

# *Distance Education: Access, Quality, Cautions, and Opportunities*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Assessing the impact of widely distributed learning opportunities now accessible through distance education must take into account the re-imposition of values and motives long associated with traditional education. The expectations of new higher education consumers should be tempered by institutional acknowledgement of pre-existing value structures and economics, constituting possible limitations on the utility of credentials thereby earned. Nevertheless, a reaffirmed confidence in higher education as a beneficial public good can reverse current trends of diminished state support which will, in turn, further participation and social equality. Continuing education leaders must search for ways to participate in their institution's distance education initiatives, including massive open online courses (MOOCs), even if they are not the prime movers, since these will expand opportunities for many new part-time learners.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The tension inherent in higher education between furthering educational attainment and facilitating social sorting is complicated by distance education, extending the implications of this dynamic to still larger populations of would-be students. At the same time, the debate continues between those favoring mass education and others who perceive it to be at the inevitable and unavoidable expense of quality. To sum up this anomalous situation,

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As educators we tend to believe that expanding access to higher education is an unalloyed good, primarily because of its beneficial effect on upward social mobility, and readily dismiss the access/quality debate as one whereby elites attempt to preserve their status and power. With college tuitions continuing to rise at a rate exceeding many wage gains and inflation, this argument gains greater traction. It is especially valid when state support progressively and deliberately dwindles, and these potential students whose finances are inadequate are compelled to assume levels of indebtedness unknown to earlier generations. More drastically, they are apt to downgrade their expectations for success by eschewing higher education.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that the value of earning a college degree is itself undergoing re-examination (Brown, 2011). Although university graduates continue to earn more than those whose education ceased at secondary school, in the current recession there are still too many of the former who cannot find work, or if so, at a level commensurate with their schooling and expectations (Vedder, 2012). One of the consequences

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for those unfortunate enough to incur further indebtedness or whose families perceive this as a lesser evil than unemployment or living at home is a return to graduate school, propelling the academic arms race toward still higher levels of credentialing to the post-baccalaureate level. A master's degree now serves the same function as a bachelor's degree 20 years ago in granting preference to applicants for white-collar, professional occupations.

But as an element of national policy (Lumina Foundation for Education, 2010), the drive to increase the number of college graduates, particularly to enhance international competitiveness, seems poorly timed at best (Brown, 2011, p. 5). And at worse, in the short run it is certain to exacerbate current difficulties intrinsic to wider participation and rising costs.

Add to this the promise of producing still more college graduates through distance education—either a calamity or godsend, depending upon one’s perspective—must at the very least cause us to question, as advocates for distance learning, some of the cross-currents operating in support of and against our actions.

### THE EXPANSION OF OPEN LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Should the premise that higher education will act as an automatic passport to a better life, usually defined in financial/monetary terms, be tempered by taking into account current economic realities? The answer is relevant to the waves of new consumers presently being brought into the higher education marketplace by means of the rapidly expanding network of distance education institutions and choices. These include both formal and informal actors, profit and not-for-profit, government and corporate providers.

While some examples of open learning, open courseware, open content such as the Khan Academy address knowledge acquisition and represent an unbundling of higher education, others still depend upon traditional forms of documentation, including degrees and certificates reflecting success in multicourse programs of study. The advent of MOOCs and the prospect of awarding badges for individual courses drop credentialing to a new and lower level, bringing with it asymmetric implications of status by association with higher-priced, labor-intensive full-term degrees.

In the much-discussed partnership (edX) between Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Lewin, 2012), what is promised is not access to a rarefied level of higher education but simulacra, the extension of branding imprimaturs and trademarks to an entirely different educational product bearing little resemblance to the actual degrees offered by these university titans (Mangan, 2012). While the exact specifications of edX are at this time unknown, the investment of tens of millions of dollars and the discussion of assessing nominal fees suggest that more than goodwill is at work and that an inventive, revenue generating model underlies this variant.

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### THE LAW OF UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

Yet for all intents and purposes, the Internet and the World Wide Web, open courseware initiatives, and MOOCs are extending educational promise to potentially millions of previously unreached students. They may even serve

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as a bridge to credit programs (Fain, 2012). The levels and types of new offerings are sure to proliferate as providers and consumers adapt products to specialized needs, much as the market for consumer goods has called forth product differentiation through staggering degrees of flavor, shape, and alleged efficacy.

Competition for students, already fierce, will only intensify at all levels. Distance education's global reach will penetrate what were once protected regional markets. This may be to the disadvantage of local monopolies but certainly to the benefit of formerly bypassed or underserved communities, allowing them to enter a universal mainstream of expectations hitherto denied.

The opportunity for individuals to compete at new and higher levels of educational attainment raises the prospect of disappointment and despair, much as some of today's college graduates languish in unfulfilling jobs, well beneath their competencies. But if the purpose of education is to equip people with the necessary tools to thrive in their respective environments, raising this concern as an ethical caution need not be a source of despair but simply a call for greater realism tempering expectations.

### STRATEGIES FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION LEADERS

There has been discomfort expressed by some continuing educators, long involved in distance education, whose institutions have suddenly discovered online education in the form of MOOCs. After years of indifference and suspicion, when the quality of online learning, often situated in divisions of continuing education, was routinely questioned, academic leaders now eagerly emulate the well-publicized initiatives of Harvard, MIT and other leading universities. Ironically, those in CE may now find themselves playing a marginal role in this newly minted, mainstream activity.

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seems to be the fear of being left behind. The same goes for liberal financial investment in these undertakings, while continuing education units are perpetually running on empty or at best, a lean mix of organizational capital.

In the meantime, institutions offering MOOCs have to cope with undeveloped or untested business models (except on the part of providers, which, in several cases, are for-profit organizations, e.g., Coursera, Udacity, Udemy), high dropout rates, and no best practice models or focused learning assessments, all of which have already been addressed in most CE online degree programs. The only dividend that institutions can point to is the publicity flowing from the visibility MOOCs still offer, which is subject to further decline as more colleges and universities proffer their own MOOCs, and the enterprise no longer merits the same level of attention in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Inside Higher Ed*, or elsewhere. There is also the possibility of faculty opposition as the long-term consequences of MOOCs are felt in the academic labor market.

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Still, it is nevertheless true that by engaging in MOOCs, institutions are strengthening their commitment to lifelong learning in unprecedented, major ways. Continuing educators should take comfort in the scale of these new outreach activities, which are way beyond the capacity of their divisions, not to mention the added status that can come from full-bore institutional support. And still another benefit may be the spillover effect of greater interest and perhaps enrollment in CE online degree programs. It may be that we will emerge as one of the big winners of the MOOC revolution. Time will tell.

The question necessarily arises whether CE programs should create their own MOOCs. There are several arguments against adopting this strategy. First is the absence of a world-class faculty. Most CE units rely upon a scant pool of full-time faculty, offset by large cadres of adjuncts. They often lack access to the full range of university talent, locked away in academic departments.

Second, even if this were not so, continuing education is without sufficiently abundant venture capital to induce “star” faculty participation, and possibly the infrastructure required to serve thousands of participants enrolled in a single course. Third, and most important of all, the absence of

a viable business model for free courses makes this a risky enterprise even for the largest and most successful schools of continuing education. And the problem increases along with numerical success. You cannot solve this

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dilemma with still greater volume.

Perhaps the most sound strategy *vis-à-vis* MOOCs is to offer a helping hand. After all, we have made a career of distance and outreach education and MOOCs certainly qualify as still another example. Also, by lending support we gain access to institutional prestige and visibility we often find lacking. Finally, MOOCs represent experimentation in higher education, a sector notorious for its dogged resistance to change. They may quite possibly lead to large-scale organizational innovation of lasting value and a major reorientation to lifelong learning, our historic cause.

### CONCLUSIONS

It is hoped that the newly degreed and credentialed, regardless of institutional pedigree, can now aspire to jobs from which they were excluded because of failure to surpass required, minimum educational thresholds. They now enjoy the same opportunity for success and, of course, disillusionment. But most would agree that this state of affairs is preferable when compared to an alternative devoid of faith in securing a better life.

While it is distressing to conceive of a future of vastly underutilized human capital, what is equally likely to occur is quite the opposite: a flourishing of creativity and invention engendering still greater investment in universal further education. These developments will add new vigor to the debate between those who view higher education as either a private or public good (Goldrick-Rab, 2012).

The latter conviction underpinned the expansion of state subsidized, affordable higher education for an earlier generation of college students. It may yet be possible to believe in the resuscitation of public higher education as a government deliverable of the highest order, once the nexus between higher education and invention are persuasively reaffirmed and demonstrated.

As continuing educators we must strive to make this causal relationship more palpable. By rejecting a common assumption that public divestment in higher education is deterministic and is simply movement along an in-

disputable, downward trend line, we can aspire to a future that is socially benevolent and also economically rich. 🌱

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