

Case 13

Free College Credit

Virtual learning via online courses has grown exponentially over the last several years.¹ “[Over four and a half] million students took a college-level online course during fall 2008, up 17 percent from a year earlier, according to the Sloan Survey of Online Learning.” Adjunct professorships have also been on the rise, nearly doubling in just the last three decades, going from 43 percent in the 1970’s to nearly 70 percent in 2007.²

These shifts, at least in part, can be attributed to financial benefits these strategies offer universities. Universities save on the costs of facilities (for online courses), and salaries and benefits (adjuncts). They can also boost their tuition income through wider availability of courses. Online courses permit thousands of students to register for the same course and/or register for more courses overall due to the flexibility in attending online classes. And adjuncts can teach the same number of courses as a tenured professor for less than a third of the cost.³

However, these benefits do not come without serious concerns. Administrators, educators, and even students were interviewed and indicated serious concerns about the decline in the quality of education available to students through these shifts in the modern American university model. And unfortunately, these cost saving strategies do not appear to have trickled down to the prime consumers of university offerings—the students.

The increase in college tuition has outpaced the rate of inflation for over 50 years.⁴ At the same time, employers’ demands for a college-educated workforce have also increased, such that many individuals find that a high school diploma no longer holds the same value in the job market.⁵ And since the credit crisis that started in 2008, student loan money has become harder and harder to obtain.⁶ Some students find that they invest tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars in an education, only to be denied the loans to complete their education. With the transition of the American higher educational system into a more economic model, some entities

¹ Trip Gabriel, “Learning in Dorm, Because Class Is on the Web,” *The New York Times*, Education, Nov. 7, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/05/us/05college.html?pagewanted=all>.

² Alan Finder, “Decline of the Tenure Track Raises Concerns,” *The New York Times*, Education, Nov. 20, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/20/education/20adjunct.html?pagewanted=all>.

³ For example, a generous adjunct position might pay \$2,500 per semester with little or no benefits. An average teaching load might consist of four classes per semester, rendering a total of \$20,000 annual income for an adjunct professor, as compared to an average annual salary of almost \$50,000 for a tenure-track professor. See “American Academic: A National Survey of Part-Time/Adjunct Faculty,” *American Federation of Teachers*, Vol. 2, March 2010, p. 4, http://www.aft.org/pdfs/highered/aa_partimefaculty0310.pdf, for a survey of adjunct faculty, their incomes, and their overall job satisfaction. For a non-scientific estimation of professor salaries, see *Salary.com*, which derives estimates from self-reported incomes, at <http://swz.salary.com/SalaryWizard/Professor-Philosophy-Salary-Details.aspx>

⁴ Mark Kantrowitz (Publisher), “Tuition Inflation,” www.finaid.org, 2012, <http://www.finaid.org/savings/tuition-inflation.phtml>.

⁵ Jacques Steinberg, “More Employers to Require Some College, Report Says,” *The New York Times*, June 14, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/15/education/15degree.html>.

⁶ See Ron Lieber, “Placing the Blame as Students Are Buried in Debt,” *The New York Times*, May 28, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/29/your-money/student-loans/29money.html?pagewanted=all> (anecdotal accounts of student loan difficulties).

are realizing that the value of an education may not lie in huge tuition bills, but in the straight acquisition of knowledge.

Recently several highly respected universities, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Harvard, announced a partnership to produce free online courses.⁷ The “massively open online courses,” or MOOCs, provide certificates of completion, but not college credit, as would help a student earn a degree. The courses received huge enrollment, with over 100,000 students initially enrolling in MIT’s first course, Circuits and Electronics, though less than a tenth of students completed the midterm. However, even with the huge attrition, the course has reached a vast audience of individuals who are taking advantage of first-rate educational materials from well-respected institutions.

While certificates of completion to evidence mastery of courses may satisfy some students, there is a large market for free, “legitimate” college credit that employers and other institutions have come to rely on as a sign of quality. Some institutions are working to provide such a thing. Companies like Straighter Line are trying to provide more widely accepted college credit for free online content by working on accreditation with the American Council on Education. Muddying the waters for such efforts are other online universities that offer what they call “internationally accredited” courses. While sounding more prestigious, such accreditation often does not translate into degrees that employers or other universities recognize.⁸

Students may still have an incentive to pay for their education in order to enjoy the full university experience and prestige associated with a traditional university degree. But free degrees may be the next wave of higher education as students struggle to gain the knowledge necessary to succeed and universities seek to truly serve their mission to provide affordable, quality education to the masses. However, as universities break from decades or even centuries of tradition, at least in terms of management and compensation, many question the value of an education provided without classrooms and professors.

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⁷ Tamar Lewin, “Harvard and M.I.T. Team Up to Offer Free Online Courses,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/03/education/harvard-and-mit-team-up-to-offer-free-online-courses.html>; for a selection of free virtual courses, see <http://lifehacker.com/201979/technophilia-get-a-free-college-education-online>; <http://www.openculture.com/freeonlinecourses>.

⁸ For examples of for-profit colleges and their accreditation issues, see: <http://www.loansafe.org/private-for-profit-colleges-face-increased-state-oversight>; <http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2012/jun/05/attorneys-general-target--profit-colleges-looking-/>; <http://www.wfaa.com/news/investigates/Regulators-revoke-accreditation-159802545.html>; <http://www.businessweek.com/ap/2012-06/D9VCEGF00.htm>.