Is This Time Different?
Questions for MOOCs and Online Learning Beyond 2012

Committee on Institutional Cooperation
Chief Information Officers

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Foreword

Each decade has proffered a new IT-enabled alternative to traditional, residential education, yet universities have continued to thrive. Early in the last decade, several university-backed online ventures fizzled while more recently some universities and for-profit institutions (e.g., Apollo group) have established successful online degree programs. Most recently, news of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), venture-backed startups like The Khan Academy, Coursera, Udacity or institutional consortia like EdX have renewed the question of IT-enabled alternatives to residential education.

Is this time different? Does the confluence of *improving technologies* in HD video, adaptive tutors, and fast connections; *economic pressures* regarding student debt and tuition; and *social readiness* to embrace distributed education with different relationships between students and instructors signal a substantial change for higher education?

The CIC CIOs believe this time will be different in its effect on residential universities relative to previous experiences, but the more enduring effects may not be the focus of the 2012 press. The CIOs offer our (1) near-term actions for campuses, (2) discussion questions for campus leaders, (3) additional context for recent developments in IT-enabled education, and (4) *State of the Union – Higher Education: Competitive Challenges to the Traditional Higher Education Model,* a compelling analysis by the Education Advisory Board.[1]

1) Near-Term Actions

1. Engage purposefully in near-term trials of MOOCs, adaptive learning systems, and emerging technologies to develop institutional understanding while also formulating a longer-term strategy for engaging online learning for badges, professional development, MOOCs, credit-bearing courses, and degree programs, as well as new business models and resulting requirements for campus systems and services.

2. Ramp up institutional capacities for online course production to support instructional design, media development, assessment, and analytics.

3. Develop IT system readiness to integrate with a range of educational software that may need to link to campus system information for rosters, identity, services in a legal, secure and policy-compliant way.

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[1] Shared with CIC Provosts by special permission of Education Advisory Board.

2) Discussion Questions for Campus Leaders

1. **What kinds of online experiences are needed as *substitutes* or as *complements* for current models?**
   - Are freely available online resources (videos, exercises, assessments, etc.) needed to empower the flipped classroom model and serve as *complements* that improve satisfaction, efficiency, and efficacy of the residential learning experience?
   - Are online, large-scale experiences needed that become *substitutes* to traditional, residential classroom experiences through the engagement of thousands of peer learners and adaptive software?
   - Are online experiences needed that establish by certification basic competency in disciplines? If so, what is the form of that certification and does it serve as a complement or substitute to the curriculum and major and direct interaction with faculty?

2. ***Why* does scale matter for distributing university content, modules, courses, or degrees beyond current models?**
   a. For fee reasons – do we want to:
      i. Grow new sources of revenue with "profit" margins that scale faster than costs?
      ii. Reduce costs per credit hour for students?
      iii. Grow base of click-stream training data for refining adaptive analytics and tutoring algorithms to enhance learning effectiveness?
      iv. Grow access to courses/degrees to satisfy demands for educating more citizens?
   b. For free reasons – do we want to:
      i. Amplify and increase awareness of our institutional brand?
      ii. Recruit top students?
      iii. Contribute to the social good?
   c. For research reasons – do we want to:
      i. Develop deeper understanding of human cognitive growth?
      ii. Refine better methods for teaching specific content?

3. ***What* is lacking within the institution to achieve its online objectives?**
   a. Foundational components – Do we have the:
      i. *Capital* to invest and risk in online course production?
      ii. *Access* to markets of potential students via course placement in portals/aggregators for discovery, marketing, access, etc.?
      iii. *Technology* platform and integrated infrastructure for conducting online courses or courses at Internet scale?
   b. Skills required – Do we have the:
      i. *Content expertise* for online course development?
      ii. *Process expertise* in how to do instructional design for online, faculty pedagogical training, analytics expertise, business model development, etc.?
      iii. *Staff* to support services to distant students, maintain accreditation and legal compliance?
   c. Organizational change – Do we have the:
      i. *Political will* regarding change and uncertainty?
      ii. *University partners* to offer a broader array of lessons, courses, or degrees?
      iii. *Construct* that amalgamates and presents college offerings in a cohesive outwardly facing CIC or University view

4. **What kinds of *partners* are needed and why? What are the non-negotiables in any partnership and why?**
    a. What are the walk-away provisions?
    b. Are there exclusivity expectations?
    c. How will conflicts be resolved?
    d. What is the basis for cost and revenue sharing?
    e. What are the reputational risks related to partners' actions?
    f. Who owns the IP and on what terms is it licensed for reuse?

5. **What is the degree of *urgency* and why?**
    a. What opportunities are perishable?
    b. What is the ramp up time to desired outcomes?
    c. What are the explicit risks/benefits of moving too early or too late?
    d. Does participation enable an ability to shape the terms of engagement?
    e. What is the degree of institutional readiness to engage in online learning?

3) Additional Background

1. **A number of factors provide incentives and context for growth in online learning, and these may combine to have a significant impact on higher education.**
    a. Governments, Boards and stakeholders desire and are acting to create more affordable education options (e.g., Western Governor's University, etc.).
    b. Universities are experimenting and seeking potential first mover advantages as innovators and parts of consortia.
    c. Venture funds are investing in new commercial models and see the Internet as creating a low barrier to entry.
    d. Reduced costs to produce and deliver mixed media for traditional educational experience.
    e. Improvements in information technology infrastructure extending reach.

2. **The path to monetizing "free" courses at Internet Scale remains unclear.** "MOCs" or Massive Online Courses (not free) may provide an interesting middle path to access (a) the benefits that only occur at a scale larger than traditional courses, (b) have a sustainable revenue stream to cover their costs, and (c) provide valuable university credit. New models of pay, subsidized, and free may rapidly evolve with experience, and institutions will want to remain nimble to adapt with opportunities. This is a time of caution for any long-term deals.

3. **Early commercial innovators are aggregating courses across known university brands to establish scale in distribution rather than developing their own content from scratch.** This differs from some previous online commercial ventures. If scale matters – and it appears that it does – then should the CIC directly and urgently assess the value in creating scale together?   A number of factors may affect the desirability of CIC affiliation relative to the growing options.

4. **Faculty support for pedagogy and creation of online materials will take enhanced and integrated support from campus providers of pedagogical, technological, audio visual, content expertise, etc.** These are not specific to MOOCS or distance learning and are needed for campus blended and "flipped classroom" courses also.

4) State of the Union

State of the Union – Higher Education: Competitive Challenges to the Traditional Higher Education Model (Education Advisory Board, 2012) *(Report not available for public viewing)*