EDITORIAL: Here come the MOOCs
Online courses will change higher education

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The business model for higher education is straight out of the Middle Ages: Keep the students in cloisters for four years, impart knowledge to them in small groups, and in the end give them a piece of parchment that grants entry into the courts of the nobility. No wonder college administrators are alternately alarmed and elated about becoming engulfed by the most powerful means of communication ever known. Colleges will soon sink or swim in an online sea.

Consortia of universities are already offering online classes to tens or hundreds of thousands of students. Called Massive Online Open Courses, the classes tend to be free and offer no credit. But plainly, when students in Botswana or Uruguay register to learn computer science from a professor at MIT, something of value is being offered. Ways to capitalize on that value will be found, as will ways of crediting students for successful completion of a course.

Online teaching is best adapted to such fields as science, mathematics or accounting, where student performance can be easily be tracked. But MOOCs are popping up in softer fields as well. Students who want to learn physics will sign up to learn from the most brilliant physicists in the world. Students who want to learn history or political science will also seize opportunities to hear the most compelling lecturers in those fields. A star system already exists in academia; MOOCs will make superstars of a few.

There are obstacles to online learning that have kept students coming to college campuses well into the 21st century. In a MOOC, opportunities for interaction with the professor are rare or non-existent. Discussion sessions are difficult to organize and monitor. An online course doesn’t lend itself to methods of student evaluation that involve a degree of subjective judgment, such as essays or artwork. Yet it seems likely that these problems will be overcome, or at least mitigated, by ever-improving algorithms and the use of social networks.

One primary advantage colleges hold over online learning may be their ability to immerse students in a social environment where academics is only part of the experience. That’s already the case for many students — long after they’ve forgotten the orations of Cicero, they look back fondly on the time spent on campus with friends. Yet in a world in which physical presence is made less important by online communications, even this advantage could weaken.

A second advantage is exclusivity — not everyone is admitted to college, and a degree is something not everyone can achieve. Exclusivity runs counter to the openness that many colleges, and especially public universities, embrace as an ideal — but all of them understand the benefits of selectivity in admissions and guard against watering down the value of degrees. As MOOCs make learning more democratic, colleges’ interest in stressing exclusivity will rise.

The real value of higher education lies in the dissemination of knowledge and the development of understanding. MOOCs will allow that to occur on an unprecedented scale, with consequences that can only be imagined. One day the world may have only a half-dozen professors of accounting — but each will have millions of students. That day may be coming faster than most people realize, and higher education will have to adapt.