

College credit for online courses gains momentum

November 16 2012, by Mary Beth Marklein

The American Council on Education, a nonprofit organization that represents most of the nation's college and university presidents, is preparing to weigh in on massive open online courses - MOOCs, for short - a new way of teaching and learning that has taken higher education by storm in recent months.

A stamp of approval from the organization could enhance the value of MOOCs to universities and lead to lower [tuition costs](#) for students, who could earn credit toward a [college degree](#) for passing a particular course. At issue is whether the quality of the [courses](#) offered through MOOCs are equivalent to similar courses offered in traditional classrooms.

The popularity of MOOCs, which have been around for barely a year, has intensified quickly. Top faculty at dozens of the world's most elite colleges and universities are teaching hundreds of online courses in a variety of disciplines to millions of students around the world. The courses are free, but they don't count toward traditional degree programs.

"MOOCs are an intriguing, innovative new approach that holds much promise for engaging students across the country and around the world, as well as for helping colleges and universities broaden their reach," says Molly Corbett Broad, president of the council. "But as with any new approach, there are many questions about long-term potential, and ACE is eager to help answer them."

Part of the council's plan, announced Tuesday and beginning next year, involves teams of faculty that will examine the content and rigor of particular courses to evaluate whether they should be recommended for college credit. Central to that activity is a division of the council, called ACE CREDIT, that was created in 1974 to help adults gain credit for courses and exams taken outside traditional degree programs. The team makes recommendations and provides transcripts for documentation, but it would be up to individual schools whether to accept the course for credit.

The initiative, to be funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, also will involve research on the impact of MOOCs. A task force of top administrators will convene to discuss the potential for MOOCs to improve student learning and boost college attainment levels. A pilot project involving a small number of colleges and universities aims to explore whether MOOCs are successful in engaging adult learners.

"We are eager to learn from and share the data that will be generated," says Dan Greenstein, of the Gates foundation.

Some universities already are incorporating MOOCs into their programs. Last month, Antioch University in Los Angeles announced it had entered into a contract with Coursera, one of the most prominent MOOC providers, to offer course credit for certain courses. In addition to taking the online Coursera course, students also would work with a faculty member on campus who also took the course.

The first courses to be evaluated through the American Council on Education have not been identified but will be offered by Coursera, a for-profit company that partners with 33 universities to offer about 200 online courses. Other MOOC providers include Udacity and EdX. The process is scheduled to start early next year.

Coursera co-founder Andrew Ng says the potential to transfer credit "is a significant step forward," but added that it's too early to know how evaluators or universities will respond. "This is a new thing for all of us."

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