All MOOCs are not the same

By James McCarthy

THE TECHNOLOGICAL revolution sweeping higher education at warp speed has been met with reactions that range from high praise to deep concern. Massive open online courses, or MOOCs, and other intensive uses of technology in support of learning are being praised as vehicles that will improve the quality of higher education and expand its reach, while at the same time reducing costs. But they are also criticized as mechanisms that might consolidate knowledge transmission. One fear is that these courses concentrate the role of teaching in the hands of fewer players, often star professors at highly selective institutions who deliver their lectures online, inevitably reducing the variety of voices that are heard.

This technological revolution will affect all colleges, universities, and students, but in very different ways. Students in the nation’s highly selective colleges and universities most certainly will encounter advanced technology that is infused into the courses they take. Still, those courses will continue to be taught by full-time faculty at residential colleges and universities that provide students with the full college experience.

The revolution will play out quite differently for those who are enrolled in regional private and public colleges and universities, and in community colleges. In these academic settings, which are facing far greater economic and demographic challenges than highly selective private schools, the pressures for more widespread adoption of fully online courses, including MOOCs, are greatest. Students will find that a much larger share of their learning will take place either in fully online or hybrid formats.

It’s true that enhanced technology can improve the quality of learning in all settings and also reduce costs at most institutions. However, the colleges and universities that educate the vast majority of American students could be relegated to the status of users of cutting-edge educational technology while its production is concentrated in highly selective institutions. If that comes about, we will have lost something very important. Many of the nation’s leading experts on promoting effective learning — learning that is specific to the colleges and universities that educate the considerable majority of American students — are in fact those faculty already teaching in regional colleges and universities and community colleges.

It is imperative that these expert educators become deeply involved in the design and creation of the technology-enhanced teaching and learning now being developed. American society has benefited greatly from the vast array of choices in college and university education that exist in this country. For the ongoing technological revolution to truly benefit the full range of students, the institutions where these diverse students learn and the faculty who teach them should be among the leaders of this revolution.
However, MOOCs are expensive to produce. So it’s not at all surprising that most MOOCs are taught by faculty affiliated with highly selective colleges and universities (typically those with substantial endowments) and offered on platforms run by a few groups with substantial capital, provided either by private equity or university endowments.

Still, in spite of the high costs for early adopters of this new technology, regional colleges and universities should not let costs deter us from becoming full participants in these developments. The consequences of not participating are too great. When regional colleges and universities take their place among the producers of hybrid and fully online courses that incorporate the latest instructional technology and delivery systems — including MOOCs — American society will continue to benefit from a system of higher education that preserves both institutional variety and variety in the voices that guide student learning. Students in all colleges and universities will benefit from the improvements in learning that will result from enhanced technology; and those colleges and universities facing the most serious financial pressures will experience some relief. When this happens, we all come out ahead.

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