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MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION: REVITALIZING SMALL COLLEGES WITH MOOC HYBRIDS

✍ Written by Jessica Mahoney and Kevin R. Burke / *💬* 0 Comments /

When MOOCs went viral in 2012, traditional small colleges reached an identity crossroads, a midlife crisis where idealism and wisdom collide. Although the main concerns of future viability have been present for years — the fate of the humanities, the rise in student debt, and the sluggish economy, among others — MOOCs have summoned a sense of urgency. “Get online, or get an identity,” as Patrick J. Deneen recently [expressed](#), illustrates the high stakes for institutions deciding whether to assimilate or differentiate. Along with the rapid adoption at large, elite institutions and flagship state schools is the growing [myth](#) that MOOCs will threaten traditional liberal arts colleges and smaller institutions. Despite the massive amount of capital

invested in [Coursera](#), [edX](#), and [Udacity](#) and the hype about global branding, according to [Insider Higher Education](#) the original MOOC platform included engaged learning activities found at most small liberal arts colleges. MOOCs, it appears, were not created to run the old guard out of town; rather, they can bring the best traditional liberal arts instruction in direct dialogue with fresh ideas from students across the globe. Recently [Wellesley College](#) announced its first course offerings with edX, making it the first liberal arts college to offer MOOCs. Will other small institutions be able to adapt?

It may be possible for small liberal arts colleges to have their cake and eat it too. As [Clay Shirky](#) recently [suggested](#), what's at risk is not identity and tradition but the financial bottom line. A hybrid pedagogical model may be the solution to preserving tradition without missing out on the new opportunities of the cost-saving platform. Although cMOOCs (and some xMOOCs) aim to present more engaged and interactive components, most of the truly "massive" courses focus on content delivery and retention through [video lectures and quizzes](#). While this approach seems antithetical to the close student-faculty interaction that these traditional institutions boast, an effective pairing of the intimate learning environment with MOOCs could extend networking and building opportunities for students in meaningful ways. At the risk of sounding political, MOOCs don't kill colleges, colleges kill colleges.

Although MOOCs could serve instructional goals in numerous ways, four integrative models resolve tensions between tradition and innovation: 1) a closed network with peer institutions, resembling the consortium of selective institutions partnering with [2U](#), an infrastructural support system that transforms on-campus programs to web programs; 2) community engagement programs to enroll students of small colleges alongside professionals from local businesses and organizations; 3) student-led independent research with a supervising professor; and 4) summer programs for remediation and youth enrichment. Each model draws on a hybrid pedagogical formula to provide new resources and opportunities for students.

Straying from the massive, open-concept of most xMOOCs, a closed cMOOC within a network of peers mirrors the small student population of most liberal arts schools. Collaborating with faculty from two or three campuses and providing online instruction to enrolled students from each school expands social, professional, and educational opportunities for all involved. It also sustains peer oversight to ensure quality and credit-bearing value. Course objectives, graded assignments, and interaction through chats and discussion forums are a few of the features of a [closed online course](#), and these could effectively pair with local study groups and projects for teams of students at the individual institutions.

Uniquely, a closed cMOOC networking with peer institutions pulls together experts from each school and attracts enrollment from each institution's student body. Advantages for students

include optimizing each instructor's expertise; an American History course, for example, could exhibit specialists in African American Studies, Economics, and Political Science on the topic of World War II. Secondly, there is a networking benefit to teaching faculty from the disciplinary connections made across several campuses. Finally, this model could lead to more research opportunities for students and faculty, including access to each institution's library resources.

Many small, liberal arts schools foster ongoing relationships with their alumni. A MOOC that invites alumni enrollment for continuing education will provide current students with a model of life-long learning that reflects the true values of a liberal arts education. Doug Fisher, Vanderbilt University's Associate Professor of Computer Science and Engineering, proposes maintaining [alumni connections to the college campus](#) with MOOCs, and [Janine DeBaise](#) has seen the [benefits of including alumni](#) in this "global community". In addition, this type of MOOC places an institution's educational resources into the community and could tap alumni to showcase their experience in the workforce for students in the course. Bringing alumni in partnership with current students can also strengthen the collaborative problem-solving skills needed for the challenges and opportunities of the 21st-century.

A staple of the small, liberal arts institutions is the one-on-one learning environment. Gettysburg College President Janet Riggs sees the potential in using MOOCs for students interested in [independent studies](#). Such upper-level specialty courses provide students with more educational opportunities than most small institutions are able to provide. Students can complete a MOOC, yet be guided and evaluated by a professor at their enrolling institution. This model also encourages faculty development in the process of screening courses, especially if a student and professor enroll in a MOOC together and collaborate on a research project. Offering upper level students a hand in selecting and evaluating pertinent MOOCs for independent research will encourage self-guided learning. These concepts have been branded by many liberal arts schools and would not be lost in an independent study MOOC scenario. Independent learners could benefit from having their instructors co-enrolled with them in enrichment MOOCs. In fact, *not* providing such co-enrollment opportunities for students does a disservice to self-motivated learners.

Most colleges struggle with the lack of preparation incoming freshmen bring to the school. The University of Wisconsin La Crosse designed its first [MOOC](#) on college readiness to prepare students for math and science courses and improve graduation numbers in less time and at lower costs. Similarly, Matt Reed, Vice President for Academic Affairs at Holyoke Community College speaks of using [MOOCs for enrichment](#). He envisions MOOCs as a supplement for developmental courses. In addition to providing remediation for college students, these courses could also serve as a college primer for high school guidance counselors, students, and parents. Many campuses and universities offer such programs in-person, but putting these programs online alleviates the

distance obstacle and reduces the drain of resources for repetitive information sessions. In addition, such online programs facilitate recruiting and establish an early, ongoing relationship between the campus and high schools. Pairing MOOCs that bridge the gulf between high school and college work with enrichment activities on campus will add transparency to the admissions and enrollment process.

While many schools have not made a formal decision on how MOOCs will serve their curriculum, institutions might consider integrative approaches to online courses like the four described above before dismissing MOOCs entirely or jumping on the bandwagon blindly. Despite the hype that expansive xMOOCs continue to gain, there is potential for smaller institutions to continue offering traditional pedagogy with the added benefits of connecting with the outside world. MOOCs become an enhancement, rather than a replacement.

Institutions will need to address challenges that could arise from integrating the online and campus environments. As schools consider MOOCs and their hybrids, dialogue should arise about striking a balance between the online and campus environment, so as not to lose any human connectivity. Attention should also be given to the design of MOOCs that will enrich and/or remediate. As Michael A. Wartell, former Chancellor of Indiana University-Purdue University For Wayne, suggests, using MOOCs for this purpose only [“treat\[s\] the symptoms rather than the disease.”](#)

Additionally, while MOOCs could help form productive relationships with peer institutions, international students, and alumni communities, garnering resources for development and policies for oversight could prove difficult. As in the case of most hybrid models, time and money need to be found for faculty training and course preparation. Financially speaking, allocating funds to professors of participating institutions or deciding whether or not to expect tuition from alumni will have to be decided. Assigning roles for management, assessment, and troubleshooting may prove challenging when more than one institution is on board. Furthermore, soliciting IT support and establishing communication with marketing and/or alumni departments about showcasing such courses strains resources, especially with the limited staffing available at smaller institutions. Administrations, though, should consider MOOCs an investment in student opportunities, not in a cost-saving measure.

On the instructional side, however, a hybrid model will be key to preserving the values and environment of a liberal arts education with the potential benefits of MOOCs for small colleges. Removing the need for lecturing through the online platform will encourage instructors to provide unique learning experiences for the students they work with so closely. Although collegiate interactions can be simulated online, traditional small colleges preserve something irreplaceable: the physical campus. The unique properties of this spatial environment reflect

centuries of learning and impress upon students timeless values of commitment, service, and loyalty to one's alma mater. Still, however, if institutions do not take advantage of potential opportunities MOOCs bring to the table, there will be nobody to blame but themselves for their obsolescence.



[Photo by [henry grey](#)]

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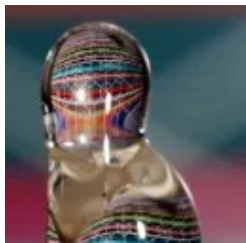
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