

# Number of free, noncredit courses on Web increasing

January 18 2010, By Susan Snyder

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A stay-at-home mom in Maine. A physics teacher in an under-supplied school in Quito, Ecuador. A food-service-supply salesman in Lancaster, Pa., laid up for months with little to do after a hang-gliding accident. And two out-of-work West Philadelphia men looking to take an intellectual journey from their living room.

They are among millions around the world who have been attracted to Yale University's free courses on the Web, complete with audio and video lectures, syllabi and supplementary materials.

"It was such a great thing to me," said Steve Ziegler, 40, of Lancaster, who during his recovery watched Ivy League English-class lectures on Cormac McCarthy's novel "Blood Meridian," which quickly became one of his favorite books. "I was able to get more out of something that I love because Yale put these courses online."

More universities are beginning to upload full-length, free courses through iTunes, [YouTube](#) and the international consortium site OpenCourseWare.

The University of Pennsylvania put up an environmental course and a psychology course on its "open learning" site last year, with plans to expand.

Eastern University in St. Davids, Pa., launched a Christian spirituality course and an urban sociology course, also in the last year.

The [University of Delaware](#) started a page on iTunes last month with courses currently restricted to staff and students, but with some likely to become public.

While some worry such projects are tantamount to giving away perhaps a university's most prized treasure -- its teaching -- others say the projects fulfill a mission to disseminate information widely.

Of the eight Ivy League schools, Yale has been a leader, with 25 free courses online and 11 more coming this fall.

"We wanted to share our academic treasures more widely with the world," said Diana E.E. Kleiner, a history of arts professor who directs the project.

Since the Web site's launch in December 2007, more than 2 million from 193 countries have viewed -- though not necessarily completed -- courses, she said. Many others have tapped into the courses on iTunes and YouTube, she said. Though these are the same courses taken for credit by Yale undergraduates on campus, they are noncredit on the Web.

The learning is self-directed. There are no grades, no feedback, no course credit and no class-time interaction with faculty. Participants send e-mails to professors, which some opt to answer.

Some of Yale's star professors take part, including economics professor Robert J. Shiller, who wrote "Irrational Exuberance," about bubblelike market behavior.

The project is being funded by a \$3 million, four-year grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

One of the biggest challenges is raising funds to add new courses, Kleiner said.

Such ventures can be costly.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2002 launched its OpenCourseWare site and eventually uploaded materials for all of the university's 1,950 courses, said Steve Carson, external relations director for MIT OpenCourseWare. Thirty classes offer video.

It cost about \$30 million -- all but \$5 million funded by outside sources. The university spends about \$3.6 million a year to maintain it, some of which also is funded from the outside.

The site's popularity has grown. In 2009, 15 million watched courses, up from 4.5 million five years earlier, he said. About 42 percent are students at other schools, 9 percent educators and the rest "self-learners," he said.

The project has boosted relations with universities worldwide, improved teaching as professors evaluated themselves, strengthened ties with students and alumni, and helped with recruiting, Carson said.

"About half of our incoming students said they have looked at the site," with many reporting it influenced their choice, Carson said.

As more universities around the world began asking for help to do the same, the nonprofit OpenCourseWare Consortium was created that now includes about 13,000 free courses from more than 200 higher education institutions and associated organizations from around the world. Twenty-two are in the United States, including the University of California at Berkeley, University of Michigan, Tufts, Notre Dame and Johns Hopkins.

Professors say the project has been rewarding to them and a public service.

"We can't admit everybody to Yale, but we can give this to everybody absolutely free," said physics professor Ramamurti Shankar.

He's heard from high school students aided by his course, the stay-at-home mom in Maine who told him it expanded her mind and an educator at a university in Istanbul, Turkey, who used his course.

Philosophy professor Shelly Kagan -- who teaches "Death," which explores immortality, suicide and other issues and has become one of the most popular courses -- said he had gained a wider audience, both geographically and in the kind of students he reaches.

"I had a janitor who e-mailed me and said he listened to some of my lectures while cleaning," he said.

Vincent Evangelisti, 53, and Matthew Moseley, 39, the West Philadelphia housemates, are making their way through Yale's intro-to-psychology course. They've also looked at Roman architecture and molecular, cellular and developmental biology.

"We've been absolutely thrilled," said Evangelisti, a 1979 Yale grad.

Ziegler, a high school dropout who said he has nonetheless always had a thirst for knowledge, began to watch as a way to stimulate his mind, awash in painkillers and idleness after his 2008 accident. He started with an MIT biology course and moved on to English courses at Yale.

He found the material accessible and understandable.

"I wouldn't consider trying to get through 'Paradise Lost' without having

a course online," said Ziegler, who has recovered and is back at work.

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**COLLEGES OFFERING ONLINE COURSES INCLUDE:**

[Yale University](http://oyc.yale.edu): oyc.yale.edu

University of Pennsylvania: pennlpscommons.org

Eastern University: eastern.edu/online(underscore)courses/index.html

OpenCourseWare Consortium: [www.ocwconsortium.org](http://www.ocwconsortium.org)

Massachusetts Institute of Technology:  
ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/home/home/index.htm

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