



Netting Knowledge

Online Education: A Way Out or the Beginning of the End?

By Lynn Wexler

America's higher education system is broken. That appears to be the mantra for some within the groves of academe, not to mention prospective students and parents confronting the escalating cost of a higher education.

The belief that a college degree offers a ticket to a better life always has been a hallmark of the American Dream. But with unemployment rates high, many college graduates at home with Mom and Dad and the national student loan debt topping \$1 trillion, many people find themselves recalculating the value of a college diploma. And some are considering alternatives to the long-traveled academic route.

As a result, many universities are scrambling, looking for ways to increase enrollment at a more affordable price. In the meantime, a fair number of middle tier colleges are demanding elite university-level tuition, while simultaneously downplaying staggeringly low graduation rates, and churning out students ill-equipped for the job market.

For some people, it's high time America's higher education model is reimagined.

Mark Taylor, Religion Department chair at Columbia University, posits in *Crisis on Campus: A Bold Plan for Reforming our Colleges and Universities* that emerging online technologies will transform higher education in the coming decade. Although distance and computer-assisted learning have been around since the 1960s, contemporary financial pressures have forced many institutions to consider ways of leveraging online education opportunities.

John Chubb and Terry Moe, fellows at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, are co-authors of *Liberating Learning: Technology, Politics, and the Future of American Education*. They believe the substitution of cheaper, online technology for more expensive labor (read professors) could be the key to increasing the global reach of some of our elite institutions.

In a 2012 conference announcing *EdX*, a \$60 million Harvard-MIT partnership in online education, officials spoke of professors potentially reaching millions of students worldwide – those in India or China, for instance – instead of a few hundred on a campus. They touted online learning as the “single biggest change in education since the printing press.”

EdX is one of several emerging MOOCs (for *Massive Open Online Course*) to host online, university-level courses in a range of disci-

plines to a worldwide audience — mostly at no cost (at least for now).

“The nation, and the world, are clearly in the early stages of a historic transformation in how students learn, (how) teachers teach and (how) schools and school systems are organized,” Chubb says.

“The fact is students do not need to be on campus to experience some of the key benefits of an elite education,” he says. “Colleges and universities do not need to put a professor in every classroom. One Nobel laureate can literally teach a million students, and for a very reasonable tuition price. It makes education much more efficient.

“And lectures just scratch the surface of what is possible,” Chubb adds. “Online technology lets course content be presented in many engaging formats, including simulations, video and games. It lets students move through material at their own pace, day or night. It permits continuing assessment, individual tutoring online and the systematic collection of data on each student's progress. In many ways, technology extends an elite-caliber education to the masses, who would not otherwise have access to anything close.”

Not everyone is sold on the idea.

Some skeptics worry, for instance, that online learning will destroy the *college experience*, where students interact with each other and their professors in a mutual and compatible learning environment.

Harvard and MIT officials at *EdX* acknowledged that there is no substitute for the “centuries-old residential education of their hallowed institutions.” But they believe a coming revolution leaves room for a new balance in the way education is organized and delivered, one where students still go to school and interact with professors and other scholars, and do some of their course work online.

This new balance won't be worked out overnight, say proponents of massive online learning, and it's not surprising given the web of issues that must be considered and the hurdles to overcome, including faculty opposition.

One of the goals of any MOOC, they say, is to optimize the quality, efficiency and accessibility of education. Elite educational institutions employ world-renowned leaders in every discipline. Theoretically, they are imbued with inherent abilities to create high-quality online content that hundreds of other institutions would be willing to purchase for dissemination to their students.

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Under such a system, they say, colleges and universities could offer online lectures from the world's most touted professors, while providing local courses that are better suited to smaller, more personal seminars and are taught by hometown instructors.

Coursera and Khan Academy are popular online educational resources. Each offers a very different product.

Khan Academy is a nonprofit education tutorial service. Salman Khan, a suburban New Orleans native whose father is Bangladeshi and mother is from Calcutta, created his academy after a cousin in a distant place asked for help with her mathematics studies. Khan, a former hedge fund analyst who holds three degrees from MIT and an MBA from Harvard, tutored her via the Internet. Soon other relatives and friends wanted help, too, so he realized that YouTube provided a better conduit for his tutoring.

These days, with underwriting from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and other major donors, Khan Academy's resources are available free to a monthly YouTube audience of about 10 million. Since the academy's launch in 2006, tutorials in math, the sciences, finance, art history and more have been delivered to over 300 million people, in more than 30 languages.

Coursera is a for-profit education tech company that Stanford computer science professors Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng started with \$16 million in venture capital. Coursera distributes online interactive courses in the humanities, social sciences and engineering. Most are non-accredited and free. The accredited ones come with a price tag.

Coursera claims 7.1 million users taking 641 courses from 108 institutions. In 2013, the founders joined the U.S. State Department in creating learning hubs worldwide, while blocking access in Iran, Sudan and Cuba at the agency's request.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, university faculty members have not exactly embraced the online model. They believe in the face-to-face approach. But proponents of the online alternative argue that the face-to-face way of doing things has become unaffordable for most students, and is sure to be marginalized over time.

Columbia's Taylor says only 15-18 percent of post-secondary education students are in the 18-to-22-year-old, living on campus profile. For everyone else, he argues, an alternative approach is needed.

What is more, he says, the move from the real to the virtual classroom reflects what those in the business world would call mass cus-

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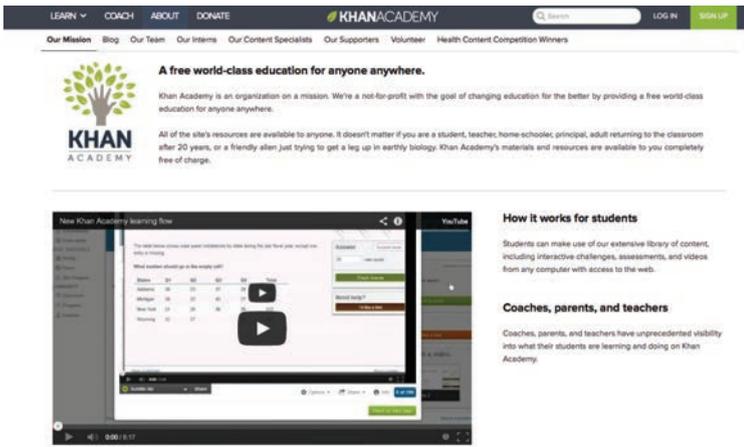
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tomization. And Taylor says the coming transformation raises such fundamental questions as why is college a four-year pursuit; why are courses the same length; why does “graduation” depend upon the successful completion of a specific number of courses or credits?

By some accounts, the gap between the rate at which knowledge is expanding and tuition is growing, versus the rate at which colleges and universities can keep up and adjust accordingly, is widening exponentially.

Moreover, the increasing have-and-have-nots gap in this country, along with growing competition abroad, suggests America’s long-held higher education dominance could wither in the 21st century, according to some observers.

Online education proponents believe colleges and universities must reorganize and create new cooperation-collaboration strategies to provide the best education at the lowest price. Through imagination and determination, the thinking goes, society should be able to provide the education its children and grandchildren will need to meet the world’s challenges.

But Trinity Washington University President Patricia McGuire believes this new model could be society’s undoing. She says American students increasingly are diverse, low-income and academically underprepared for the rigors of collegiate study. “A blind rush to on-line everything,” she argues, “may, despite the promise, ultimately provide access to failure.”

She and others are wary of a “parade of savvy corporate leaders promising unprecedented free or low cost educational opportunity, while making staggering sums of money along the way.”

“Quality online education costs real money – registration systems, instructional design, course instructors, academic oversight and quality assurance ... and collaboration, student services, marketing and enrollment support. Someone has to pay,” she says. And the less fortunate, she argues, will eventually be left behind when the inevitable bill comes due.

In the meantime, don’t expect life to keep imitating art (circa 1973) as it did when the late John Houseman won an Oscar as the bow-tied contract law professor Charles W. Kingsfield Jr. in *The Paper Chase*. Those days of a lecture hall full of students will likely go the way of a fixed time and place to graduate, and 10-pound textbooks.

The online education door is open now, but the view down the hall is still dim. What does seem clear, however, is that students from the class of 2025 are likely to encounter a radically different college experience than the one their parents remember. Buckle up.

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