platform flips a specific part of the classroom. Instead of gambling that prepared talking points on a specific text will trigger a meaningful debate, faculty members using the platform can call on students they already know made an interesting observation.

**A**re you reading closely? Chances are you’re not. Web traffic analyses of online publications show most readers scroll only part of the way through a story before disappearing. Maybe you’re off to a new story, the comments section or a different website altogether.

But what if, in tomorrow’s edition, we used that traffic data to call on you in front of all of our readers? That’s the idea behind ForClass, a student engagement platform that aims to stop students from skimming through reading assignments.

Skimming is “human nature,”

said Jeffrey S. Lehman, vice chancellor of New York University at Shanghai. “You’re thinking about a lot of different things at once, and your mind tends to wander as you read.”

But as an instructor, Lehman still needs to spark discussions about dense texts written by Aristotle, Confucius, Plato and other philosophers in Global Perspectives on Society, a freshman requirement at the university. In a course that enrolls 300 students, those who skimmed or skipped their reading could easily disappear in the crowd -- but not anymore, Lehman said.





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## Would-Be Disruptor Shifts Gears

By Carl Straumsheim

A plan to create an accreditor for adopts a new model: free MOOCs to help students earn placement credit.

**M**odern States Education Alliance, an organization initially billed as an accreditor for nontraditional providers of education, is changing its focus and taking a more direct route to increasing access to higher education, its founders say.

David Bergeron and Steven Klinsky, two of the founders behind Modern States, previewed their concept for an “innovation-focused accreditor” in an October 2013 op-ed. The accreditor, according to the two men -- respectively, a former U.S. Department of Education acting assistant secretary for postsecondary education and philanthropist -- would help academe make sense of emerging technologies and lower the cost of college.

By the time of the official launch in December 2014, the organization presented a revised mission. In its inaugural news release, Modern States said it would work to create a “path to a tuition-free, high-quality and universally accessible college education for any motivated student who seeks one.” Last week, the organization recruited another set of institutions to join in that effort: the Texas State University System.

“Our goals have shifted,” said David A. Vise, a former *Washington Post* reporter who now serves as a senior adviser to Klinsky’s investment firm, New Mountain Capital, and Modern States. “Our goals haven’t changed.... The goal was always to try to do what we could to help make college

more affordable and accessible to all students, and we found that the path that we were on initially turned out to be more complex and time-consuming.”

Freshman Year for Free is one step toward Modern States’ goal, Vise said. Starting in 2016, the initiative will offer about 30 massive open online courses designed to help students pass standardized placement tests for which many colleges award credit. Modern States is also searching for partner organizations that will offer student support services. The resources will eventually be combined in an online platform.

“We want to be an on-ramp to college education for students of varying backgrounds and ages,” Vise said, adding the courses could benefit high school students, members of the military, adult learners and students looking to complete degrees.

Modern States is the latest organization to see MOOCs as a way to let students quickly earn college credit. Earlier this year, Arizona State University and edX, a MOOC provider created by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, announced Global Freshman Academy, a set of MOOCs through which students can earn up to a year’s worth of credit from Arizona State.

Freshman Year for Free has much in common with Global Freshman Academy. Not only is Arizona State a member of both initiatives, but edX also serves as the course platform in both cases.

Unlike the Global Freshman Academy courses, which are cohort-based and conclude with a final exam, the Freshman Year for Free courses are self-paced and intended to serve a more preparatory role. The MOOCs, which are currently in development, will align with Advanced Placement and College Level Examination Program tests, both offered by the College Board.

Faculty members at Harvard, MIT, Davidson College, and institutions in the University of California and Texas systems will create the MOOCs, which are expected to launch next summer or fall, Vise said.

The MOOCs will be available free, funded by a donation from Klinsky. Students will still have to pay for the standardized tests, but Modern States is exploring ways to lower those costs. AP exams cost either \$92 or \$122 each depending on location, while CLEP exams costs \$80 each.

Modern States' members -- who also include Colorado State University's Global Campus, the Ohio Department of Higher

Education, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, Rice University, the State University of New York System and the Tennessee Board of Regents -- aren't obligated to award credit to students who take the MOOCs and pass the standardized exams. Each institution ultimately decides the scores students will have to earn in order to be awarded credit there.

Institutions in the Texas State University System, which joined Modern States last week, has long awarded credit to students who complete those standardized exams, said Brian McCall, the system's chancellor.

Adding several dozen MOOCs aimed at helping students do better on those tests will create more opportunities to earn college credit, he said.

"We really have no idea how many students will find this to be a useful tool," McCall said. "We just want to have as many opportunities for our students to fit their lifestyle and get the job done to get through the door."

McCall said he hoped Freshman Year for Free could lead self-motivated students to enroll at institutions in the system.

"It will be a driven, disciplined student who will find success with this," McCall said. "I do think

that we may find -- and this is just a hunch -- that this is an older, more disciplined student who can manage time and has a lot of balls



in the air."

Michel L. Conroy, professor of art and chair of the Faculty Senate at Texas State University, said faculty members only heard of Freshman Year for Free on Thursday and have yet to form an opinion.

Since the decision was made on the system level, she said, the institution is "bound by the agreement."

Modern States doesn't charge institutions a membership fee. Participation in the alliance indicates "that they see value" in expanding access to higher education, Vise said. As its list of members grows, the organization will also look to add partners that can offer tutoring and mentoring services.

"We're calling this the Modern States Education Alliance for a reason," Vise said. "We're not going to be able to do it all ourselves." ●



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## General Education Discounting or Devaluing?

By Kellie Woodhouse

U of Akron cuts the price of certain general education classes by 86 percent, and says they will be less expensive than those at community colleges. But two-year institutions disagree, and professors say effort is penny-wise and pound-foolish.

The University of Akron plans to cut the cost of its general education courses by 86 percent and begin delivering them primarily online in an effort to both increase enrollment and respond to calls from the state's governor to make college more affordable for Ohioans.

The university is publicizing that by charging \$50 per credit hour -- down from \$359 per credit hour for an in-person general education class on the college's main campus -- students who enroll in the GenEd Core Pilot Program will pay half as much as they would for a general education class at a community college.

Yet Northeast Ohio community colleges and representatives from Akron's faculty union are skeptical about the program. Community colleges, worried in part that the program will erode

their student base, have accused Akron of inaccurately advertising the financial benefits of Akron over two-year colleges and "misleading" students.

"The overall cost of the 60 credit hours at a community college for the associate degree is less than half of the cost for 60 credit hours at the University of Akron, even with the proposed discounted tuition structure," the presidents of Cuyahoga Community College, Lorain County Community College, Lakeland Community College and Stark State College wrote in a joint statement. For four community colleges to jointly issue a statement criticizing a local public university -- on the day that university announces a new program -- is unusual. And so is a public university boasting about savings for students who might otherwise go to community

colleges.

Courses not offered through the program are \$359 per credit hour in Akron's four-year program and \$282 per credit hour in its associate degree program.

"At the end of a student's registration, they'll know what the true cost is. The students will make the decision," Stark president Para Jones said. "We are still the most affordable option, without a doubt."

Meanwhile, the president of Akron's chapter of the American Association of University Professors, biology professor Steve Weeks, says he's dubious the program will actually benefit students, who early in their college career might not do well with online education.

General education classes -- which at Akron can include up to 200 students per course, Weeks said -- are generally a large source of revenue for colleges and often subsidize smaller upper-level seminar courses. Lowering the price of general education offerings could make it difficult for Akron to pay for smaller courses or expensive specialty programs, unless the university is able to increase enrollment.

Todd Rickel, Akron's vice provost and executive dean of the College of Applied Science and Technology, said the low price of the online general education classes should prompt an increase in enrollment that will not only pay for the cost of



University of Akron

the pilot program but also continue to help fund upper-level courses.

“Our intention is to attract additional students,” Rickel said. “The greater community and the region is quite large. We’ve seen a drop-off [in enrollment] over the past several years, so this is a way to maintain relevancy in the community.”

Akron “should be good” financially if it increases enrollment and, through student advising and counseling, focuses on retention, he said. In addition to attracting new students, Rickel says the program will also encourage existing students to take general education courses at Akron, as opposed to other campuses. Some Akron students, according to Rickel, have been opting to take general education courses at schools with lower tuition, especially during the summer.

Akron will begin offering the online courses as early as the fall, but has not finalized which courses

will be offered. The college’s governing board approved the program in April 2015.

Rickel expects modest enrollment gains in the fall, with more significant increases later in the spring semester after more students have learned of the program. He says the university doesn’t have “a specific number” for predictions on enrollment gains.

Weeks said the program won’t be financially beneficial unless there’s a substantive hike in enrollment.

“If that does not happen, all we’re doing is shifting students from one area to another; we’re getting less money and, in my opinion, giving them a less high-quality experience,” he said.

Akron’s undergraduate enrollment in the fall was 21,600, down about 1,000 students from the previous year.

Connie Bouchard, a history professor and vice president of Akron’s AAUP, said she’s worried about the “cannibalization” of

university resources.

“It will just add to the deficit, which we’re having trouble filling anyway. We’re pretty much tuition driven,” she said.

Weeks and Bouchard said Akron’s president, Scott Scarborough, has told faculty that the university will be about \$20 million in the red this year. Rickel said the university will likely have a deficit, but said officials are still balancing the books and did not have a set figure. Akron has a roughly \$380 million general fund budget, \$99 million of which is funded by the state.

The online general education courses will be offered through Wayne College, Akron’s two-year college in Orrville, Ohio. Under the plan, they’ll include in-person elements, such as optional office hours with a professor, and “experiential” learning, such as an assignment to visit a museum. The price for a three-credit course would be \$150, plus a fee that is at least

\$49 per course. For comparison, a three-credit general education course at Stark would cost \$462, with most fees (not including costs like lab fees) included.

Akron will continue to offer full-price in-person courses, currently priced at \$359 per credit hour; however, officials expect enrollment in the full-price courses to drop once the GenEd Core

program is rolled out.

When planning the program, Rickel said, he looked for other public four-year colleges that were following a similar path but was unable to find any. "To my knowledge this is a fairly unique effort," he said.

Many for-profit companies offer inexpensive general education courses online, and not always

for credit. The Baltimore-based company StraighterLine offers online courses for as low as \$49 per course. StraighterLine is not accredited and students must get a transcript with credit recommendations from the American Council on Education if they want to seek transfer credit for a StraighterLine course to another institution. ●

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## Online Penalty

By Scott Jaschik

Large study of California community college students finds that they are more likely to succeed in in-person courses.

courses. The study, released in April 2015 at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, is by Cassandra M. D. Hart, Elizabeth Friedmann and Michael Hill, all of the University of California at Davis.

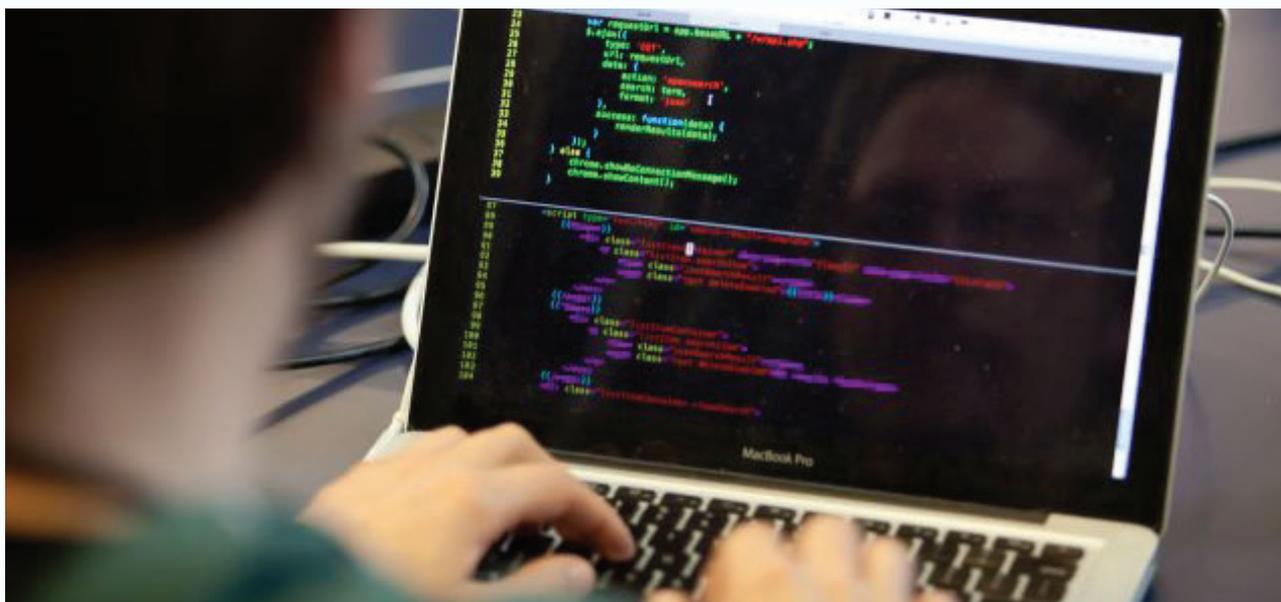
The authors acknowledge that comparing student success is difficult based on transcripts alone. In an ideal world (at least from an educational researcher's perspective), students of equal ability would be randomly assigned to identical face-to-face or online courses taught in similar ways.

Since researchers can't do that to California community college students, they compared success by looking at students' performance in courses from 2008-9 through 2011-12 offered at the same community college in both face-to-

Many politicians and educators see online education as key to expanding access to higher education. But a large study of online education used by students at California's massive community

college system cautions that student success may not go hand-in-hand with online education.

On many measures of student success, the study found, online students are not doing as well as those who enroll in face-to-face



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face and digital formats. To avoid atypical students, the researchers excluded those who already have an associate or other degree, and those in dual enrollment programs with high schools.

The researchers also excluded physical education and fine arts courses, and those offered for fewer than one or more than five credits. Even with those limitations, the California system is large enough that the researchers were able to study results from 217,000 unique students.

From that sample, the researchers found online students lagging behind face-to-face students in three critical areas:

- Completing courses (regardless of grade).
- Completing courses with passing grades.
- Completing courses with

grades of A or B.

The results were the same across subject matters, courses of different types and different groups of students. Larger gaps were found in some areas, such as summer courses and courses taken by relatively small numbers of online students. But no patterns could be found where students online performed better than those in face-to-face courses.

The researchers note that there may be some questions about how broadly their findings can be applied. Other states may have community college systems (or other higher education systems) with better or worse online offerings, and more or less student support.

And the nature of online education continues to evolve. But the researchers also note that

California has placed a priority on online education, has a diverse system of community colleges and has a huge student population.

Even with the caveats they note, they write that their findings should be a caution for many. "Our results also have implications for student support in online classes," they write. "Faculty members teaching online should be aware of the performance penalty associated with taking courses online and consider implementing course policies and practices that would allow them to detect student disengagement in the absence of the physical cues that FtF [face-to-face] instructors can rely on. Students should be made aware that success rates are systematically lower in online than in FtF sections so that they can make informed enrollment decisions, and should

be introduced to study strategies and time management strategies that promote success in online formats."

In terms of policy, the researchers write: "Policy makers in California

and other states are interested in exploring whether online courses can be used to expand student and improve outcomes. The results suggest that there may be costs to this strategy, although

formal cost-benefit analyses should explore whether the greater likelihood of course noncompletion or failure offsets the possible cost savings associated with online courses." ●



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