“No budget, no credit, unlimited enrollments.”

That’s how Ray Schroeder, associate vice chancellor for online learning at the University of Illinois Springfield (UIS), initially described to a colleague the “massive open online course” (or MOOC) he was organizing. The course, eduMOOC, went live last summer, focusing on the topic, “Online Learning Today . . . and Tomorrow.” Drawing nearly 2,700 participants from 70 countries, eduMOOC sparked intellectual discussions throughout cyberspace, ranging from how online learning will affect traditional higher education to how social network media can enhance online learning. A group of participants in New Zealand even gathered weekly at a McDonald’s restaurant to view the recorded presentations and engage in lively face-to-face dialogue.

“I am amazed that so many eduMOOC participants are networking, tweeting, blogging, discussing,” Schroeder wrote on his July 4, 2011, blog post. “Normally, I would need to motivate students in my classes to do this. Those students are paying tuition and fees. eduMOOC participants are not. Yet, they are the ones who are motivated, energized, enthusiastic. I ponder why that might be.”

The Educational Marketplace

MOOCs and other online programs that offer informal credentials, such as badges or certificates, are cropping up just about everywhere, attracting eager learners from all parts of the globe. They range from private start-ups, such as the Khan Academy and Mozilla Open Badges, to initiatives within traditional higher education. Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, have
partnered to create edX as an outreach service for learners throughout the world. And AASCU members Empire State College (SUNY) and Thomas Edison State College (N.J.) are partner institutions in the Open Education Resources university (OER), a consortium of institutions “committed to creating flexible pathways for OER learners to gain formal academic credit,” according to its website.

One of the most publicized MOOC success stories comes out of California: Last fall, 160,000 people from 190 countries signed up for a free online course on artificial design offered by Stanford University professor Sebastian Thrun and Google Research Director Peter Norvig. The experience altered Thrun’s teaching philosophy so much that he left Stanford and co-founded Udacity, a for-profit educational venture.

After the first MOOCs were offered about five years ago, “The dam broke, and then everybody became engaged,” says Schroeder, who is the founding director of the Center for Online Learning, Research, and Service at UIS. “I think they are a symptom of the changes that we are entering in higher education. They’re a stage along the way. I think what we’ve seen are not mature offerings, but rather they are going through a process that will continue to evolve over the next couple of years. There are certainly changes in the wind.”

The market for these free online offerings seems to arise from a perfect storm of factors, including a deep global recession, reduced state support for higher education and increasing tuition rates. As a traditional degree becomes less affordable for many American students, these emerging modes of delivering education may become a viable option for today’s generation of college students, who are accustomed to a digitized world.

Higher education seems to be losing its grip on the monopoly of credentialing. As the drum beat gets louder on the issue, many are asking: Will a college diploma matter in the future? Some outspoken MOOC advocates, who are getting the lion’s share of national media attention these days, say “no.” Some have even called for state legislators to stop funding traditional higher education.

“One of the things that’s dangerous about the MOOCs is that they change the subject and give politicians an easy [excuse for] avoiding a real investment in higher education,” says Tim Hall, president of Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tenn. “We have flourished precisely when higher education has been made a source of investment by our political leaders.”

While Hall believes online offerings—whether free or not—have an important role to play in education’s future, he believes state universities should be focused on the national Completion Agenda, which strives to increase the number of college graduates in the United States. At this point, most of the students currently enrolled in MOOCs are overseas, and in most cases, only about 10 to 20 percent of enrolled students actually complete the courses. With hundreds of thousands of students enrolled, that’s still a significant number.

“People have to ask, where do the MOOCs stand in connection with completion?” Hall says. “There’s lots of evidence to suggest that one of the core factors supporting persistence by students through higher education programs is the relationship they have with the faculty. I think our experience is, especially with the people who are struggling to get a college education today, that they need the face-to-face, the relationship context. We’re not seeing the MOOCs anywhere near to eroding the market for traditional higher education, especially for those students.”

Can this new mode of delivering knowledge actually replace the learning that takes place on the traditional college or university campus? Are MOOCs and other online offerings really a threat to higher education as we’ve known it for thousands of years?

Colleen Carmean, assistant chancellor for instructional technologies at the University of Washington Tacoma (UWT), doesn’t think so. Most of the MOOCs being offered cover very narrow and specific topics, she says, typically related to...
A Magic Bullet?

Though some higher education insiders are resistant to the notion of open online learning, others believe there are positive lessons to glean from this new approach. Making intellectual content widely available is an effort at “democratizing” education, many say, and open online courses give learners a chance to study under notable scholars in their field of interest. By picking and choosing topics that really appeal to them, learners may be more motivated. And they’ll be able to control the pace of learning because they can watch the recorded lectures or videos over and over until they grasp the concepts.

The focus with these new pursuits in online learning, says Mo Qayoumi, president of San Jose State University (Calif.), becomes less about the technicalities of providing educational experiences and more about the learner’s needs.

“It really forces us, in a very positive way, to think beyond content delivery,” Qayoumi says. “Traditionally for universities, one of our major assets has been content delivery, rather than looking at learning. Everything has been done on an input-based system—how many credits, how many hours a student sat in the classroom—and not necessarily how much learning really occurred, especially in a summative way. This moves us from being a content-delivery enterprise to a learning enterprise. To me, that is something very healthy and positive.”

Not everyone in the academy will be comfortable with that, he admits. But “it’s a window of transforming how learning should really occur.”

Carmean adds: “It’s higher education that’s doing this, so we are learning, very rapidly, a new pedagogy—a new way of teaching and learning. The web has created an opportunity for us to change the way we teach. People talk about ‘taking the sage off the stage and putting the guide on the side,’ and that’s what we’re learning. We’re learning how to create interactive and engaging material that allows the students to move themselves along and self-assess and determine their own pace of learning.”

Carol Yeager, a mentor with the Center for Distance Learning at SUNY’S Empire State College (ESC) and her colleague Betty Hurley-Dasgupta, mentor and coordinator for Mathematics and Technology Studies, co-led “Creativity and Multicultural Communication,” a MOOC that began last fall and continues on through discussion boards. The course enrolled over 400 participants, with 15 seeking college credit by paying a fee and completing projects for evaluation. Both Yeager and Hurley-Dasgupta say the course was just as much a learning experience for them as it was for their students.

“As learning facilitators, we found that it’s a more fluid learning journey, rather than a course with a set beginning and a set ending,” says Yeager, who will partner with Hurley-Dasgupta this fall to offer a math MOOC. “It can be a less formal and less threatening learning environment. If you can make the environment inviting and secure for the participants, then the learning just grows and evolves so much more easily and so much faster.”

One of the limitations of MOOCs is how to assess students at the defined end of the course. The sheer number of students presents a challenge, and then it’s not so simple to ensure that students aren’t cheating. Elmer Poe, director of distance
education at East Carolina University (N.C.), adds that simply earning a badge doesn’t necessarily convey how much a person has learned—particularly when they are tested with multiple-choice exams.

“If you think about a course that is truly massive, think about how to evaluate thousands of students,” Poe says. “That’s a great undertaking. Even if you give machine-graded assignments, you’re still looking at significant costs.”

That’s an area still to be researched, says Schroeder. What we really don’t know, he says, is whether we get “the same learning outcomes in massive learning courses.”

“Motivated students can learn very well in this environment, but they can learn well in almost any environment,” he says. “What about less motivated students or students with less time? Instructors typically follow up with students who are falling through the cracks [in traditional higher education], but when you have 2,000 students—or 160,000 students—it’s not possible for the instructor to do that.”

**Time to Dabble**

Higher education isn’t historically known as a fast-paced field that readily embraces sweeping changes. But technology is here to stay, and many insiders say it’s time to appreciate the rewards that may come from fully unlocking its potential.

“People should not look at [open online learning] as a threat,” says Qayoumi. “Whenever you look at something as a threat, you close down and start to circle the wagons. It’s not a threat; it’s another means. Technology has always been a means—it’s not an end by itself. The technology of today is the utility of tomorrow.”

Instead of viewing open online learning with suspicion, Hurley-Dasgupta says look around: Students already are fully wired and connected to the global community. It’s time for public universities to acknowledge that fact and find new ways to integrate technology into the learning experience.

“In terms of open learning, faculty need to accept the fluidity of learning and how networked their learners are,” Hurley-Dasgupta says. “And they need to really accept that the learners who are sitting in front of them are no longer just dependent on their lectures. They are really looking for people to facilitate their own learning. So I think faculty do need to be open to probably a different role for themselves as facilitators of learning, rather than deliverers of content.”

For university leaders unsure of how to wade into these new waves of change, Schroeder says it’s time to simply get started. He recommends tapping into faculty and alumni resources to launch new programs that are “relevant, up-to-the-minute, and in demand.” Each university should assess its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats to determine how they can best serve their communities in the current digital environment.

“Universities have to respond today,” Schroeder says. “And literally today—this can’t wait a year. We all need to dabble in trying out some of these technologies to deliver open classes. It’s just as an experiment—just so that we get experience so that we can rapidly respond as it matures. All of these online learning technologies will still evolve for a year or two. We need to be ready and follow those changes carefully so that we can find our niche in this realignment of the delivery of higher education.”

—Colleen Carmean

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Karen Doss Bowman is a writer based in Bridgewater, Va.