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Before You Jump on the Bandwagon ...

By Alison Byerly

We are only starting to imagine the possible effects that massive open online courses and other innovative technologies will have on traditional higher education—but the immediate response has a disconcerting air of panic. The recent surge of interest in MOOC's suggests that some colleges hope that offering such courses is a kind of inoculation against the effects of technological disruption, and many institutions are feeling tremendous pressure to join the elite group of colleges that has staked a claim in this area. It is not clear, though, whether every college has weighed the costs and benefits of membership in what is now, at least, a particularly exclusive club.

The speed with which announcements of new MOOC initiatives have emerged in the last few months seems reminiscent of the period in 2007-8 that saw a number of colleges follow the lead of Princeton in eliminating loans from their financial-aid packages. The need to become a "no-loan" institution was suddenly talked about at board meetings across the country, and every month another prestigious college proudly announced that its financial aid would consist entirely of grants. There was much less fanfare when, following the recession of 2008, a number of colleges had to eliminate their no-loan policies.

Colleges that are contemplating a new venture, such as a MOOC or other online-learning offering, need to ask themselves the fundamental question: Is this consistent with the unique mission of our institution? Not, Are MOOC's a good idea?, or even, Are they inevitable?, but: Should we be offering them right now?

Three corollary questions can help guide colleges:

1. Do you see offering MOOC's primarily as a public good, or as an opportunity to enhance your institution's position?

Your answer is probably "both." But these goals may not always be compatible, so you need to be clear about which is the higher priority. Providing access for people who are underserved, for example, might dictate different course offerings from a goal of attracting people who have, or may develop, ties to your university, such as prospective students, alumni, or donors.

MIT's OpenCourseWare project paved the way for current developments more than a decade ago by offering course materials online. Its founders saw OCW as consistent with a culture of open sharing that was well established at MIT, and described its motivating factor as "a spirit of intellectual philanthropy that aligns closely with the mission of the

institution," a spirit that is echoed in statements about the later MITx and (in partnership with Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley) edX ventures, which offer free online courses. Coursera, a company that works with colleges to provide free online courses, states its goals in similar terms: to "give everyone access to the world-class education that has so far been available only to a select few," and to "empower people with education that will improve their lives, the lives of their families, and the communities they live in."

These are goals any college would be proud to support. However, MIT and other early adopters also benefited from the "brand enhancement" that comes from being a leader. It was cutting edge for the first three or four colleges to make this move; the PR benefits will be diluted as more institutions join the club. Your college's "public good" commitment needs to be strong enough to sustain support for your MOOC's if they do not seem to offer as much prestige value as you had hoped.

2. Will your MOOC curriculum parallel the aims—whether liberal arts, professional, or vocational—of your existing curriculum?

Georgia Tech's provost, Rafael L. Bras, was careful to communicate to his campus that in joining Coursera, the institution was "not abandoning our central mission of residential undergraduate instruction." He describes its involvement as an opportunity to "define the technological research university of the 21st century by exploring new modes of instruction and operation." Other colleges have echoed this description of MOOC's as a space for experimentation that may benefit the on-campus experience.

To achieve these benefits, you will need to consider whether your MOOC's will attempt to replicate what you offer on campus, supplement it, or do something else entirely. Given that your public audience may differ significantly from your on-campus audience of enrolled students, you will need to consider how responsive you want faculty to be, if at all, to external demand.

3. Can MOOC's fit into your college's financial model?

Several colleges that are pursuing MOOC's have said that they are not in this to make money. However, saying that you are willing to forgo profits is not the same as saying that you are able to sustain losses. For many colleges that lack endowments the size of those at MIT and Harvard, it seems likely that MOOC's will need to at least break even. Otherwise, they will become a drain upon other college endeavors, and it may be difficult to defend your decision to devote scarce resources to providing free access to content for which your on-campus students are paying a lot of money.

If your institution is committed to offering MOOC's as a public educational benefit, even at a loss, you will need to make clear whether they will be financed by your endowment, additional fund raising, or budget reallocation. Obviously, community support for this investment will be strongest if there is a demonstrable alignment between the goals of your MOOC's and the overall mission of your college.

As we attempt to grapple with the changes that John Hennessy, president of Stanford, has described as a "tsunami," it is important to remember that the unique strength of American higher education is the diversity of educational options offered by the wide range of institutions and institutional types it encompasses. Technology should in fact make it less, not more, necessary for colleges to replicate each other.

So, once again, ask yourself: Why do you want to offer massive open online courses?

I hope it is because your institution is prepared to make a substantial commitment to the principles of open access, your faculty members are excited about curricular http://chronicle.com/article/Before-You-Jump-on-the/134090/?cid=wc&utm_source=wc&utm_medium=en experimentation, and your trustees believe that asserting a leadership role here is worth the investment.

If your honest answer is, Because all the cool guys are doing it, then I can hear my mother's next question: If Stanford jumped off a bridge, would you jump, too?

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