

FN

FRIDAY, JANUARY 25, 2013

UC joining new wave of online instruction

'MOOCs' promise to disrupt age-old university class model, but how effective are they?



CLIFF PEALE

 @cliffpeale

I write about higher education and the University of Cincinnati Health system and all their impacts in our region. Email me at cpeale@enquirer.com.

The University of Cincinnati is entering the world of higher education offered online – for free.

UC's first massive open online course, with the capacity to include tens of thousands of students not paying any tuition, will start next fall with "Innovation and Design Thinking" for business and engineering students.

The courses are called MOOCs, an acronym turned buzzword at universities across the nation. They're the biggest step yet toward disrupting the way universities have operated for generations.

MOOCs are moving colleges toward a system where students would get their content anywhere, online or on a campus, and package it into a degree.

"We think it's a way to extend our reach beyond the local region and to extend access to students who may not have access," said BJ Zirger, director of online education at UC's Lindner College of Business.

The best known MOOCs include Coursera, which was founded last year at Stanford University. It now includes professors at 33 universities – including Ohio State University – teaching more than 2.3 million students in 200 courses.

There are two catches. First, few of the MOOCs are approved for college credit, although Coursera is working on tests to validate the courses. Second, providers have to

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

 **Take our poll** on MOOCs and see a list of courses at Cincinnati.com.

See MOOC, Page A6

MOOC

Continued from Page A1

find a way to pay for the courses, which aren't currently bringing in tuition dollars.

UC and virtually every other university have moved aggressively into online courses. In the College of Nursing, for example, more than 1,700 students are taking online classes toward a master of science degree in nursing. Those courses, though, don't radically change the model as MOOCs aim to do.

UC currently plans to offer credit for its initial MOOC only to those enrolling in a UC graduate program, but it will make the course available to anyone worldwide, Zirger said. Lecturers, documents and discussion boards will be available online, and students would take a series of "assessments" that could include tests or group projects.

Zirger said there is no technological limit on how many students can enroll and that UC does not plan to cap the number of students.

The payback is far from certain, and it would

come only if the course produces a stream of new students for UC graduate programs. "It's an experiment," Zirger said. "We want to see if it benefits the university."

UC currently doesn't give credit for courses taken through Coursera or any other MOOC. Zirger said there just isn't enough testing or other evidence to prove that students have learned what they need to know.

MOOC benefits now under study

Now UC will join the roster of other universities that have moved more aggressively into the open online courses. Ohio State also offers two pharmacy courses on Coursera. Other members include elite Ivy League schools and public state universities such as Virginia, Michigan and Maryland.

Very few of those students get academic credit for the courses, but Coursera is working with the American Council on Education to certify the courses.

That leaves a looming question: Are MOOCs any good? The Center for Online Learning, Research and Service at the University of Illinois-Springfield

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. In November, 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.

Officials at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., currently are designing a MOOC, to be offered this spring, on gender roles in comic books. The university hopes to draw at least 1,000 students.

"No one yet really knows what are the strengths and weaknesses of this type of educational approach," said Richard Edwards, director of research at Ball State's Integrated Learning Institute. "But this is what makes it so exciting."

Research intern Josh Wright contributed, as did Mary Beth Marklein of USA Today and Michael Boren of the Indianapolis Star.

PHOTOGRAPH BY