Helping to Take the Disruptive out of MOOCs

Those of us who have found our way into the enrollment and academic services professions in higher education have become accustomed to the somewhat familiar refrain that colleges and universities are slow to change. The recent attention given to MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) has often included the descriptor “disruptive” (meaning: “to throw into confusion or disorder”) partly because this characterization of resistance to change suggests that higher education institutions could not possibly address this phenomenon in an orderly fashion.

We—the authors of this article—think that change, particularly change around the technology that makes it easier for students to enroll and complete their degrees and that helps faculty focus their time and energy on their teaching and research, is instead part of the fabric of higher education and is actually more characteristic of our profession than is any notion of our resistance to change. We have both been in higher education enrollment services long enough to have witnessed change that would make our offices and processes unrecognizable to those who were in the business twenty years ago. We believe that the same measured approach higher education has taken to apply emerging technologies to current business processes in order to make them more student-centered can be used to navigate the MOOC phenomenon in order to make it more “productive” than “disruptive.”

To understand higher education’s ability to “roll with the changes” from the academic and enrollment services perspective, think of how students applied for admission or registered for classes, or how faculty submitted grades or advised their students, thirty years ago. Applying to college involved completing a paper application and tracking down transcripts to mail to the admissions office. A bank of staff hand-keyed these applications and records into the “system” (usually a legacy system built on COBOL code). Registering for classes was a massive manual exercise involving 80-column punch cards, paper forms, and miles logged walking around campus tracking down signatures. Faculty advised students by comparing transcripts against the degree requirements in the institution catalog. Grades were rushed to the Registrar’s Office at the end of each term and were hand-keyed into the system so that grade reports could be mailed to students.

Today, web-based services have made nearly all academic and enrollment processes available to students and faculty through their computers and, increasingly, through mobile applications on their phones. The vast majority of students apply for admission through a web-based application (many institutions accept only electronic applications). Transcripts can be requested via a website and delivered electronically to the college or university of choice (AACRAO and its SPEEDE Committee developed some of the first standards for electronic records exchange back in 1990). At the institution, those electronic transcripts can be uploaded into a degree audit system that shows a student’s progress toward degree requirements and is updated each term. These degree audits allow faculty advisors to spend more time talking with students about research interests or career plans and less time making sure students’ course choices are meeting degree requirements. Students register for classes, pay their bills, order their textbooks, request transcripts, change their major, and handle many other processes via the web.

The embracing of emerging technologies has made many of these improvements in student services possible. Verification of enrollment for financial aid purposes is now easily done through the National Student Clearinghouse. Document imaging has made it easier to share records with faculty and to store records in digital files rather than in the bulging file cabinets that cluttered offices. Most students get their questions answered or their needs met through websites, allowing institutions to close the banks of windows that often characterized student services offices. Many students attend institutions only through web-based instruction and never even see the inside of campus offices.

So what does AACRAO and what do academic and enrollment service professionals have to contribute to the discussion of MOOCs? Academic leaders at our institutions are already beginning work to address student assessment and learning outcomes issues. The areas where AACRAO members have expertise are in ensuring identity management, in transcripting, and in recording and verifying credentials. A degree from an accredited institution of higher education in the United States has substantial value in part because rigorous quality controls have been applied to the process of obtaining that degree. These include not only institutional and program
accreditation, faculty credentials, and other academic quality metrics but also procedures ensuring that an applicant’s academic preparation for study has been thoroughly evaluated, that prior credit applied to the degree was earned at legitimate institutions, that transcripts reflect the achievement earned by the student in the course and assessed by faculty, that a prescribed course of study was completed, that the record is stored in a secured environment, and that student privacy is protected.

Call us old-fashioned, but we think these sets of quality assurances have served U.S. higher education well.

MOOCs create challenges to this quality-assurance regimen—challenges that will require some thought. How do we know who is taking a course when the course is “open” to anyone who wants to take it? Does this matter only if someone is interested in earning course credit to apply toward a degree or credential? Promising technologies are emerging in identity management, including through Internet2 and the Common Identity and Trust Collaborative (CommIT), which present some opportunities for better authentication of the participants. A variety of strategies is available for transcripting or awarding credit for MOOC courses. The American Council of Education (ACE) and others are beginning work in this area.

At the AACRAO annual meeting in San Francisco in April 2013, we are planning to hold a robust discussion of the role of enrollment and academic services in contributing to the success of MOOCs. We anticipate that our members and partners will have a number of creative ideas to offer. Hopefully we can one day look back to the beginnings of the MOOC phenomenon as just another of the many challenges we have tackled as part of the ever-evolving enterprise known as higher education.

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