

Universities look to online programs to navigate an uncertain future

August 23 2013, by Michael Vasquez

Measured strictly by size, the University of Florida's recent Fundamentals of Human Nutrition class was a resounding success. The class, offered this past spring, was UF's first foray into the online trend of massive open online courses, or MOOCs. The class was open to anyone interested, from around the world, and more than 69,000 students signed up.

For comparison purposes, UF as a university has a total enrollment of about 50,000 a year.

In other ways, though, UF's MOOC - and the track record of MOOCs in general - is less impressive. With the courses generally offered free of charge (hence the "open" part of their title) some inevitably sign up simply out of curiosity, or because it allows them to listen to the lectures of big-name [professors](#) at far-away schools such as Harvard or MIT.

Students often have no real intention of doing the work. Completion rates are generally abysmal, with more than 90 percent of [students](#) dropping out.

At UF, tens of thousands of students registered but didn't even watch one class presentation.

Also, if stadium-sized online [classes](#) are indeed a glimpse into the future of [higher education](#) (and many have suggested they are), how are universities supposed to stay financially afloat when they're giving away

their product for free? Another issue: MOOCs usually don't include any college credit, so how useful can they be for students who want a credential that is recognized and valued by employers?

The ongoing debate over MOOCs is a [microcosm](#) of America's higher education industry, which is now at an Internet-created crossroads. Across the country, online learning allows schools to expand their reach, but it is also threatening the traditional business model of how to deliver knowledge and also how much to charge for it.

Across all sectors of the industry - public, private, and for-profit - there is the sense that online learning offers the greatest opportunity for future growth. For-profit universities such as the University of Phoenix and Strayer University were the first to truly embrace online education, and their revenues soared as a result. Between 1998 and 2008, enrollment in U.S. for-profit colleges jumped by 236 percent, according to the independent advocacy group Education Trust.

Aside from their early mastery of the online platform, the for-profits excelled at marketing to adult, nontraditional students, as well as tailoring the educational experience to their unique needs. The University of Phoenix, for example, compressed its classes into five or six-week mini-semesters, with the idea that it's easier for busy adults to absorb one fast-paced class than to juggle four classes in a full-length college semester.

More recently, though, for-profits have been criticized for using overly-aggressive, car-salesman-like selling tactics to recruit students. The schools often charge higher tuition than public colleges, and the student loan default rates at for-profit schools are dramatically higher than at other types of colleges.

The combination of bad publicity and stricter government oversight has

slowed for-profits' recent growth. In 2011, Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based Keiser University took the unusual step of switching its status from for-profit to nonprofit, but the school still had to contend with a Florida Attorney General's office investigation that began before the switch. Keiser last year agreed to a settlement with Attorney General Pam Bondi in which the school would offer free retraining to thousands of former students, while also changing its policies to add new consumer protections.

At the same time that for-profits have struggled, traditional public and private colleges have aggressively expanded their menu of fully online degree programs.

But some schools, such as the University of Miami, have been hesitant to join the mad dash toward offering fully online degrees. UF has a staggering array of graduate-level online degrees - 70 in all.

This fall, UM will unveil its first online degree: a bachelor's in general studies that targets adult learners who have some college experience and want to get enough credits to finally graduate.

"Overall, UM sees itself as coming cautiously to this party, and wanting to look very carefully at what the implications are for making the shift to online learning," said Rebecca Fox, UM's dean of continuing and international education.

For UM, which prides itself on small classes and high interaction between students and faculty, the task of teaching online presents a challenge to its whole institutional identity.

Ray Schroeder, director of the Center for Online Learning, Research and Service at the University of Illinois-Springfield, says universities are now facing the same decisions that confronted the music and newspaper

industries years ago when the Internet turned their whole operating structure upside down.

"Colleges and universities should be excited - this is an important change and movement in higher education," Schroeder said, although he warned that online learning means colleges will face increased, and tougher, competition. Schroeder noted that well-known Harvard business professor Clayton Christensen predicts that about half of U.S. colleges and universities will go bankrupt during the next 15 years.

"There certainly will be a shakeout," Schroeder said.

Davie, Fla.-based Nova Southeastern University was an early pioneer in the realm of online learning - the school began offering an online master's degree program back in 1986. Limited by the technology of the times, that master's degree in computer-based learning was entirely text-based, with instructors typing out a lesson and students responding with typed questions.

Flash-forward to 2010, and Nova had advanced tools such as "interactive teleconferencing," which it used to train doctors in Iraq on emergency pediatric procedures. In a room located thousands of miles away, the Iraqi students practiced their techniques on plastic dummies, while Nova instructors at the Davie campus virtually looked over their shoulder online.

Where will things go from here? Perhaps the future will be something like the fully online (and bargain-priced) bachelor's degree programs that UF will launch next year. State lawmakers in April approved a new initiative where UF will offer online bachelor's degrees priced at no more than 75 percent of the university's face-to-face tuition. With Floridians increasingly struggling to pay for college tuition, state leaders have pitched online classes as a way to rein in the cost of getting a

degree.

But W. Andrew McCollough, associate provost for teaching and technology at UF, warns that online classes don't automatically solve the college-affordability problem.

"There is no inexpensive way to develop quality online learning," McCollough said. "If you're going to maintain the quality you insist on, you need scale."

That means online classes of 200 students, not 20, McCollough said. Regarding MOOCs, McCollough views the gigantic courses as an initiative to freely spread the knowledge of the nation's best professors worldwide - but without awarding college credit.

Others think MOOCs will eventually shift to a for-credit model, thereby allowing students to take a sizable chunk of their college courses for free. But for now, only a handful of colleges nationwide grant transfer credits for a completed MOOC.

At some institutions, the online classes taken for college credit are actually slightly more expensive than traditional face-to-face classes. That's because the schools, in an effort to offset the cost of developing online courses, tack on an extra online-learning fee. Florida International University's online fee is \$160 for a standard three-credit course, added to the normal tuition of \$615 per class.

Such fees haven't slowed the popularity of online learning at the University of Central Florida, where an astounding 74 percent of students take at least one online course. Even with the fees, President John Hitt argues that the online revolution is saving students money.

Thanks to online courses, Hitt said, UCF is no longer constrained by the

number of classrooms available at its Orlando campus. As a result, the university can offer more of the classes that students need to graduate on time preventing students from having to stick around for an additional year.

"That's easily \$10,000 or so for a year," Hitt said. "That's a huge savings."

UCF has built a national reputation as a leader in online education, and Hitt says he's "very optimistic" about what the future will hold.

Administrators say online classes - perhaps surprisingly - are helping enliven the school's traditional campus. Most UCF students aren't fully online - they take a mix of online and face-to-face classes. But the scheduling flexibility of online classes has given students more time to hang out on campus and participate in student clubs or other activities, administrators say.

Online classes have also transformed the teaching practices of traditional face-to-face classes. At UCF, it's common for professors teaching classroom courses to nevertheless use the online learning management system to post interactive activities for students. The standard "chalk and talk" lecture approach is fast disappearing, said Joel Hartman, UCF's vice provost for information technologies and resources.

"There aren't that many pure face-to-face courses left anymore," Hartman said.

When UCF students rate their courses at the end of the semester, blended learning classes (combining in-person and online instruction) have received the highest marks. Fully online classes, and then traditional classroom courses, rank the next highest in student satisfaction.

"It's not that face-to-face classroom is low, it's that these others have risen to the top," Hartman said.

At Florida International University, history professor Brian Peterson teaches both online and traditional classes. In his face-to-face classes, he also uses the online teaching platform - Peterson might give a 15-minute lecture and then break up the students into research teams, or they may evaluate each other's written papers online.

"What we're doing in class is interacting. ... It's making face-to-face classes better," Peterson said.

Still, Peterson has mixed emotions about the rise of fully online classes. He said he has noticed that students in his online classes seem less engaged (with less-frequent attendance, for example) and that they often sign up for online classes assuming the course will be easier in that format.

The course does end up being easier online, Peterson said, if only because he can't push these unmotivated students as far.

"You have to set the bar lower online if you want to keep an acceptable number of students," Peterson said. "Yeah, it bothers me, but I think that my job is to do the best I can with the circumstances that I have."

Another issue is whether online education is the right fit for all types of students. Some research has suggested that community college students - who are often unprepared for college-level work when they enroll - are particularly ill-suited for online courses.

A 2011 Columbia University study found that community college students had an 82 percent chance of completing an online course - compared to 90 percent for face-to-face courses. In remedial classes, the

gap grew even larger, with 85 percent of face-to-face students succeeding, but only 74 percent of online students completing the course.

Ruth Ann Balla, who heads Miami Dade College's Virtual College, said online students are about 5 percent more likely to either fail or drop out of an MDC course. To help students succeed online, the college caps its classes at 30 students, and MDC designs its classes to keep students engaged: There are lots of discussion groups and group projects, and assignments are due every week instead of only at the end of the semester. The college will also call students who are not regularly logging in.

"We, by intention, are very aware and really track what's happening in the online classes," Balla said. About 10,000 MDC students are taking online courses each semester, and the college offers 16 different online degree or certificate programs.

But MDC isn't offering any MOOCs, Balla said, in part because of concerns that its students would struggle in a class that has little to no interaction with faculty. Balla also isn't sold on the whole MOOC concept in general.

"I have to question: Why do you have 1,000 or 5,000 or 50,000 people in a course when fewer than 10 percent are finishing?" she said. "What's the point?"

Investors are clearly more bullish on the future of MOOCs. The massive courses have generated considerable Silicon Valley buzz, and Coursera - the MOOC provider that partners with UF as well as more than 80 other schools - has had no trouble raising money, even though the firm has yet to turn a profit. In a span of about 15 months, Coursera has raised roughly \$65 million.

MOOC users in some instances rave about the experience. The website Coursetalk allows the public to search for MOOCs based on subject area or student reviews. There are several other similar websites, such as Course Buffet and Class Central - all of them aiming to become the Yelp.com of the MOOC universe.

Of the hundreds of courses listed on Coursetalk, the top-rated MOOC is "An Introduction to Interactive Programming in Python" at Rice University.

Closer to home, South Miami-Dade student Max Goldberg is quite satisfied with the UM MOOC he took in AP Calculus. Max, 17, also took the AP course in person at his high school, Belen Jesuit, but he credits the UM course with helping him brush up on the topic before sitting for the actual AP test.

Thanks in part to the UM course, Max scored a 3 on the exam - enough to earn him college credit at some schools.

In keeping with its university philosophy of smaller classes, UM's MOOCs are somewhat smaller than what you'll find at other colleges. Max's class, for example, had hundreds, not thousands, of students.

Although Max praised the UM class as interesting and engaging (with an instructor who answered questions and even gave out his phone number), the teen still favors a traditional classroom. When taking classes online, he said, it's too easy to lose focus and start wasting time surfing the Web.

"I'm more of a fan of face-to-face," he said. Looking ahead to college, Max said, online classes "would not be my first option."

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