To coin a phrase, when it comes to Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), there’s something happening here, but what it is isn’t exactly clear. And there’s the rub for presidents of AASCU institutions. University leaders today face the discomforting challenge of needing to map a position for their institution within the Massive Open Online Courses space—when so far, few compass points in that space have come into focus.

So when it comes to MOOCs, how does your institution find its own true north? What factors need to go into your thinking as you plot a MOOC strategy for your institution?

The Rise of MOOCs

While some experts trace the concept behind MOOCs to Buckminster Fuller’s thinking in the 1960s, the first MOOCs as they have come to be defined today started just a few years ago.

Following earlier experimental efforts, the first MOOC that really drew widespread attention was “Introduction to Artificial Intelligence,” taught in 2011 by Peter Thrun and Peter Norvig at Stanford University. As offered in its conventional form on campus, the course had previously enrolled fewer than 200 students. But when the faculty members decided to offer the course widely online, for free, as an experiment, some 160,000 students from 190 countries wanted in.

It didn’t take long for the venture capitalists to get engaged. Funded by Charles River Ventures—and Thrun himself—the company Udacity has quickly moved to scale up a portfolio of free online courses. Launched in January 2012, Udacity started offering courses the next month—a speed that The Economist noted was “a nanosecond by the standards of old-style university decision making.”

By the end of 2012, Udacity was offering courses in computer programming, computer science, mathematics, general sciences, and entrepreneurship to nearly half a million users.

The other major corporate player—at least so far—is Coursera. Also founded by Stanford academics, and also funded by venture capitalists, Coursera has partnered with more than 30 prominent universities—including Brown, Columbia, Duke, Princeton and Stanford—to offer their content via MOOCs. With the tagline “Take the World’s Best Courses, Online, For Free,” Coursera says “we envision a future where the top universities are educating not only thousands of students, but millions.”

In January, The New York Times reported that Coursera was enrolling new students at a rate of 70,000 per week. Also that month, Coursera announced plans to offer some courses for a fee; students would earn certificates of completion bearing the brand of the university offering the course, but the plan stops shy of awarding full college credit.

Harvard and MIT are the forces behind another major player, edX, a not-for-profit venture designed for “interactive study via the web.”
Many other firms, including established companies and start-ups, are also dipping into MOOCs. Udemy and 2U, for example, are often mentioned in the context of MOOCs but differ in that they charge for access to courses. Many other players, from the Khan Academy to iTunes U, post educational content—essentially components of courses—online.

The one AASCU member institution to partner so far with Udacity, San Jose State University (Calif.), is pilot-testing the online teaching—for credit and to both SJSU and non-SJSU students—of remedial and introductory courses in algebra and statistics. The hope is that revising these critical entry-level courses, which traditionally have high failure rates, will improve student engagement and lead to better learning outcomes. Easily accessible online, the pilot courses will also be affordable; at $150 each, they will cost about the same as a course at California’s community colleges.

State systems of public universities are also pushing further into this space. The University of Texas System joined edX last fall, with initial plans to offer four courses on that platform. In January, the State University of New York announced a planned 2014 launch of Open SUNY, which will include 10 online bachelor’s degrees—some of which may be three-year programs—and access to online degree offerings at every SUNY campus through common online tools.

**Are MOOCs a Game-changer?**

Unless perhaps you have been on sabbatical way, way off the grid, discussions about MOOCs have been hard to miss. In a headline late last year, The New York Times dubbed 2012 “The Year of the MOOC.” MOOCs are front and center as an agenda item in many a campus meeting. And although she quickly got her job back, one public university president—Teresa Sullivan at the University of Virginia—was fired, temporarily, in part because UVa’s trustees didn’t think she was moving fast enough to join the MOOC parade.

So, in the face of all the hype and hoopla, how should university leaders think about MOOCs? Are they, in fact, the disruptive force that many make them out to be?

The reality is that MOOCs *are* disruptive. They have sparked a conversation in higher education that is leading many educators to rethink fundamental aspects of academe, from assumptions about classroom learning to the basic construct of university teaching to the reality that corporations can successfully compete with universities to educate students. But at the same time, MOOCs may not be quite as revolutionary as some would have us believe.

Perhaps a better word for MOOCs is “evolutionary.” Susan Aldridge, a former president of the University of Maryland University College who now serves as senior fellow at AASCU and has extensive experience in online learning, suggests that MOOCs are a logical extension of a progression in technology mediated models of education that started with distance education and early efforts in online learning.

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**Tool for Transformation**

John D. Haeger is president of Northern Arizona University (NAU), an AASCU school that has extensive experience in online learning. Haeger says MOOCs bring two new factors to the table. One is scale, he says: the number of people that MOOCs can reach. The other notable thing, he points out, is that prominent universities that have not traditionally been major players in the online space are spearheading experiments in MOOCs.

“I think MOOCs will create a lot of interest in online learning,” Haeger says. That’s one plus for institutions that can offer a robust catalog of online classes. But Haeger says the real potential of MOOCs goes deeper, to what he characterizes as “the extent to which MOOCs can fuel other transformations.”

One such transformation is in teaching and learning. NAU is developing pedagogy based on “flipping” the classroom, or using technology to move lectures and core content outside the classroom, reserving class time for discussion and interaction. Haeger says that offers a lot of promise. “If we can do our introductory courses where the content is on the web and we reserve class time for interactivity, we think we can...
make students more successful. That’s the transformation that I think is there.”

The other side of that coin is saved costs, of course. “It’s back of the envelope,” Haeger says, “but I think if we adopted flipped classrooms in lots of introductory classes across the campus, we could probably reduce the expense of offering those courses by some 15 to 20 percent.”

George Mehaffy, vice president for academic leadership and change at AASCU, puts it this way: “If every institution offers four sections of Psychology 101, and we multiply that times 4,000 institutions, that means every fall we teach 16,000 sections of Psych 101 as if it has never been taught before. Really? Do we really do that still?”

In presentations around the country, Mehaffy urges campus leaders to think about how they can capitalize on flipped classrooms to better deploy faculty resources.

Haeger acknowledges that such change can be perceived as a threat to faculty. If you can get departments to do a uniform course at the introductory level, he says, overall you would probably need fewer faculty for those courses. But the upside of that, he says, is that “then you can move the faculty’s time to working with students on higher order skills. If that happens on a big scale, then we have really changed the pattern of instructing students on university campuses. And that would be a transformation.”

Yet another positive dimension of MOOCs is that they potentially hold a key for better assessment of student learning. While many argue that MOOC education can’t match the quality of a classroom course, advocates of MOOCs counter that while we generally don’t yet have good tools for assessing the quality of classroom learning outcomes, MOOCs have a powerful multiplier effect in their inherent ability to gather basic information about learning from large numbers of students. “MOOCs have certainly propelled forward the conversation about learning assessment,” Mehaffy says.

“Given the numbers of students taking MOOCs, they give us an opportunity to do data mining at a level we have not been able to do before,” Aldridge says. “Web-based education provides us with an opportunity to amass the type of data that we have wanted to help us determine how students learn and what interventions really contribute to student success. Because we can track information more readily in a web-based environment, we are learning more than we ever have before. We are creating metrics and analytics that give our institutions opportunities to intervene where students need our help and support. We’re reassessing the role of faculty members and where they intervene with the students to help them learn.” All of these factors, Aldridge says, move us forward toward better student access to college and more successful degree completion.

**Boon to Universities**

The potential promise of MOOCs doesn’t stop at the classroom. Lost in the “sky is falling” chatter about MOOCs is another reality: For all their disruption, MOOCs might actually help universities reach more students. In a recent AASCU meeting, the president of a university with extensive experience in online learning suggested that MOOCs delivered well could help the university publicize its brand to a wider market of potential students. “I think there is some value in the MOOCs as a way to bring potential students to your institution,” this leader said. “I think we can think of these as a potential recruitment device.” Moreover, MOOCs have the capacity to publicize and promote a university’s top faculty members.

Another education leader at the same meeting said “there’s a lot of opportunity here. It may open up new roles for universities that we can’t conceive of quite yet.” Some education leaders think, for example, that MOOCs create channels for a new era in lifelong learning, opening the door for universities to draw new student populations from the ranks of adults in the workforce who need or want additional education.

**Challenges to Address**

As AASCU presidents shape their own institution’s strategy around MOOCs, several challenges come immediately to the fore. One is monetization. No one seems to have quite figured out a way
to make money from MOOCs, which obviously come with an operating cost and, for viability’s sake, need to contribute something to an institution’s bottom line. Mehaffy says one key challenge for AASCU institutions is the business model around MOOCs, and what it will take to compete in this space.

Revenue models that have been discussed in the MOOC space include the possibility of having students pay for earning a certificate in what would otherwise be a free course. For-profit MOOC pioneers also hope to reap revenue from employers willing to pay for information about current or potential employees who have successfully completed a MOOC.

“I think in the short term the money will be made with certificates,” Aldridge says. “When you put a brand name on a course, that conveys a lot of status, especially with students overseas, and an opportunity to compete in very competitive employment markets. So I think certificates will be an opportunity for revenue. I don’t think 40,000 students will pay for certificates, but given the numbers of students in a MOOC course, I think there’s an opportunity there.”

The possibility of paying for certification dances up to another thorny problem with MOOCs, credentialing. Colleges, of course, need to take pains to decide what kind of credit to award for any educational offering. That is certainly true with MOOCs.

“Just because you can post a series of lectures on the web doesn’t make it a good MOOC,” says John C. Cavanaugh, then chancellor of PASSHE, the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education. (Cavanaugh has since been named head of a university consortium in Washington.) “Like anything else on iTunes U or whatever, just because you can post it doesn’t mean that it’s high-quality. And just because a student claims to have taken a MOOC, the question is whether they have actually learned anything.”

PASHE is working with the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning to develop better ways to assess and standardize measures of the learning that a student obtains from a number of sources, including MOOCs. That work also links to assessment of prior student learning for credit. This past November, the American Council on Education announced a separate initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to examine the academic potential of MOOCs. As part of that project, researchers will evaluate select Coursera courses for college credit by the ACE College Credit Recommendation Service. ACE subsequently announced a similar project to evaluate four Udacity courses.

Conversation for AASCU Institutions

MOOCs obviously offer both opportunities and challenges for the leaders of AASCU institutions. Given that MOOCs are indeed disruptive forces, the key question might be how public universities can transform themselves to adapt to the changes that MOOCs bring—and more importantly, capitalize on those changes.

Mehaffy, for example, likes to ask college audiences how they are using MOOCs to reduce costs, increase access or increase learning outcomes. “As you can imagine,” he says, “there is deafening silence.” Yet that may be the very kind of conversation that public universities need to be having if they are to compete efficiently in a fiercely more competitive education marketplace.

Campuses delivering MOOCs will need to learn how to deliver high quality online education to large groups of students. They will have to figure out how to make money from those courses, and how to award credit for them. Fundamental aspects of academic culture, including the traditional faculty role, may need to be re-envisioned. Those are no small challenges, and in the short term, this change could get extremely messy. But from invigorating students to be masters of their own learning to capitalizing better on faculty expertise to improving our understanding of learning outcomes, the winners in this race have a real shot at transforming teaching and learning in potentially profound ways.

Experts suggest that AASCU presidents experiment in the MOOC space now to determine what paths are right for their institutions. For example, Aldridge suggests that presidents “think about the strategies that they have on their campuses, and utilize technologies to enhance their current strategies. There aren’t sufficient resources to do everything, but there may be opportunities to conduct pilot tests of different modes of delivery across classes, and to research them and determine the extent to which they are having a positive impact on student learning, student progression and student success.”

MOOCs and related innovations in education may help public universities deal with the double sword of lower state appropriations and constraints in the ability to expand tuition. AASCU institutions “need to be looking down the road,” Haeger says. “The transformation in the way that students learn and the way we teach is under way. It promises to be a wild ride probably, but it could totally change everything. We’re going to have more students, we’re going to have less money from the state, we’re going to have less money from tuition—something has to allow us to offer the same quality programming, and it could be that technologies are sophisticated enough now to let that happen.”

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