

OF MOOCs AND MEN

It is the year of MOOCs. But they are a distraction, a gimmick.

They are bread crumbs that well fed R1s fling to the masses. They are advertisements for star professors on the lecture circuit with a book, of all things. They are token alms to the poor and middle class by universities that feel pressured to reduce cost publicly.

The real story is that free resources like search engines and digital libraries, as well as the web itself, now allow online entrepreneurs in higher education to bankroll only a fraction of the resources that they link together. They free-ride the publicly developed internet, as we do, too. They crawl and scavenge networks of information. They feed off experts for whom often bricks and mortar institutions provide digital access, offices, and benefits.

Among these entrepreneurs are the aggregators of online courses; they sell content without the seal of accreditation. They reduce cost, essentially by eliminating the rest of the university. They replace live classrooms, in which the teacher's meter is always running, with digitized content, which capitalizes on automation and repeatability. Aggregators, therefore, are trying to acquire a large share of the traditional offerings that can be standardized and scaled. The aggregator's main business is business, not higher education.

In fact, a few bricks and mortar universities are outsourcing basic courses to them. The universities pocket the difference between their own old cost and the price of the new services.

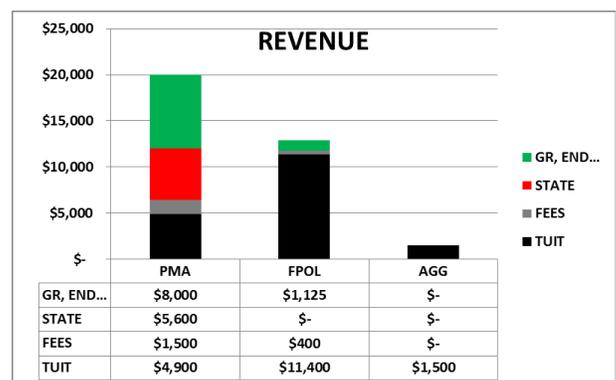
This game works until publicity and competition drive down overall tuition to the lower cost.

We get high and mighty about such cashing in on learning. But we exploit learning, too.

We accessorize learning with sports spectacles, fitness centers, suite-like dorms, special meal plans, career centers, and etc. These enterprises contribute to the long-term portfolio and upscale marketability of the university. They introduce students to the goods that a diploma helps one to buy—on credit.

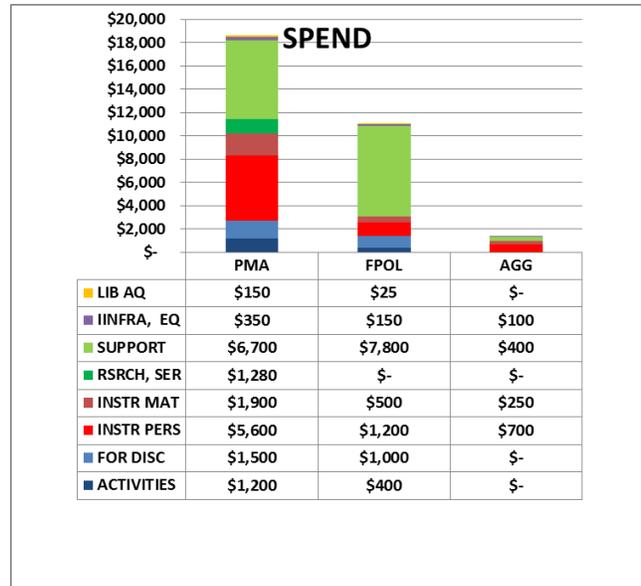
In an expanding economy, with an expanding gap in wages between those with college degrees and those without, traditional higher education seems a well upholstered necessity. In a stagnant economy such an education easily becomes an unaffordable luxury.

What does tuition actually buy? Consider three types of institutions, public MA-granting like most CSUs, for-profit online universities, and unaccredited online course aggregators. Compared to online universities, the public MAs seem to be a steal at



\$6,400 in tuition and fees in 2011; however, total funding includes the state subsidy, grants, endowments, etc. They combine with tuition to exceed nearly by 2:1 the cost of online universities that rely almost entirely on tuition.

Look closely at what drives up cost at the bricks and mortar. \$2,700, over 40% of tuition and fees and over 30% of instructional cost, fund aid (discount) and student life (fees levied for clubs, sports, entertainment, health, career services, etc.). Students also help to underwrite research and public service by members of the university.



Philanthropy is a good thing, but should the share for aid to others rival the share for one's own instruction? The production and application of specialized knowledge in research and service are good things, too, but will the bulk of students benefit from either? Student life is a good, but at what price?

Obviously, the aggregators and online providers slash prices by unbundling learning in courses from other goods, services, and accessories. The aggregators also have trashed most of the support for students and faculty that traditional universities organize into divisional hierarchies. They do not stock libraries. Because there is little there, there, the cost of infrastructure and equipment is low. The aggregators especially are flat; they are lean and focused.

Instructional costs in the public MAs reflect older ways. The student to faculty ratio is 18, not 36, to 1; half of the faculty is full-time, earning \$66,000 in 2011 with benefits, not almost entirely part-time, making less than \$40,000 with few benefits. The online sectors get economy by using web media to reduce the labor cost of live instruction. The standardization of content decreases the time and cost of preparation. Groups of content experts, media developers, on-call tutors, and blog moderators splinter the traditional professor. The narrowing of skill sets tends to lower rates of pay. Tenured authorities yield to technicians on contract.

Such changes do not necessarily portend the end of traditional higher education. The economies, if practiced sensibly, can help us to respond constructively to the reality that most states lack funds for capital projects and for more benefits for more staffing. Also, they do not have the stomach for raising tuition and fees. Web-mediated courses can serve repeaters in large courses with low pass rates. Typically takers must diagnose and fix not everything but something. Popular electives, for which departments staff many sections with term employees, are suitable,

too. If 10% of CSU's FTES could be taught at 50% of cost, for example, campuses could save at least \$120,000,000.

We also can profit by adapting the flat organization, shared services, and self-help in these online sectors. Academic disciplines and business functions dictate our organization into a warren of offices. Many have redundant support and technology, thereby inflating the need for more administration. These structures repeat across campuses in state systems. Often, the central office compounds cost. It polices campuses for conformity with central templates and expectations. It eliminates redundancies where there is no gain, as in similar academic programs on different campuses at great distance. It shies from re-design where there likely is gain, as in collection management across libraries, personnel records and basic queries, cyclical bulk purchasing, computing capacity and online help, etc. In effect, the "system" is structured for bureaucratic compliance, not economic resilience.

Used strategically, digital technology can assist even high-touch organizations like regional universities to dampen cost yet burnish their character. For example, course redesign can reduce the time, labor, and expense of filling class hours with rote exercises and content that must be repeated across classes and terms. Faculty then can concentrate in the classroom on those activities that really do need their immediate presence for students to learn deeply. Or, they can redirect resources to other important activities that require immediate presence.

We should not use digital technology, therefore, to erase immediate presence but rather to conserve it. Then, we can apply it in force and on point. Our justification for continuing as bricks and mortar institutions turns on how well we leverage change in the region with our immediate presence. We should be "stewards of place," as the American Association of State Colleges and Universities has said. Can we document our impact on teaching practice and pupil learning in local schools? On community health and social services? On technology transfer and business revitalization? We should be able to explain how the public investment in research and service pays off to the region especially. The account need not be in dollars and sense. But it should help taxpayers make sense of why they should support other people's grown children to learn in a place that, apparently, spends on socialization as well as learning and that, further, spends on research and service as well as teaching.

We also need to build a better case that the immediate presence of teachers, advisors, and peers matter for learning, graduation, and career. This presumes a strong commitment to life in the university by its key stakeholders. Too often, seats that are reserved for faculty at graduation go unfilled. Administrators do not even try to schedule common activities in common hours. Students have few structured opportunities to bond with employees who can befriend and advise.

We are suspicious of technologies that displace face to face. And we are dismissive of ideologies that reduce immediate presence to a commodity of content. Yet we begrudge the university's call

on our presence. That call, we often argue, exceeds the letter of our contract or interrupts our preparation and research. We could be dead right.

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