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## Princeton, Penn and Michigan join the MOOC party

Submitted by Steve Kolowich on April 18, 2012 - 5:00am

Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor have teamed up with a for-profit company to offer free versions of their coveted courses this year to online audiences. By doing so, they join a growing group of top-tier universities that are embracing massively open online courses, or MOOCs, as the logical extension of elite higher education in an increasingly online, global landscape.

Princeton, Penn and Michigan will join Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley as partners of [Coursera](#) [1], a company [founded earlier this year](#) [2] by the Stanford engineering professors Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng. Using Coursera's platform, the universities will produce free, online versions of their courses that anyone can take.

The move is perhaps the most coordinated foray into online learning by high-profile education institutions since early last decade, when Fathom (a Columbia University-led for-profit venture into online education that also involved the London School of Economics, the University of Chicago, and Michigan) and AllLearn (a nonprofit collaboration between Oxford University, Yale University, Princeton and Stanford) became casualties in what was then a relatively underdeveloped online learning sector.

Online education, and the technology universities are using in that medium, has matured significantly since then. And brand-name elites, this time with little or no emphasis on making profit or even breaking even, are making a new push toward finding their place in the constellation of Web-based higher education.

There are "100 wrong ways" to do online education, and Penn has been "looking for years" for the right way, Amy Gutmann, Penn's president, said in an interview.

Gutmann said she doesn't care if Penn eventually makes money from its MOOC experiment, noting that the cost of taking the course online with Coursera, which is buoyed by \$16 million in venture capital, has so far amounted to "a rounding error in my budget."

The Penn president also said faculty have leaped at the opportunity to teach MOOCs, even without major incentives (participating professors may get some summer release time to create courses, she said). Faculty at traditional colleges have occasionally struggled to persuade professors to cooperate with administration-led online initiatives, occasionally to [the peril](#) [3] of those initiatives. But

the prospect of teaching tens or hundreds of thousands of students at once seems to have piqued the interest of certain faculty members at Penn, which is currently scheduled to put 12 courses online through Coursera over the next year.

The Coursera courses -- which total 39 <sup>[4]</sup> across all the universities -- will be interactive, with perhaps hundreds of thousands of students completing exams and assigned work that will be graded, either by intelligent software or by their peers. The universities will own the courses.

These include six courses in the humanities and social sciences <sup>[5]</sup>, including History of the World Since 1300, Introduction to Sociology, and Modern & Contemporary American Poetry. That is uncharted territory for the new breed of MOOC -- which focuses on scale, assessment and certification -- that emerged last fall at Stanford <sup>[6]</sup> and has since taken hold <sup>[7]</sup> at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

So far, the high-profile MOOCs being offered through Udacity <sup>[8]</sup>, another Stanford-born company, and at MITx, MIT's new nonprofit subsidiary, have focused on courses where student work can be more easily quantified and scored by machines, such as engineering, math and computer science.

Koller, an artificial intelligence specialist who has taught computer science at Stanford since getting her Ph.D. there at age 25, said that the challenge of assessing student work in humanities-oriented MOOCs could be addressed through a system of "calibrated peer review." Human readers, plucked from the ranks of the course registrants, could read short essays written by their peers and rate them according to a rubric developed by the professor. A critical mass of deputized students should be able to evaluate an essay "at least as [well] as a pretty good [teaching assistant]," Koller said in an interview.

Mitchell Duneier, a sociology professor at Princeton, said he is planning to give students in his Introduction to Sociology MOOC the opportunity to participate in small group discussions with him and his students at Princeton via Google Hangouts, a videoconferencing application.

Duneier said he hopes that taking the normally cloistered curriculum to the masses will benefit not only those who get to take the courses online, but also those paying a premium to take them at Princeton.

"I think that as we move toward bringing the humanities and social sciences to this kind of format one thing I'm really excited about is integrating the diverse perspective and experiences from students around the world and bringing them to Princeton," he said. "I think having them involved is going to enhance our learning experience here."

### **The credentialing question**

None of the universities will offer formal credit through the courses they put online through Coursera. However, several might give students the opportunity to earn certificates bearing the names of both the universities and the company. There is no formal credentialing mechanism currently in place, but some university officials indicated that tangibly recognizing the achievements of non-enrolled learners is a goal.

"The steady-state model is: you will be able to get certificates," Martha Pollack, a vice provost at Michigan, said in an interview.

"Since the venture is just starting, cost and certificates may be determined in the future, based on appropriate market analysis and metrics after the courses have had some time to get off the ground," said Steve MacCarthy, vice president for university communications at Penn.

“There are no definite plans yet for what courses, if any, might have certificates and, if they exist, how much might be charged for them,” wrote MacCarthy via e-mail. “That said, if there were to be some monetization and revenues in the future, universities would partner with Coursera in determining any future structure or pricing for certificates.”

Ng, one of the Coursera founders, said “no firm decisions have been made yet” on how the company’s university partners might recognize the achievement of their non-enrolled students. “We’ve had informal discussions with the partner universities about different certificate options, but the final decision will be made on a per-university and per-course basis,” Ng wrote via e-mail.

Princeton, for one, said that certificates for successful MOOC participants are out of the equation. “We do not intend to offer certificates or any other credential to public viewers who access the material,” said Martin A. Mbugua, a university spokesman.

Princeton notwithstanding, If some of Coursera’s university partners do end up authorizing credentials that bear their seal, it will be a step forward in contributions of elite universities to the open educational resources (OER) and “alternative credentialing” movements.

MIT, Berkeley and Yale University for years have offered free course materials and video-recorded lectures via “open courseware” clearinghouses, but never gave those who learned from the materials the opportunity to prove their chops and earn tangible recognition for their diligence.

Last fall, when Koller, Ng and several colleagues began broadcasting their computer science courses and accepting machine-gradable submissions from hundreds of thousands of online auditors, Stanford permitted the professors to send “statements of accomplishment” to the far-flung learners on the condition that the documents thoroughly disclaimed any implication of a Stanford endorsement.

When MITx inaugurated its first MOOC earlier this year [9], it enrolled 20 MIT undergraduates in the course to work through the material and scan for glitches ahead of the 100,000 auditors, with the understanding that their MITx coursework would count as credit toward their MIT degrees. But by arranging for the tuition-paying undergrads to attend weekly, face-to-face “recitation” sessions with MIT professors, university officials squelched any suggestion that succeeding in an MITx course should be enough to earn formal course credit from MIT.

The idea, MIT officials told *Inside Higher Ed* earlier this month, is not to make MOOCs as good as the classroom experience; but to use MOOCs to make the classroom experience even better.

Officials at Coursera’s new partner universities seem to be taking the same approach. Duneier, the Princeton sociology professor, plans to let certain approved Princeton undergraduates enroll remotely in his six-week sociology MOOC this summer; but in order to get credit toward their Princeton degrees, those undergraduates must show up later in the summer for six weeks of face-to-face class sessions.

Neither does Penn expect that its MOOCs will be interchangeable with its traditional courses. “Right now I have zero confidence that we could replicate a Penn education online,” said Gutmann.

The Penn president added that she expects one of the prime benefits of expanding its courses beyond the university walls will be giving faculty occasion to improve their own literacy in technology tools that could help them better serve tuition-paying students.

“I was worried before that we wouldn’t find a way to use online,” she said. “This is a way of increasing access to parts of the Penn education [while] also increasing the educational experience of Penn students.”

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**Links:**

[1] <https://new.coursera.org/>

[2] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/03/07/stanford-professors-spin-company-support-free-online-courses>

[3] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/09/03/globalcampus>

[4] <https://new.coursera.org/courses>

[5] <https://new.coursera.org/category/humanities>

[6] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/12/13/stanfords-open-courses-raise-questions-about-true-value-elite-education>

[7] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/12/20/planned-mit-courses-may-advance-front-elite-open-education>

[8] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/01/24/stanford-open-course-instructors-spin-profit-company>

[9] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/04/06/how-could-mitx-change-mit>

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[11] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/teaching-technology>

[12] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/online-learning>