

Commencement 2012 / Editorial

EdX and Justifying Our Privilege

By ANITA J JOSEPH

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Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology together introduced a global online education platform, EdX, earlier this month. The idea is that lectures at these two world-renowned universities will be accessible to anyone with an internet connection. It's been heralded as revolutionary. In a piece modestly entitled, "The Campus Tsunami," David Brooks wrote, "What happened to the newspaper and magazine business is about to happen to higher education: a rescrambling around the Web."

To see how this might play out, one need only to look to Stanford, where last year 160,000 people in 190 countries registered for the online course Artificial Intelligence. The student corps bonded rapidly, forming Facebook study groups and offering translations of course materials in 44 languages. EdX is free, for now.

Does this cheapen an Ivy League education? Far from it. The biggest value of a Harvard degree is not the pedagogical experience itself, although I think that if you take a wide variety of courses and stray out of your comfort zone this place will make you a lot smarter. The value of a Harvard degree is that that it means you got into Harvard.

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To society, it signifies that the gatekeepers of the intellectual aristocracy deemed you worthy of admission. The brand is fueled by exclusivity, and open admission courses will always remain on the fray of this.

But despite the caution that intellectual and social mobility do not go hand in hand, if EdX runs smoothly, it promises to be one of the best things to happen to the University—and to fundamentally transform our role in the world.

Right now, Harvard benefits society mainly in the forms of admitting students from underprivileged groups, storing knowledge, and preserving the academic process and the trickle-down effect of its research. Are these goods equal and opposite to the immense concentration of wealth and power here? Probably not.

Universities are not engineered to play all the roles that this one does. They are conceived to provide instrumental educations, not to be sociopolitical forces. But because of the fortunes of history, many American universities—and foremost Harvard—find themselves in the awkward position of effectively being small welfare states without all of the political and international corrective mechanisms that actual countries have. Their reach as institutions has escaped their grasp as colleges.

This is what makes something like EdX so important. Nearly the only thing that can justify this privilege is a massive public works project like EdX. Wikipedia serves as an example of the potential of accessible self-education. Learners around the world use Wikipedia as an essential source of information. It has vastly increased the amount of knowledge publicly available to the average person. We may joke about trusting a site that anyone can edit, but the recent furor over the Stop Online Piracy Act demonstrates most clearly how important it is.

EdX can be Wikipedia times a hundred, with many times its impact and reach. When a software engineer in Tanzania wants to learn a new computer language, they will not have to buy a costly book or wade through the Wild West of current internet self-education—he or she will simply use EdX. When a middle schooler in America gets bored of her math classes, she can go to EdX and take accelerated courses. The most valuable courses of all could be English classes—ways in which writers and rebels worldwide can sharpen their tools of rhetoric and self-expression.

Harvard is especially well-positioned to take on the role of organizing online self-education because it has such a trusted name. The Chinese government may sporadically block Google and Facebook, but would its population stomach obstructions to a free Harvard education? In this vein, educating the world in as non-dogmatic a way as possible is a heavy responsibility. To execute this well would prove to the world that we are worthy of its respect and that our wealth is deserved.

We are lucky that, in this time of economic austerity, our local and national communities have tolerated Harvard's privilege so well. To be honest, the quiet acceptance likely comes in part because loyal Harvard graduates are in positions of power. **But sooner or later the general public will begin to ask, first in soft whispers and then in open cries, why is Harvard so rich while we suffer? When this happens, we should have an answer ready—and that Harvard is making a good-faith effort to create a free, worldwide educational platform is a very good one.**

Anita J Joseph '12, a Crimson editorial chair emeritus, is a social studies concentrator in Leverett House.