

MOOCs offer free college-level education

By Jim Nowlan

You and your college-age youngster can now take courses on-line—for free—from professors at the best universities in the world and, soon I predict, earn college credit for your work. For-profit universities and private colleges without strong brand names have to be deep-down worried about their futures.

Massive open on-line courses (MOOCs) are now being offered free by consortia of schools like Stanford, Princeton, Illinois and the Ivy League in a phenomenon that has expanded exponentially in just the past year. The world of higher education won't ever be the same.

What does higher education do? It adds value through education and learning, and it provides credentials for that learning through college-based credit hours and degrees, which travel with the holder for his or her lifetime.

The costs of earning those credentials have soared in recent years, and parents now look at outlays of \$20,000-\$50,000 a year to send their youngsters away to college.

More parents and high school graduates are now opting for local community college education topped off with on-line four-year college degrees.

For example, the University of Illinois now offers 100 different degrees on-line. The U. of I. at Springfield has been a leader in the game. Today about one-third of its majors are on-line students and 38 percent of all credits at the campus were generated from on-line courses.

These on-line courses are offered to classes of no more than 25 students each. They are the same courses as offered on campus. Tuition is about the same as for on-campus instruction at the public institution, which can be close to \$10,000 a year.

MOOCs are different. They are free and anyone can sign up, which means that scores of thousands have done so, from around the world, for a single course offering.

Ray Schroeder is a professor of communications at the U. of I. at Springfield and a nationally recognized expert on the topic of MOOCs. Indeed, he offered a MOOC recently on “on-line learning today and tomorrow.” More than 2,700 students from 70 countries signed up.

Every Thursday for four weeks he held audio panel discussions with leaders in the field. Students posed questions via Twitter. Discussion groups sometimes formed, as with students of the course in Christ’s Church, New Zealand, who gathered weekly at a local McDonald’s (which had wi-fi).

If you want to try a U. of I. MOOC, you can go to <http://uis.coursesites.com> and sign up free for a course on the Emancipation Proclamation that begins January 28.

The big names in MOOCs are Coursera, edX, and Udacity, all started in just the past year or so by professors at gilt-edged universities. They may be superseded by Google and Apple, which are moving rapidly into education.

“If they can see a profit in it,” observes Schroeder, “you may well see Google U. and Apple U. in the future. Many existing universities would have trouble competing with that.”

There are, of course, bugs to be worked out. How will cheating be avoided and course credit authorized, for example?

Proctored examinations at testing sites around the world (every community college has a testing site) are now used for “traditional” on-line courses and could be utilized by MOOCs. And if a student scored high on a final exam, why not award him or her college credit?

At present, some course providers offer electronic “badges” that represent successful completion of a course. These badges become part of a student’s record, and may someday replace the old college transcript.

I imagine that “free” will become “low cost” at MOOCs in the future, as there are certainly costs involved in providing courses. Google could, of course, sell advertising to offset costs and make a profit.

A MOOC education would certainly be less personal than a traditional college experience, though I recall introductory psychology and economics courses being taught to 1,000 or so students at the University of Illinois in Urbana, which wasn’t very personal.

But attendance at a bricks and mortar college provides experience at living somewhat on one’s own, development of social skills, creation of life-long mentoring relationships with professors, and a setting that imposes some discipline upon learning.

Maybe in the future some colleges and universities will become affiliates of Google U., providing structure and tutoring to complement MOOCs. Maybe MOOCs will be blended with traditional coursework.

There will be much sorting out of all this in the near future. Possibly MOOCs will be a flash in the pan, yet Schroeder thinks the phenomenon “is a big deal.” So do I.