

Online college courses boom

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Another day, another development in the rapidly evolving world of massive open online courses, otherwise known as MOOCs.

Over the past several months, dozens of universities, including the University of Texas System, Brown and Wesleyan, have joined the bandwagon, working with MOOC providers to offer free online courses to anyone with an Internet connection.

- Last week, the American Council on Education, an association for higher education presidents, raised the possibility that such courses could count toward a degree when it said it would review several to determine whether they ought to be eligible for transfer credit.

- Two days later, a consortium of 10 universities, including Northwestern, Wake Forest and Notre Dame, announced plans to develop an alternative approach -- classes are still taught online, but with just 15 to 20 students. The courses, to be offered next fall through an initiative called Semester Online, wouldn't be free, like MOOCs are, but students who pass the course could earn credit.

- Today, edX, a MOOC founded by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard, is expected to announce plans to bring a computer science course to two Massachusetts community colleges next spring.

Colleges and universities have offered online courses for years, but the embrace by elite higher education was "really a game-changer," says Ray Schroeder, director of the Center for Online Learning, Research and Service at the University of Illinois-Springfield. "Now we've really moved to disruption in higher education."

A looming question: Are MOOCs any good? Schroeder's center, founded in 1997, is working with the American Council on Education to determine whether MOOCs can improve college completion rates, particularly among low-income young adults and older adult learners.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is supporting that effort, and the edX pilot program with community colleges. Last week, it announced 12 grants totaling more than \$3 million to study MOOCs, which "hold great promise, but are not without challenges," says Dan Greenstein, who directs the foundation's higher education efforts.

Three companies -- edX, Udacity and Coursera -- are most associated with MOOCs, but they are not the only providers. The Jack Welch Management Institute, an executive education program, plans to announce this week that it will offer massive online courses for its degree and certification programs. Two George Mason University professors are teaching an economics development course this fall through a platform they call Marginal Revolution University.

Not all higher education leaders are ready to jump into the fray.

While some Vassar College faculty are experimenting with MOOCs or similar initiatives, the college will wait for more evidence of their value, says President Catharine Hill.

"We're seeing a huge proliferation" in models of online teaching and learning, she says. "But I don't think we know yet about the quality implications or the cost implication."