

**PRESIDENTIAL TASK FORCE ON ONLINE EDUCATION AND ALTERNATIVE CREDIT**

**Report to Clif Smart, President**

**Missouri State University**

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Task Force:

Arden Miller, Psychology; Chair  
John Bourhis, Communications  
Richard Callahan, Technology and Construction Management  
Melida Gutierrez, Geography, Geology and Planning  
Craig Hemmens, Criminology  
Lora Hobbs, Religious Studies  
Joseph Hulgus, Counseling Leadership and Special Education  
Beth Hurst, Reading Foundations and Technology  
Julie Johnson, Modern and Classical Languages  
Jason Jolley, Modern and Classical Languages  
Cheryl Jones, Library  
Stanley Leasure, Finance and General Business  
David Mitchell, Economics  
Lloyd Smith, Computer Science  
Pam Trewatha, Agriculture  
Dianne Twigger, Mathematics  
Rose Utley, Nursing

# Report of the Presidential Task Force on Online Education and Alternative Credit

## SUMMARY

There exist both challenges and new opportunities associated with extra-institutional learning, online education generally, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in particular. Online instruction, in all its formats, is now a permanent part of higher education's landscape. The MOOC movement, however, is in its infancy at present, and there is little consensus in literature about its impact. MSU and higher education writ large, however, are now nudged by the technological revolution into an arena where they may be required to make decisions about the future in an environment with many uncertainties. Regardless of the learning platform, the task force considered the broader issues regarding whether the University should grant credit for prior or extra-institutional learning and, if so, under what conditions. Current policy and practice were reviewed in light of opportunities for students, best interests of the university, and maintaining curriculum responsibility in the academic departments. After careful consideration of the available information, the members of the Task Force reached the following conclusions and recommendations. A more detailed report of discussion and research is attached.

### Our Conclusions & Recommendations

1. The MOOCs movement is currently a powerful topic that is influencing academic and political thinking. Although it has the potential to reshape the academic structure nationwide, this rapidly changing force does not have a clear trajectory, and there are as yet unresolved issues. Therefore the University should not initiate broad development of MOOCs at this time. A tactical use of Open Online Courses, however, would serve as an access point and function as a recruitment tool, introducing a wider pool of students to MSU's face-to-face and online education.
2. Online modalities and programs should be clearly articulated as critical parts of the long-term strategy of the University. We recommend that online support structures be maintained and continuously upgraded. This will also position MSU so that we are involved, informed, and agile to act if MOOCs prove themselves an advantageous platform for educating students.
3. Specifically, the University should explore developing a limited number of high-quality MOOCs or other Open Online Courses to further the following goals.
  - a. Introduce non-traditional students and high school students to the University's broader online programs and face-to-face programs;
  - b. Attract community college transfer students who have completed substantial numbers of online courses;
  - c. Develop a limited number of courses centered on Ozarks topics in furtherance of our public affairs mission and highlighting our unique region, character and history;
  - d. Show the MSU brand beyond the traditional borders;
  - e. Create a nucleus of faculty members, infrastructure, and support staff with hands-on experience developing MOOCs to serve as resources and evaluators; and
  - f. Further institutional knowledge with respect to the pedagogy of online modalities of learning by careful assessment and collection of data.

4. Missouri State University should continue to award academic credit on the basis of learning obtained through extra-institutional means, regardless of where that learning occurs. Any conditions or limitations should be determined by academic departments.
5. The University should continue to support academic departments that grant “retroactive credit” for lower-level courses and prerequisites when students successfully complete an advanced-level course they have placed into. Such courses should be transcribed with a grade of P.
6. Existing Credit by Examination (CBE) policies should be reviewed and, if necessary, updated and expanded to create a basic set of institutional parameters academic units could use to draft department-specific extra-institutional learning policies. The revised CBE policies and any department-specific policies should be more widely publicized and promoted.

With regard to such policies, we further recommend that:

- They should apply to prior or extra-institutional learning obtained by any means (i.e. be not limited to MOOC participation).
  - Departments should be free to determine which assessments or other mechanisms they would use to grant prerequisite waivers, course exemptions, or credits.
  - Departments should be able to charge reasonable fees for the purpose of covering assessment-related costs (design, proctoring, grading, etc.) and compensating faculty.
  - The university should provide increased support to departments for the development of assessment materials for extra-institutional learning.
7. We recommend that a task force, the Distance Education Committee, or another appropriate group monitor developments in MOOCs and other forms of extra-institutional learning so as to be in a position to make strategic recommendations to the President as developments warrant.

## Detailed Report of Discussion and Research

To better consider the charges given to us (appendix A) we divided the task force into two groups: A) addressing strategies and impact of Massive Open Online Courses and other online modalities and B) addressing avenues to credit where learning occurs outside of the institution

### A. MOOCs and Online Modalities Subgroup:

1. **As a part of our long-term strategy, how should MSU position itself in relation to MOOCs and other online education modalities?**
2. **How can and should an education at MSU differ from one conducted largely or entirely via MOOCs and online?**
3. **Can and should MSU make a portion of the intellectual capacity of its faculty available and disseminated in ways that do not bring college credit to all those receiving, such as MOOCs? If so, how and under what circumstances might this occur?**
4. **How will online education (including MOOCs) affect on-campus enrollment over the next 15 years?**

After reviewing information on MOOC offerings and effects around the U.S., it appears that MOOCs are important, but it is not clear what role they will play in higher education as a whole. As this is an evolving technology, it is vitally important that MSU remain abreast of what MOOCs are being offered, how they are evaluated, and what role they will play in degree-completion for other universities. We advise MSU to consider offering a limited number of Targeted Open Online Courses (TOOCs) as gateways to other courses; this will allow MSU to develop primary infrastructure for potential expansion. MSU should evaluate possibilities of how credit by examination, blended courses utilizing MOOCs and dual credit from high schools using MOOCs might be used by students as a means of reducing total educational costs.

A recent survey indicates that only 2.6% of universities offer Massive Open Online Courses and another 9.4% plan to offer MOOCs in the future.<sup>1</sup> A majority of faculty and university presidents are somewhat skeptical about the value and impact of MOOCs for higher education. In a survey of professors who teach MOOCs, only 28% believe that college credit should be given for these massive open online courses at this time, and only 34% believe their institutions will ever give credit for them.<sup>2</sup>

However, the huge enrollments and access to learning, with the possibility for credit at relatively little cost to students, leads others to dispute that skepticism.<sup>3</sup> There is a rush on the part of high profile universities to develop them.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the race to develop MOOCs will require continuous monitoring.

There is little consensus in the literature about the impact of MOOCs.<sup>5</sup> If MSU does not act, the university could be negatively impacted in terms of enrollment in the long run. Fundamentally, when predictions are made as to the impact of MOOCs, they must address human decision-making and how factors like cost, personal contact, educational community, motivational support, convenience, and a plethora of other factors will be considered by potential students.

But as MSU moves forward into the era of MOOCs, it is important to be cognizant of the numerous benefits, concerns, and limitations to a strategy of educating MSU students through MOOCs.

- MOOCs can be used as supplementary course material for instructors who wish to weave them into their curricula. However, legalities and ethics of utilizing enrollment in a free online course with specific terms of use contracts will need to be carefully considered.

- Possibilities for MOOCs at MSU include development for outreach, extension of brand, and to gain institutional experience with the emerging forms of online instruction.
- With several open source hosting sites for MOOCs and the development of open source software for MOOC presentation<sup>6</sup>, it is conceivable that faculty, individually or as a team, could create a quality MOOC without extraordinary infrastructure cost to the university. “Humanware”, however, is likely to be expensive.
- As a major strategic focus for a university, it really requires an “all in” approach with extensive funding. MSU would need to compete with universities that have much greater access to funding. Creating MOOCs without this quality will undermine the MSU brand.
- MOOC dropout rates are extremely high and likely to raise concern with state politicians. In a survey of MOOC professors, they reported that only 7.5% complete their courses.<sup>7</sup> However, by looking at the actual numbers (instead of percentages) of students completing these courses, the volume of students completing the courses is high.
- Evidence indicates that MOOCs may actually increase the disadvantages of weaker students due to the limited levels of support and advising.<sup>8</sup> Classroom attendance schedules and personal contact may be particularly important to the success of weaker students.
- MOOCs for college credit create diverse challenges in the area of academic integrity. New emerging technologies, e.g., webcam surveillance, may address these challenges. But it remains to be seen as to how these challenges can be overcome.
- Ownership and competition issues may undermine educational quality. In a recent example, conflict over standards resulted in the professor quitting midway through the course offering, with course designers taking over the course and course expectations.<sup>9</sup>
- Institutions have not found a way to generate revenues through MOOCs directly. Revenue benefits are generally limited to supporting recruitment.
- MOOCs, by having potentially tens of thousands of students, create disconnect between educators and students, undermining the experience and transmission of educational values.
- Currently, MOOCs are being offered internationally to millions of students from some of the most prestigious schools in the world. With tuition costs no longer being the consideration, the most competent students will be likely to take the courses from the most prestigious university possible.
- A collection of MOOC courses, while potentially filling requirements in a degree program, if competency can be standardized, will not result in majors that prepare students for graduate school or earn them the recommendations they need for graduate school and careers.

### **Where Missouri State University Might Position Itself in the MOOC World:**

Given the limitations described above, creating an Open Online Course as an expansion of strategically sound, traditional “controlled access” online offerings could be a means to increase MSU visibility and enrollment. However, a weak open online course will undermine this tactic. Hence, we should stress quality. The university should support proposals for open online courses that promote the university and its mission. This can be done through the offering of Targeted Open Online Courses and Public Affairs Open Online Courses.

- Targeted Open Online Courses present an attractive threshold or entry point for online programs (either undergraduate or graduate). In a grant offering from the Gates Foundation, targeted courses like this were referred to as "gateway" MOOCs.<sup>10</sup> However, Missouri State University goals would be less aligned with the notion of "massive". These would be open to all, with credit by exam (either arranged to be proctored at a high school or to be taken on campus) for a fee that is a substantial discounted from usual credit-hour costs. Currently, dual credit high school students pay one-half the MSU credit-hour fee and take the MSU final exam for the course for their credit. Missouri State University provides the additional incentive of a \$1000 scholarship for students who have completed six dual-credit hours with the university prior to high school graduation. High schools could use these courses as a basis for some of their dual-credit classes. For example, a department could create a course supervised by one faculty member with lessons and videos prepared by eight to ten faculty members. This course opportunity could be offered to any high school. This course would create interest and give incentive to attend MSU. Non-traditional students could be introduced to our online programs in this manner as well.
- Public Affairs Open Online Courses offer an opportunity to promote the public affairs theme to the community. There are benefits to the development of a small number of MOOCs focused upon MSU's unique location (e.g. Trans-Mississippi Civil War with emphasis on Wilson's Creek, Ozarks Culture, Ozarks musical history, etc.). Here the aim is to raise awareness of MSU nationally and internationally, by offering something that no other university can do as well, to provide resources for Missouri high schools or anyone interested in Missouri life, and to provide a showcase for interesting features of this area.
- All Open Online Courses should include links that promote enrollment in other courses and programs that produce revenue for the university.
- High-quality pedagogy and technical delivery is essential. With wide-open access, no university can afford to look bad to an audience of thousands. Instructional support and technical services are essential, particularly for the first open online courses that would emanate from Missouri State University.

### **How Should Missouri State University Position Itself in the Traditional Online Learning Environment?**

Traditional "controlled access" online programs are now and should continue to be a part of the strategic plan for the university. A significant majority (69.1%) of the chief academic officers surveyed concluded that "online learning is critical to their long-term strategy" and 77% believe that learning outcomes in online education are the same or superior to outcomes in face-to-face courses<sup>11</sup>. MSU needs to be prepared to make substantial financial investments in the development of online courses and programs. It is notable that the University of Missouri has recently announced a \$2.5 million investment to launch 16 new online degree programs and 25 new courses<sup>12</sup>. Online programs need to be extended to:

- Provide increased access to a broad range of students unable to commit to schedules in conventional coursework.
- Attract more transfer students who have completed substantial numbers of online courses from community colleges.

Online programs need to be developed with an eye to sustaining quality and program integrity through this alternate medium.

- Missouri State University should continue to pursue development of degree programs, rather than just a collection of courses that we are able to put online. In addition, development of completely online minors

and certificate programs should be expanded, since online access to these shorter programs could significantly increase enrollment in some areas and support other majors.

- Missouri State University should continually assess online programs and strive to meet the needs for instructional support, test proctoring, and technical support in order to deal with the increasing number of online students accessing courses from MSU.

## **B. Non-Course Credit Subgroup**

- 1. Should MSU accept and/or give college credit for learning that has been achieved through MOOCs, or other similar avenues? If so, what are the conditions and limitations for granting this credit? How would it work?**
- 2. Should there be a way to transcript and give credit for the normal pre-requisite course when students enter college and successfully are placed in and complete an advanced-level course without taking the normal entry-level course in the discipline? Alternatively, should a student in this circumstance have a reduced number of credit hours for graduation?**
- 3. Should the opportunity for credit-by-exam be more widely promoted and made available to students?**

## **Summary of Discussions**

Rather than focus on the problematic particulars of MOOCs – or those of any other single platform – the task force determined that the broader issues were whether the University should grant credit for prior or extra-institutional learning and, if so, under what conditions. The task force identified and discussed several reasons why recognizing extra-institutional learning would be in the best interest of the University. Not doing so would put Missouri State at a competitive disadvantage, given that pressure to expand access and reduce time to graduation is encouraging more and more institutions to award credit for prior learning. Related to this is the opportunity to use a well-designed prior learning policy as a recruitment and retention tool. If prospective MSU students know that their prior learning will be taken into consideration – that they will have a chance to prove that they have already mastered program-specific learning outcomes – they will be more likely to enroll here.

It was also noted that this already happens at Missouri State to varying degrees. Under current Credit By Examination (CBE) policies, academic departments already have substantial discretion and authority to grant prerequisite waivers, course exemptions, or academic credit (including retroactive credit) on the basis of examination results. Several departments already use standardized or in-house assessments and other placement procedures to recognize prior learning. For example, students in music or foreign languages who have already mastered basic proficiencies can place out of lower-level classes. In some cases, they also receive retroactive credit for those courses upon completion of a more advanced class. Currently, the practice of recognizing prior learning by granting prerequisite waivers, course exemptions, and credit (including retroactive credit) is a matter of departmental discretion, as set forth in Faculty Senate Resolutions 9-77/78 and 2-85/86. The consensus view of the task force was that even if those policies are updated and expanded, academic departments should continue to be free to determine how and under what circumstances they might award credit for extra-institutional learning since they are responsible for the curriculum, quality, and reputation of their programs.

As we looked more closely at the issues relating to the other two questions delegated to us, we realized that all or most of them could be addressed by means of a thorough review, update, and expansion of the CBE policies established in the above-referenced Faculty Senate resolutions. As noted above, some departments already grant retroactive credit (transcripted with a P grade), a mechanism that should be more clearly articulated in a revised CBE or extra-institutional learning policy. All of these issues can be adequately addressed in a way that safeguards the autonomy of academic units while better positioning the University to realize enrollment and retention gains by reviewing and updating existing CBE policies and practices and encouraging departments to use those parameters to establish their own extra-institutional learning policies.

### **C. Future Work Suggested**

Ongoing research will be particularly useful to assist us in making determinations concerning whether MOOCs will turn out to be a viable method for offering courses at Missouri State University. Study should include the following:

- monitor new developments in MOOCs and advise the university accordingly;
- survey students regarding their awareness regarding Credit by Examination and their likely use of MOOCs if credit by examination were available;
- survey faculty about online and MOOC vehicles of education;
- consider funding recommendations for exploratory efforts in open online course development;
- address new questions that will be raised in the evolution of online education and alternate forms of credit; and
- assess current infrastructure for online course expansion.

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## Appendix A

### Presidential Task Force on Online Education and Alternative Credit

**Background:** The University environment faces increasing challenges due to the fact that learning and the accompanying development of an educated citizenry is available from many different sources and forms. At the same time one of the goals of public-supported higher education is to graduate a large number of students at a minimum of cost to both the student and the state. Hence, it has become imperative that we periodically review and evaluate how we balance these simultaneous challenges and goals.

#### Statement of Charge

This task force is charged with evaluating the issues and making recommendations concerning the following:

- 1) How should the university position itself in relation to MOOCs and other online education as a long-term strategy? In what ways can and should an education at MSU differ from one conducted largely or entirely via MOOCs and online, and how do we reach that goal? How does MSU continue to brand itself in this marketplace? How will online education, including MOOCs affect on-campus enrollment over the next 15 years?
- 2) Should MSU accept and/or give college credit for learning that has been achieved through MOOCs, or other similar avenues? If so, what are the conditions and limitations for granting this credit? How would it work?
- 3) Is it feasible that MSU will participate in making a portion of the intellectual capacity of its faculty available and disseminated in ways that do not bring college credit to all those receiving, such as MOOCs? If the answer is yes, how and under what circumstances might this occur?
- 4) When students enter college and successfully are placed in and complete an advanced-level course without taking the normal entry-level course in the discipline, such as taking calculus without taking college algebra, should there be a way to transcript and give credit for the normal pre-requisite course? Alternatively, should a student in this circumstance have a reduced number of credit hours for graduation?
- 5) The current MSU credit-by-exam policy is seldom made available and it is very little utilized. Should the opportunity for credit-by-exam pathway be more widely promoted and made available to students?