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Why Some Colleges Are Saying No to MOOC Deals, at Least for Now

By Steve Kolowich

Amherst College, known for its selectivity, is accustomed to sending rejection notices. But when the liberal-arts beacon this month turned down an invitation to join the exclusive partnership of colleges offering massive open online courses through edX, it nonetheless drew surprise from many corners of academe.

Colleges have clamored to be part of the high-profile consortiums run by edX, a Cambridge-based nonprofit, and Coursera, a Bay Area start-up—often with little input from faculty members. The pace of adoption has shocked even the founders of the MOOC platforms, who are veterans of a higher-education sector notorious for its tortoiselike reflexes.

But Amherst's rejection of edX, decided by a faculty vote, could mark a new chapter for MOOCs—one in which colleges revert to their default modes of deliberations and caution. "I think we're at the early stages of that honeymoon period coming to an end," says Richard Garrett, vice president and principal analyst of the consulting company Eduventures.

If MOOCs portend a "tsunami" of change in higher education, as observers have said, then many colleges have been willingly swept in by the undertow. In less than two years, massive online courses have grown from side projects of a few techie professors into companies fueled by tens of millions in venture capital funds and the imaginations of the entire education industry. For universities worldwide, membership in edX or Coursera has become the hottest ticket in town.

The nonprofit edX, founded last year by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, has been particularly careful about whom it lets in the door; it has 12 institutional partners but has received inquiries about membership from more than 300 colleges, according to Dan O'Connell, a spokesman. Meanwhile, Coursera has gotten so many inquiries that Daphne Koller, a co-founder, says she has lost track.

"For a while it really felt like a rocket ship, with folks desperate not to be left behind," says Peter Stokes, executive director of postsecondary innovation at Northeastern University's College of Professional Studies.

"I think that phase has passed, and the folks who are starting to do the work are starting to realize that these efforts ... have real costs for the institution," says Mr. Stokes. "And I think that's creating a little bit more sobriety about how folks view the opportunity."

Offering MOOCs through edX is hardly free. There are options available to institutions that want to build their own courses on the edX platform at no charge, but for partners who want help developing their courses, edX charges a base rate of \$250,000 per course, then \$50,000 for each additional time that course is offered; edX also takes a cut of any revenue the course generates.

There are also significant labor costs that come with offering MOOCs. A recent Chronicle survey found that professors typically spent 100 hours, sometimes much more, to develop their massive online courses, and then eight to 10 hours each week while the courses were in session. This commitment amounted to a major drain on their normal campus responsibilities.

Those known costs, combined with uncertainty about whether the MOOCs will make enough money for colleges to recover their investments, might be enough to deter some institutions, says R. Michael Tanner, a vice president and chief academic officer at the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities—especially public universities that are facing budget cuts.

In the debate at Amherst, which boasts a \$1.64-billion endowment, money was no object, and the faculty committee devoted to weighing the pros and cons of joining edX did not seem worried about MOOCs as a distraction to teaching and service.

Rather, the committee cited a number of philosophical qualms. MOOCs run counter to Amherst's commitment to "learning through close colloquy"; they might "perpetuate the 'information dispensing' model of teaching."

On a larger scale, MOOCs might create a "new and different kind of competition" that could jeopardize more-vulnerable colleges, if not Amherst itself; they could "enable the centralization of American higher education" and "create the conditions for the obsolescence of the B.A. degree."

The committee also wondered if edX's need to bring in money to remain sustainable could lead it to do things the college would consider unsavory, like selling aggregated student data to outside companies, or putting too much emphasis on credentialing.

While joining edX might allow Amherst to fight those battles from within

the consortium, "there might, realistically, be little opportunity to shape the organization within due to the size and type of member institutions," the faculty committee wrote.

On Their Own

In the end, the faculty vote was not close: 70 to 36 against joining edX, with five abstentions.

Tekla A. Harms, a professor of geology, was among those in favor of teaming up with edX. The risk to joining the MOOC parade was low, in her view, since the proposal limited Amherst's commitment to a trial period of four or five years. The risk to remaining on the sidelines is higher than the risks of joining up, says Ms. Harms. "If there's something at the forefront of education, Amherst College should be there," she says.

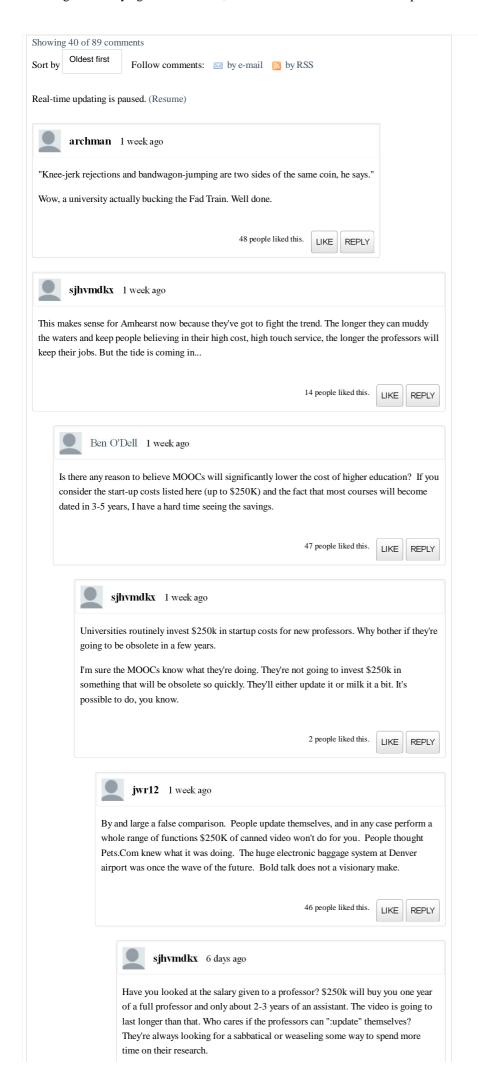
Stephen A. George, a professor of biology and neuroscience, led the call to stay out of edX. But it was not the idea of venturing into online education so much as the thought of joining a MOOC consortium that deterred him. "The fact that Amherst needed to join this organization—that really seemed most difficult to accept," says Mr. George.

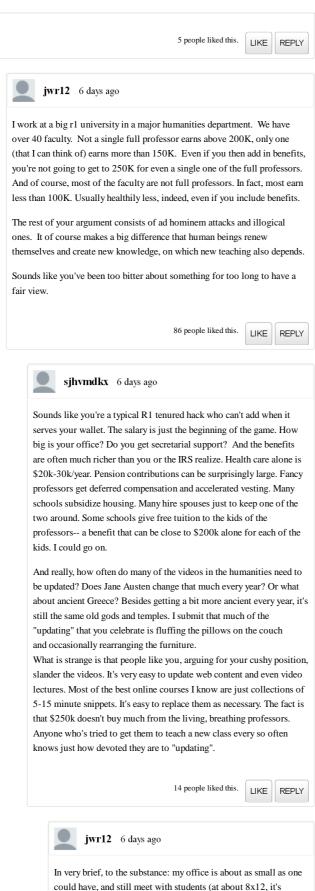
The biology professor's motion, which was passed in the vote, proposed that Amherst explore online teaching technology outside the context of the major MOOC groups. New ways of teaching that include "flipped" classrooms and online videos—"that is within reach," says Mr. George, "and that is what we really want to do."

The way the edX debate unfolded at Amherst reflects a healthy change in the way a leading institution might approach the question of how to incorporate online education into its curriculum, says Mr. Garrett, of Eduventures. Knee-jerk rejections and bandwagon-jumping are two sides of the same coin, he says.

"They thought this through," says Mr. Garrett, "in a way that they wouldn't have a few years ago."

Comments
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In very brief, to the substance: my office is about as small as one could have, and still meet with students (at about 8x12, it's probably three times as wide and twice as long as my eventual coffin). I do not have personal secretarial support; the department has administrators, who handle some copying and scanning for me, but most of both of those tasks are done by me, and most of the rest of what our staff does has to do with the mechanics of running a big program: schedules, book orders, classrooms, etc. I have health care, for which I pay a substantial monthly amount in employee contributions. Add all of this up, and the same for

most of my colleagues, and you get nowhere near \$150K, much

less \$250k.

I won't base my judgements of higher ed as a whole based on the deals finagled by a handful at elite private institutions, which is what most of the rest of your argument is based on.

Speaking for my own discipline, I would say that history constantly changes in ways more profound than you imply. States end (the USSR or Apartheid South Africa for example), and their archives and secrets come into view; people also ask new questions (was same sex marriage practiced in the middle ages?; how widely did the Federalist papers circulate?). Unless we want to give up on the idea that we can learn new things about our selves, we need to invest in people, first.

57 people liked this.





sjhvmdkx 6 days ago

So some new history is created each year. The history of the Korean War and before is relatively fixed. I'm sure that any video about such a time today will still be just as valuable in twenty years. Any of these great discoveries in archives-really just PR events by schools desperate to justify those trips to the exotic European cities holding the archives-- can be boiled down to an errata sheet.





Sam 4 days ago

I am from a third world country who got an opportunity to study in a US university. I have done library research on the American university's history, especially the politics that kept this (now) amazing institution in the history of humanity--this power house of almost all inventions and discoveries, this mother of most modern knowledge-making, and I could go on--from developing as it should have after President Lincoln signed the Land Grant bill in 1862 until, yes, the "market" picked up interest in the university, around 1912. Then the American university soon grew exponentially. The second boom (which I studied less extensively) was the GI bill and its aftermath (especially open enrollment). As someone from outside the US (based on how fascinated I was by the intellectual productivity of, yes, the English department at a not very prestigious public university in the south), when I read sjhvmdkx's arguments, I really wanted to cry. Sir/Madam, I don't want to offend you, but you miserably fail to appreciate the American university and its intellectuals as one of the few fundamentals that makes America what it is. You may be right that the economics of the university has to be seriously rethought (considering the rising cost of college to students, technological advancements that must be used in order to add or enhance/not replace what is best, etc). But your visible dislike of the professoriate, especially in the humanities, in my opinion, seems to invalidate much of your argument. Here's one reason why: Professors in the humanities and social science produce knowledge of society, art, history, humanity, culture,

technology, government, and many, many areas of knowledge that are fundamental to America as a superpower. If you only have doctors and scientists and engineers--or worse if you just have a few star professors teaching thousands of students in a financially viable but humanly isolated manners--you will throw the baby with the bathwater. Even as a graduate student who got 20k/year, I produced more knowledge, created more opportunities for professional development of fellow graduate students, taught and mentored more undergraduate students, and served more local communities than people in trade and business can even imagine as to what the "lazy" professors do in the university. Your description of professors sounded like 10% true and 90% hate-filled when I remember my professors, and while some of the tendencies you describe may be there in some professors, there is something about being "American" in university professors that you will only appreciate if you compare them with other societies. American professors have that deep, cultural desire to create new knowledge; even the tenure and promotion process rewards good teaching (students don't "evaluate" their teachers in most other societies in the world); and even the professors of art and music produce generations of new professionals who take the knowledge/understanding of those more abstract fields into more concrete professions. For example, people who return to my country with American graduate degrees in English go into diplomacy, international organizations, trade and business leadership, and most importantly serve as promoters of America's intellectual leadership to the world (as do those that stay in the US--even though most of them find opportunities within the academic discipline itself). If there are problems, they need to be solved. There's no use of demonizing people. This kind of talk can be dangerous.

35 people liked this. LIKE REPLY



TA4EVA 6 days ago

"Does Jane Austen change that much every year? Or what about ancient

Greece? Besides getting a bit more ancient every year, it's still the same old gods and temples. I submit that much of the "updating" that you

celebrate is fluffing the pillows on the couch and occasionally rearranging the furniture."

Is it so surprising that professors of ancient greek tragedy or philosophy don't want to relinquish control to people who view their subject-matter as "the same old gods and temples"? Your staggering anti-intellectualism is precisely why most faculty are utterly suspicious of MOOCs and their MEd-wielding Silicon

Valley cheerleaders.

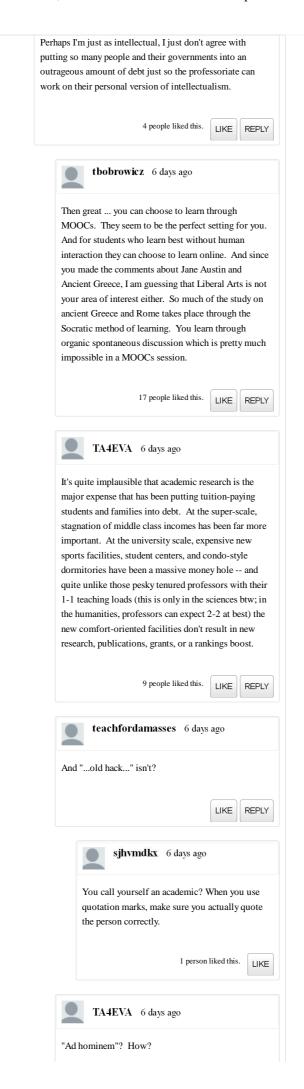
77 people liked this.

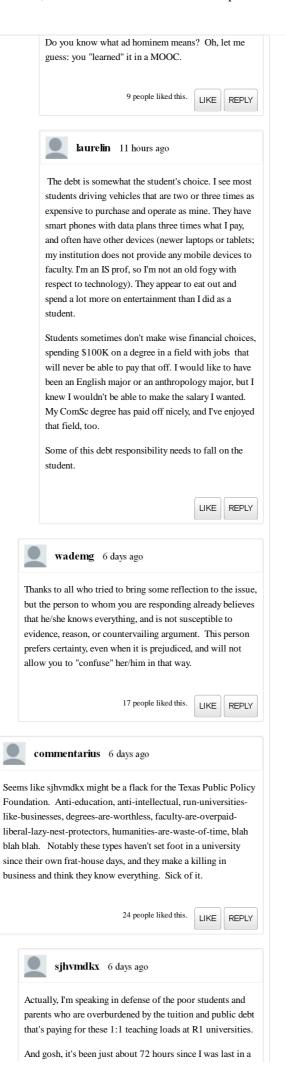




sjhvmdkx 6 days ago

Ah the old "anti-intellectualism" argument. Sounds ad hominem to me.





university. It was incredibly fancy-- much fancier than it needed to be. Much fancier than the law offices I was in last week.

I like the humanities but I can't afford them at the price you want to charge. Nor can 99% of society. So go on, keep hating on your customers. Keep pretending that your customers (and taxpayers) are stupid. That's the arrogance I get from the university. When you get criticism it's so much easier to dismiss it or label it "bitter" than to act upon it.

4 people liked this.





tbobrowicz 6 days ago

My kids go to a Charter school in a poor district, 65% of the students are Hispanic from low income families (low meaning they make less than \$50,000 per year). Our board, in part because Microsoft is giving us so much money, in part because they feel technology is the way of the future, is moving to an online learning environment this year. Teachers will basically proctor and trouble shoot. This is where the problem is for these kids though. The way they begin to even care about an education is through the relationship they have with a dedicated and talented teacher. Someone who can inspire them and mentor them and show them that education is the way out of poverty. Many of these kids have learning issues as well and what we are seeing is that online learning disengages kids from the learning experience. So I do believe you care about poor students and their parents who are burdened by the cost of college. And indeed many of these kids, while they graduate from high school and go on to college, end up dropping out because the cost. Online learning can help, but it is not the solution to a much larger problem. What we need are more good teachers who see the profession as a vocation; who are dedicated to changing lives. I have seen teachers like this and they can do in one year what MOOCs will never be able to do. Maybe things are different at the college level, but I certainly won't be shelling out and financing and education that costs \$150,000 over four years if all they're going to be doing is sitting in front of a computer.

24 people liked this.

LIKE REPLY

REPLY



TA4EVA 6 days ago

Near as I can tell, your "defense of the poor students and parents who

are overburdened by the tuition and public debt that's paying for these

1:1 teaching loads at R1 universities" amounts to "don't send the poor to R1 universities."

4 people liked this. LIKE

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sjhvmdkx 6 days ago

Well, if by "R1 University" you mean a plush place with big labs, low teaching loads, loads of

grad students on stipend and fat pensions, well, the answer is that no one can afford those things except, perhaps, a few rich fools. The smart ones are already skipping college like the head of that Preston Gates law firm.

But we can do research on an affordable scale. The schools used to do it in the 1950s before the universities figured out how to blackmail the middle class.

1 person liked this. LIKE



TA4EVA 6 days ago

This is in response to your "R1 University"/1950s comment below.

We're in total agreement that universities' balance of costs made more sense in the 1950s. I'd also argue that there was more pathbreaking research getting done during the whole 30s-60s period, in most disciplines.

However, it's hardly the case that universities in the 1950s were embracing anything like a "MOOC" model of education! Quite the opposite. NOW is the MOOCification era, not then.

The other part of your comment smacks of libertarian thinktank drivel.

6 people liked this. LIKE REPLY



professormo 6 days ago

Yes, you are bitter. I suggest you start looking at the real salary drains in universities..... Administrators. In the few years I have worked at my university, the number of administrators has proliferated, all to no real value added to the education. The salaries of administrators easily outweigh the salaries of the faculty. And, I'm not sure what they all do, except attend many meetings, to no good outcome, and do not add any positive effects to the education of students.

15 people liked this. LIKE



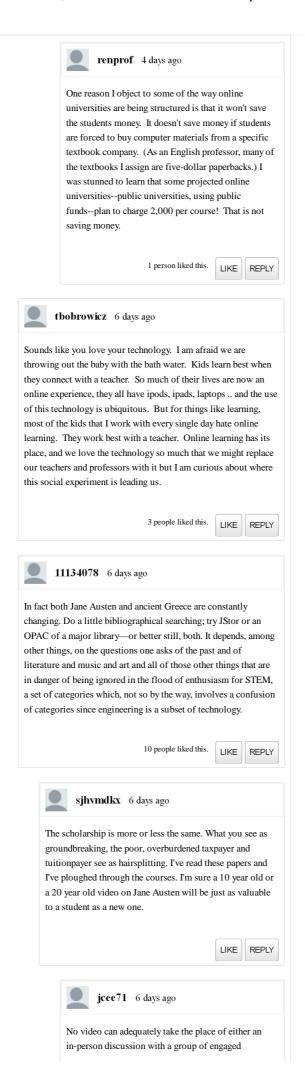
sjhvmdkx 3 days ago

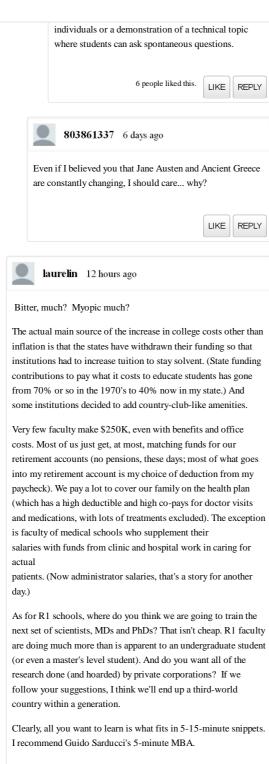
Sure. Go ahead and dismiss someone as "bitter". It's easy for the tenured who are determined to protect their privilege, all supported by dumping trillions of dollars of debt on the shoulders of the next generation.

But sure, I'll agree that the administrators are a drain too. But if we get MOOCs, we'll be able to get rid of both the administrators and the cushy 1:1 teaching loads.

1 person liked this.

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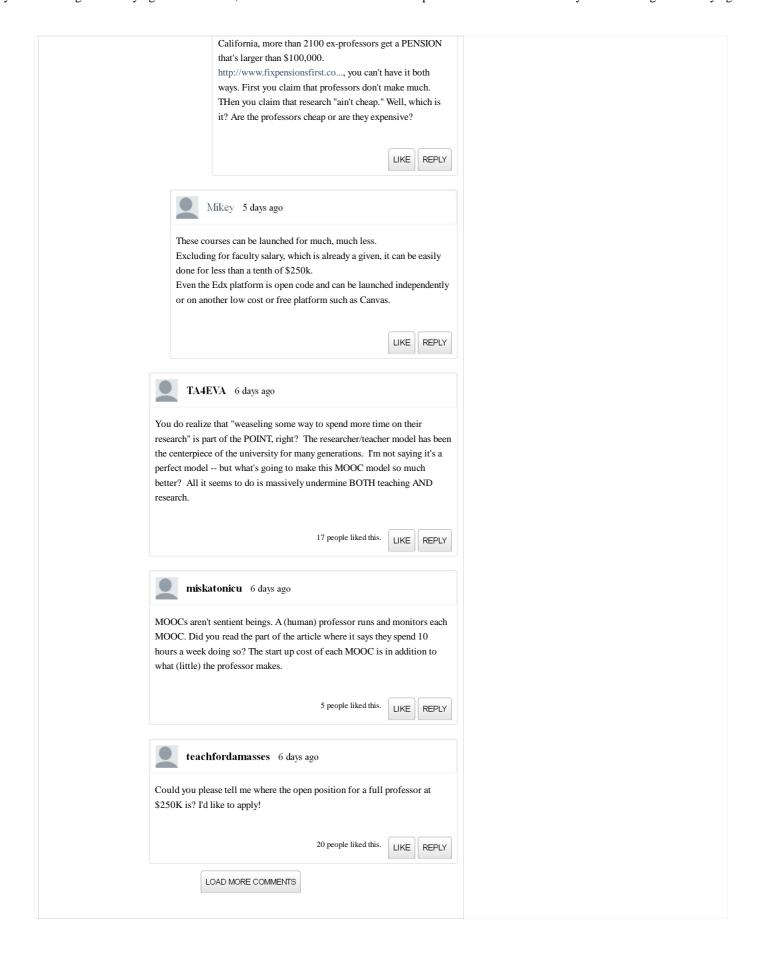


LIKE REPLY



Oh myopic? I love how you cite a statistic that makes it seem like the states are slicing funding in half. Wrong. State funding is declining only slightly but the schools are boosting tuition dramatically. So sure, states are paying a smaller percentage of the overall cost, but only because the overall costs are dramatically higher. It's a slimy way to manipulate the statistics. The colleges can have their cake and eat it too. Simply by boosting tuition and boosting spending, they can claim that the states are paying a smaller percentage.

And sure, "very few faculty" make that much, if you include all of the adjuncts doing the work but plenty do. Why in



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