Online Education Is Replacing Physical Colleges At A Crazy Fast Pace

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Educators knew the online revolution would eventually envelop the physical classroom, but a torrent of near-revolutionary developments in the past month are proving that change is coming quicker than anyone imagined. In just 30 days, the largest school system in the U.S. began offering **credit for online courses (http://techcrunch.com/2013/01/15/how-californias-new-online-education-pilot-will-end-college-as-we-know-it/)** , a major university began awarding degrees **without any class time required (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323301104578255992379228564.html?mod=WSJ_hpp_LEFTTopStories)** , and scores of public universities are **moving their courses online (https://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/universities-try-mooc2degree-courses-to-lure-successful-students-to-online-programs/41829)** . The point at which online higher education becomes mainstream is no longer in some fuzzy hypothetical future; the next president's Secretary of Education will need an entire department dedicated to the massive transition.

For over a decade, admissions-selective universities (e.g. not the University of Phoenix) resisted giving credit for their overwhelmingly popular online courses. Established with just 50 free online courses as a proof-of-concept, MIT's groundbreaking Open CourseWare project quickly expanded to 1,700 courses through a worldwide consortium of universities in just three years [**PDF (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/02680510802627787)**]. To date, MIT's Open Courseware has a staggering **125 million lifetime visitors (http://web.mit.edu/fnl/volume/244/abelson%20et%20al.html)** . Online education startup Coursera, which added

interactive video, homework, and peer learning communities to courses from top-tier universities, has amassed more than 2.5 million users in only nine months since its debut in April 2012.

Then, last month, the California State University System, the financially broken/largest education system in world, swung open the gates, piloting a few online courses for credit, at the super-low cost of $150 per course. Earlier this year, **I attempted to predict (http://techcrunch.com/2013/01/15/how-californias-new-online-education-pilot-will-end-college-as-we-know-it/)** how California's partnership with online course provider ,Udacity, would succeed and cascade into a movement that would radically replace most of the physical college experience.

I was wrong about one thing: the otherwise scientifically prudent community of higher education didn't wait to see if the pilot was successful. Just three weeks after California's **announcement (http://techcrunch.com/2013/02/07/curbing-the-cost-of-college-coursera-wins-approval-to-offer-online-courses-for-credit-for-under-200/)** , The American Council on Education, a consortium of roughly 1,800 accredited universities, announced it was also piloting cheap online science courses at three more universities, including Duke and the University of Pennsylvania.

Perhaps most disruptive of all, the University of Wisconsin is offering a **fully legitimate college degree (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323301104578255992379228564.html?mod=WSJ_hpp_LEFTTopStories)** without any class time required. So long as students can pass some tests (and pay the associated costs), they can learn from anywhere in the world.

To give readers a sense of how abrupt this change is, online education pioneer and founder of the YouTube-based learning website **Khan Academy (http://www.crunchbase.com/company/khan-academy)** , Sal Khan, opined about a test-based college degree at Aspen Institute's big-think Ideas Festival two years ago. No one, even those on the cutting edge of digital education, considered that they were talking about the very near future.

The semi-sad impact is that we're acting quicker than we're thinking. It can take years to assess a single course, let alone an entire restructuring of the education system. A review of research by the Department of Education shows pretty definitively **that (http://articles.cnn.com/2011-06-09/opinion/computers.replace.teachers_1_schools-change-online-teachers-cash-strapped-school-districts?_s=PM:OPINION)** "students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction."

~~More relevant to the Massively Open Online Community courses (MOOCs) being piloted in higher education, a team of researchers from that replacing a physics teacher with lectures from a Nobel Prize-winning physicist nearly doubled test scores [**PDF (http://www.um.es/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=c538d7e7-52a4-4f9a-93c7-92ac04c80b06&groupId=115466)**].~~

Still, in education it's well-known that successful pilots tend to fall apart upon scaling. Educational experiments work great with the best teachers and students, but they struggle when pilots move beyond the highly dedicated walls of an experiment.

In short, we have almost no idea how this will affect our educational system. What we do know is that the unknown is coming — very, very quickly.
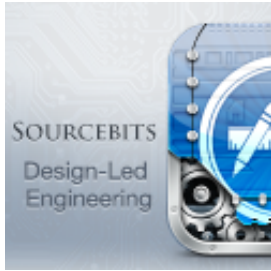
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