



MOOCS

AND CAREER COLLEGES

Are they teaching us,
or are we teaching
them?

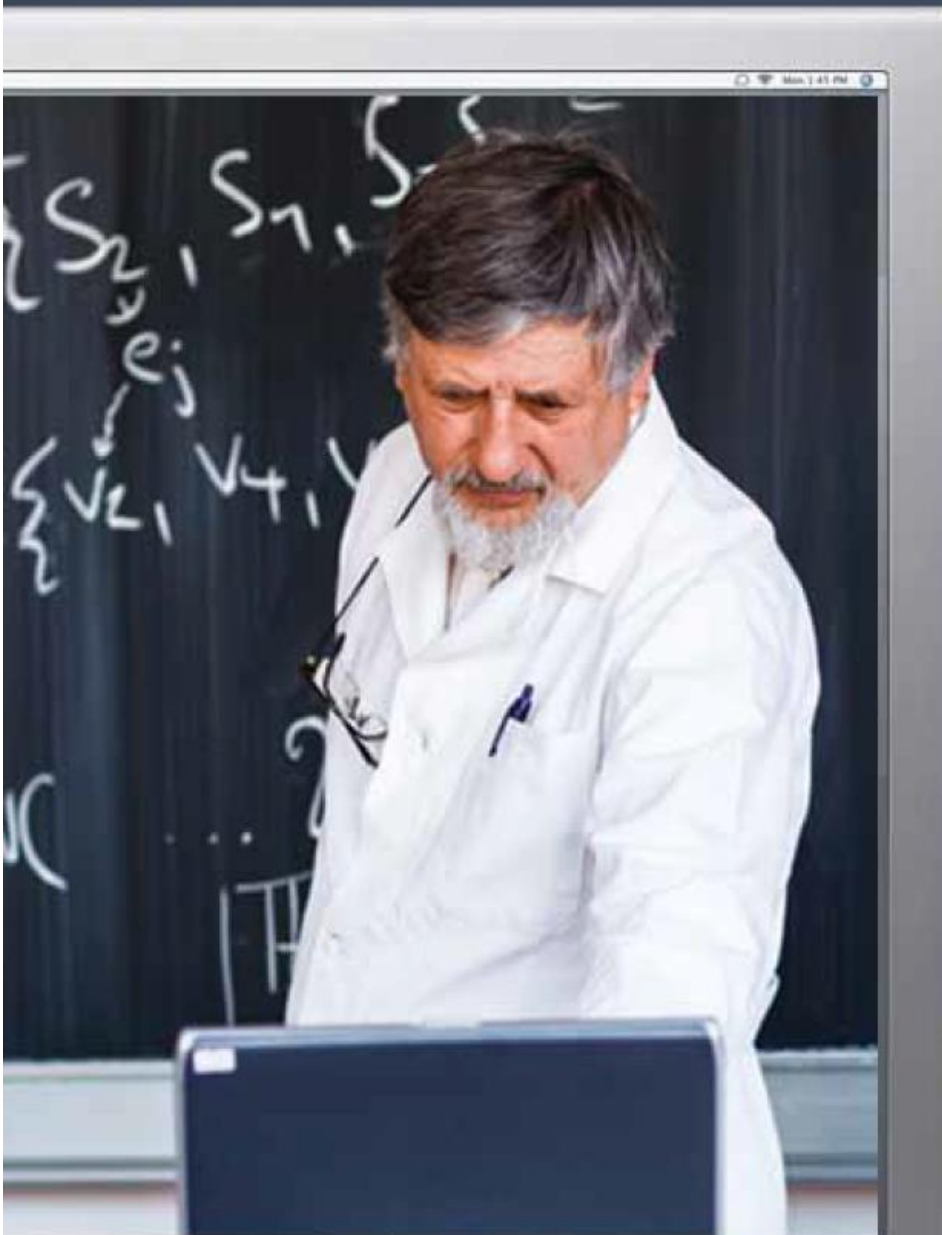
By Tasha Cerny, Staff Writer

Massive open online courses (MOOCs): Chances are you've heard of them. MOOCs are everywhere in the news right now, from the ways in which they are affecting online education to institutions which are already incorporating MOOCs into their course schedules. So, what are MOOCs, and how might they be affecting career colleges across the nation?

MOOCs are free, online courses which are open to any number of students and can draw thousands of student participants. The structure of these courses typically involves a recorded lecture series, automated quizzes and often, tests. Student participation is completely voluntary, and successful completion of the course relies on the self-organization and responsibility of the student. More and more MOOCs are being adopted and adapted in the public not-for-profit sector of higher education, but what does this mean for the for-profit sector of career colleges? I spoke with three MOOC panelists who presented on this topic at the 2013 Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities (APSCU) Annual Convention & Exposition in Orlando, Fla., to find out.

How are MOOCs contributing to higher education?

It can be disquieting to ponder the implications of this trend on higher education. MOOCs opened doors for free access to higher education at a pace never before matched by any online or technology-based



educational programs; students enrolled in courses typically number in the multiple thousands. This could be a game changer for our educational system, particularly career colleges and the for-profit sector, which have led innovation in online educational programs and coursework. But are MOOCs really something career colleges need to take seriously? According to our panelists, Dr. James D. Hutton of Keiser University, Rebecca R. Whitehead of Campus Management Corporation and Dr. Wallace Pond of EduK Group, the answer to that question is complicated.

MOOCs have a few things going for them:

1. MOOCs reach an extremely wide audience. According to a briefing by EDUCAUSE, a nonprofit striving to advance higher education through technology, most students enrolled in MOOCs are internationally based or professionals
2. MOOCs are free to their students. This doesn't mean that schools are not paying to provide MOOCs, but it does mean that for students, particularly those with tighter budgets, MOOCs may be very appealing
3. MOOCs are growing. According to the aforementioned EDUCAUSE article, "the list of American institutions offering MOOCs is growing exponentially." MOOCs have opened doors in the educational realm to provide broad access to a global audience for little to no money for the learner, and several universities are already jumping on the MOOC bandwagon

However, before MOOCs revolutionize higher education, there are still questions that need to be answered. The first and most obvious question has to do with financing: How can a course, offered to several thousands of people for free, be sustainable? According to one of our MOOC panelists, Dr. Pond, it can't be. With no revenue model and fees charged to each school that signs a contract, even public and not-for-profit schools can agree that nothing remains free forever.

The second important issue MOOCs are facing is the question of credit. As of right now, MOOCs are not typically offered for credit, and have very low completion rates – less than 10 percent, according to Dr. Pond. With an educational model that relies completely upon student motivation and responsibility, completing a free course that may not provide any certification of qualifications earned can be disheartening and, more often than not, get put on the back burner. According to InsideHigherEd.com, the U.S. Department of Education recently endorsed the competency-based model of education at the online College for America, a program developed by Southern New Hampshire University. This is a milestone in the push toward competency-based credit, and MOOCs could become more useful to higher education institutions around the nation in upcoming years.

Do MOOCs pose a threat to career colleges?

Given the recent increase of online and technology-based education, it may seem like MOOCs have the potential to become serious competition for career colleges, some of which, like the University of Phoenix, are completely online. However, as our three panelists agree, MOOCs – as they are now – do not pose a threat to career

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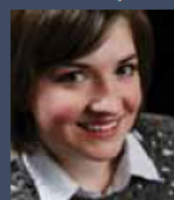
– Dr. James D. Hutton, Keiser University

colleges. In fact, according to Dr. Hutton, MOOCs have something to be learned from the efficiency of career colleges' online classes. "We've had years to study the effectiveness of online classes," Hutton said. "MOOCs are just videos of lectures. There's no class interaction; there's no involvement. If anything, MOOCs will begin to evolve more toward the model of career college online courses."

Still, if and when the financial and credential issues for MOOCs are resolved, these types of educational courses could prove useful to institutions wishing to branch out, especially on a global scale. However, though every institution should keep tabs on such an evolving, popular trend, career colleges have no reason for concern. According to Dr. Pond, "the career college model is not easily scaled because of its enticing, small-class, face-to-face appeal and hands-on, career-oriented education."

Despite posing as potential competition in future years, Whitehead believes, ultimately, career colleges are safe because "everyone has different learning styles, and the MOOC style of learning is not going to appeal to everyone."

While we may still have a lot to learn from MOOCs, they have a lot to learn us, too.



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