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Web Courses Woo Professors

Online Firm Opens Way for More Educators to Create Their Own Internet Classes

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By DOUGLAS BELKIN and MELISSA KORN



Jason Henry for The Wall Street Journal

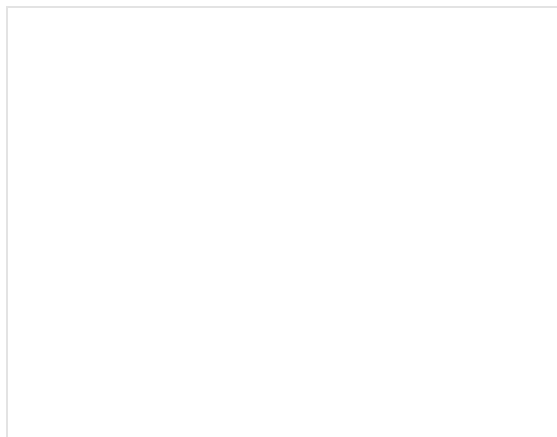
MacArthur Fellowship recipient Daphne Koller, left, and Andrew Ng, co-founders of Coursera, at their Mountain View, Calif., office on Wednesday.

Technology companies trying to reinvent higher education through online instruction are looking to win over the group with the most to lose from the effort: professors.

Coursera, one of the biggest providers of Massive Open Online Courses, or MOOCs, plans to announce Thursday it will open its doors to professors at 10 major university systems to create their own online courses.

Until now, Coursera content has come almost exclusively from professors at the world's most prestigious institutions, making it vulnerable to charges that it was helping to create a system where elite professors would produce the content and eventually cost faculty at less selective schools their jobs.

The contracts broaden Coursera's audience, currently 3.68 million people, by giving it



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access to more than 1.25 million students enrolled in the combined university systems. Professors will be able to incorporate MOOCs into their campus-based classes, creating a blended model designed to free up time for more classroom discussions as students watch lectures on their own.

Long Reach

Internet education provider Coursera has:

- 80 schools producing online courses
 - 375 classes offered
 - 500+ professors teaching the courses
 - 37,000 in average class
- Source: Coursera

"I think that what we're looking at here is not a job loss but rather a change in a job description to something that I consider to actually be more challenging and more intellectually stimulating than just delivering the lecture," said Daphne Koller, co-founder of Coursera.

Still, many critics within academia remain concerned that MOOCs will eventually limit live lectures to the wealthiest schools. Meanwhile, faculty at cash-strapped public or midtier colleges might be displaced by low-paid staff who lead discussions after students have watched lectures from other schools' star professors online.

Audio

WSJ's Hank Weisbecker talks to Reporter Doug Belkin about how Massive Open Online Courses could disrupt higher education by making the lectures of superstar professors available to the public.

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"Higher education is being disrupted just like the steel industry or the newspaper industry," said Ray Schroeder, director of the Center for Online Learning, Research and Service at the University of Illinois Springfield. "From that shakeout, a lot of people will become unemployed."

The popularity of MOOCs, which have been accessed by millions of students and adopted by scores of schools around the globe, is fueled by soaring college tuition and student debt. But as administrators ask professors to forgo their traditional lectures and incorporate MOOCs into their curricula, faculties have begun pushing back.

At Amherst College, faculty voted in April against joining edX, a nonprofit initiative led by Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The philosophy department at San Jose State University in California this month wrote an open letter decrying MOOCs as harbingers of the dismantling of departments and a diminished quality of education.

Last week, 58 Harvard faculty members signed a letter calling for faculty oversight of edX. If MOOCs proliferate and replace professors at public schools, that could eventually mean fewer jobs for Harvard's graduate students and ultimately fewer Harvard professors to teach them, said Peter Burgard, a Harvard German professor who signed the letter.

"We've been told that [MOOCs are] not a doomsday machine, but that sort of doomsday scenario is not unreasonable to expect," Mr. Burgard said.

Sebastian Thrun, chief executive and co-founder of Udacity, another Silicon Valley-based MOOC, said jobs wouldn't be lost because making school less expensive would encourage more students to pursue a degree.

We should "not assume that the market size is fixed," he said. "You take something that is expensive and make it less expensive—why would it be bad?"

EdX is supporting teachers at partner school San Jose State by opening the Center for Excellence in Adaptive and Blended Learning this summer. Initially, the center will serve faculty at the 11 California public universities that now use edX courses.

Despite these overtures, some faculty remain wary. "I'm a tenured professor, but I do have anxiety on some level of being replaced," said Maria Gonzalez, an associate professor of English at the University of Houston, one of the schools that just entered

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Coursera will open up its platform to professors in public university systems from West Virginia, New York, Tennessee and Kentucky, among others.

Initially, some schools may just import existing MOOCs, while others are expected to create new ones for use within their own institutions. Some university systems also have expressed an interest in reaching out to adult learners wishing to take university classes for credit at reduced cost.

"Each system is looking at where they can make the biggest impact on the students in their state," Ms. Koller said.

Kathleen Bollard, vice president for academic affairs at the University of Colorado—one of Coursera's new partners—said the contract aims to "give faculty options, without creating concerns about losing jobs."

Lorenzo Anaya, a 20-year-old junior studying mechanical engineering at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, one of the schools with which Coursera signed a contract, said the prospect of MOOCs at his school sounded "like an incredible idea if it's going to make college more affordable." But he also has some reservations. "It's hard enough for one professor to connect with 200 students in their own classroom. I'd be worried that one professor trying to connect with 100,000 students would be impossible," he said.

Even if individual faculty jobs remain safe, some say there is still cause for concern about how secure entire universities might be amid the tumult.

"People often ask me which institutions are going to disappear as a consequence of this massive change," Ms. Koller said. "It's the ones that take the ostrich strategy. If you stuck your head in the sand and hope that all this will just go away, you're going to be in serious trouble."

—Geoffrey Fowler contributed to this article.

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