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The Next Big Thing

Submitted by John V. Lombardi on July 23, 2012 - 3:00am
Blog: Reality Check [1]

Universities, like other high profile service organizations, continuously seek visibility and preeminence to validate their claims of significance and advertise their association with the latest educational trends and enthusiasms. MOOCs are one of these enthusiasms. Massive Open Online Courses deliver to the connected e-world electronic views of institutional course offerings. They vary in sophistication, some being mostly projections of text and static visual materials while others include classroom video capture, interactive features with other students and sometimes even professors, computer or student graded exercises, and other enhancements. Led by high prestige name-brand universities, these initiatives offer quality content to anyone at no direct cost to the consumer. Although the content is often superb, the MOOCs do not yet provide the clear certification of degree awards.

Many institutions, seeking to emulate the high visibility name-brand institutions, sign up to offer MOOCs through various providers, associating themselves both with the movement and with the prestige leaders. While much experimentation in online courseware and e-learning continues at many universities, much of it systematic credit and degree granting activity, this particular version is more in the mode of institutional advertising. It puts quality products online for free, demonstrating the value of the institution’s instructional programs that in normal circumstances are mostly invisible. It offers the world an opportunity to see how hard or easy it is to learn from the best. It provides a demonstration of quality faculty at work and it is good public relations.

However, these initiatives are not free. While the participants may not pay to engage one of the MOOC’s, someone pays to put them online. Universities sign up with companies that put the material into cyberspace, universities pay to produce the material, and of course the universities pay the faculty who create the course. All this is wonderful and exciting, but everyone needs to focus a little bit of attention on the financial structure of these arrangements.

The current students of the MOOC provider institutions pay for some significant part of the cost of these open courses because it is their tuition and fees that support the instructional programs (along with other sources from state subsidies, endowment earnings and the like). The recipients of the value of the MOOC are essentially free-loaders riding on the investment students make in the development and production of these courses that they have had to pay to receive in the classroom, on campus, or through some e-learning portal. This may be a good thing, students may thrill to have their academic challenges displayed for all the world to see and try, but no one should be confused about who's paying.

The MOOC's currently do not generate real academic credit, even when a student conscientiously takes the courses and passes the tests. At best, perhaps some kind of participation or completion certificate may appear. Absent a mechanism for preventing cheating, the MOOC's do not have a way to validate the learning that may be accomplished through these innovative enterprises.

The MOOC's are not free to the institutions that support them, leaving aside the question of the resident student subsidy. Except for wealthy institutions with surplus money to invest in initiatives and experiments, an institutional investment in delivering MOOC's to the world comes at the cost of not investing in some other academic activity of the university. If the university is high quality, has exceptional resources, continues to sustain its competitive position without difficulty, this marginal investment in MOOC advertising and trend-setting public relations is probably a fine thing. For an institution that struggles to maintain its investment in research infrastructure, student quality, library acquisitions and subscriptions, and campus services, an investment in MOOC's is not likely to be the highest and best use of the next available dollar.

Wise universities secure in their own plans and operations, seeking constantly to improve the quality of their research and teaching performance in highly competitive marketplaces, would do well to simply wait. Wait until the wealthy institutions have experimented, invested, developed, resolved problems, and produced a viable MOOC strategy that can deliver value to the university and to the participating students without taking value from the currently enrolled students. Then, when the game is mature, a university may wisely decide that there is a reason to participate.

Trustees should exercise real caution in demanding trendy responses from their institutions. Yes, it's nice to brag about keeping up with the Joneses (especially when the Joneses are rich and famous), but doing so may well prevent the current investment in core university functions of teaching and research that will determine the university's future competitiveness and success.

Being first to market with educational innovations is not necessarily an optimal strategy. Often it is best to observe, study, evaluate, and above all, do a real cost benefit analysis before jumping onto the Next Big Thing with scarce institutional resources. The opportunity cost is high and the value may not be there at the moment. After the wealthy institutions have failed, tried again, failed, and eventually subsidized the creation of a viable business model, then it's time to evaluate the marginal improvement in an institution's performance from an investment in the Next Big Thing.

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