Tens of thousands take first ‘massive open online course’ offered in Western New York
Noncredit offerings proliferate across U.S.

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The most popular college course in the region this semester cost nothing to take, had no set meeting times and did not require students to step inside a classroom.

Nearly 41,000 people – more than the undergraduate and graduate enrollment at the University at Buffalo, the area’s largest school – signed up for the course, called “Ignite Your Everyday Creativity.” Developed at SUNY Buffalo State, it was the first massive open online course, or MOOC, to come from Western New York. The course ended Sunday.

And most of the students live nowhere near the Buffalo State campus. They’re in just about every state and 185 countries.

A few years ago, MOOCs received as much hype as the iPhone debut. Some proponents predicted MOOCs – which are free but don’t count for college credit – would revolutionize higher education, chopping away at spiraling costs and making many campuses obsolete.

The hype died down after a 2013 University of Pennsylvania study found that few students completed MOOCs, souring some educators on their potential.

But the free online courses continue to proliferate. Buffalo State is among more than 100 colleges and universities, including elite schools like Yale, Columbia and Duke, that are partnering with Coursera, one of several technology companies and nonprofit organizations that provide platforms for online courses.

MOOCs are just a small part of a tidal wave of change in store for higher education, said Carey Hatch, associate provost at SUNY, who oversees SUNY’s online initiatives.

“The fact of the matter is, we need to educate more people,” he said. “We’re interested in learning how these types of tools can be effective in teaching and learning.”

The State University of New York joined nine other public university systems in signing on with Coursera in 2013. The Buffalo State course is the third MOOC offering from SUNY; Albany offers a free 16-week online course on nonprofit governance, and a new MOOC debuted this week on the topic of MOOCs and e-learning, through Empire State College.

“The landscape is starting to change. Students are starting to ask for these alternative forms of education,” said John F. Cabra, associate professor at Buffalo State’s International Center for Studies in Creativity. “There’s so much more flexibility being demanded by our students.”

Cabra and Cyndi Burnett, an assistant professor at Buffalo State, developed “Ignite Your Everyday Creativity” in conjunction with the college’s instructional technology staff.

Their MOOC is a version of the introductory course in creativity that Buffalo State has offered on campus for decades. The classroom course is open to roughly 25 students per section, with up to four sections offered per semester. That means no more than 200 students a year can take the course in a classroom.

The single six-week MOOC, which began Feb. 16, offered the potential to reach the same number of students that it took the college 20 years to teach through its traditional classroom course.

But one of the biggest knocks against MOOCs is the huge drop-out rate, so the sign-up numbers can be misleading. The University of Pennsylvania study found that, on average, 96 percent of students who signed up for a MOOC failed to complete it. The creativity course held to that pattern, too, though it
sustained more interest for a longer time than most MOOCs.

“You have a platform that's open, that's splashed out to people around the world. You're going to get people who look at it a little bit and say, 'This is not for me,'” Cabra said.

Many people who registered for the open online creativity course stopped actively participating after a week or two. Yet, after three weeks, Cabra estimated at least 6,000 “very active” students had watched all of the videos and participated in most of the assignments.

“That's still a lot of students sticking with a class that's not giving them any kind of credential,” said Christine Kroll, assistant dean of online programs for the Graduate School of Education at UB.

**Broader reach**

Faculty members at UB have yet to develop a MOOC. But Lisa A. Stephens, an instructional design expert at the university, is coordinating SUNY’s entry into the MOOC world.

The “university will be in the game soon,” said Hatch, the associate provost at SUNY.

Kroll also is applying for a grant to develop data from the Coursera platform that education researchers can then use in analyzing what works and what doesn’t in MOOCs.

Many of the region’s colleges and universities, including Buffalo State and UB, have offered online degree programs for years. But the courses have been limited to paying students pursuing degrees.

The power of MOOCs comes from their potential to reach many more people and broadly, at relatively little cost. So, when an estimated 160,000 people signed up in 2011 for an online artificial intelligence course at Stanford University, hype about MOOCs went into overdrive.

Hatch doubts online learning will lead to wholesale closures of colleges and universities, as some MOOC advocates had predicted.

“We know we’re always going to have students who want to come to our campuses,” he said.

Still, schools will be forced to rethink how they blend their traditional cohort of students with greater varieties of nontraditional students, including the estimated 2 million New Yorkers who have some college credit, but no degree. Adult learners in particular could benefit the most from MOOCs.

“These kinds of tools might in the long run fit into some kind of continuing education space,” Hatch said.

Some educators view MOOCs primarily as a hands-on marketing tool, allowing students who take a MOOC to see if they're cut out for online learning before committing big money for credit-bearing courses.

**The creativity skill**

For Cabra and Burnett, who constantly look to heighten the profile of teaching creativity, a MOOC was a natural step at Buffalo State.

“Our department’s mission is to ignite creativity around the world,” Burnett said. “We believe that everybody is creative and that creativity is an essential life skill. We're living in an age where things are changing so rapidly that we need to have a creative mindset.”

The professors weren’t sure how people would respond to their course offering. The huge interest points to a broader trend in society toward a better understanding of how creativity works, they said.

Cabra, for example, has consulted with organizations such as NASA and the British government on cultivating more creativity.

“The challenges they are facing require new thinking,” he said. “It’s our tools and techniques that are helping them find new breakthroughs.”

Cabra and Burnett tracked how well students learned through the online course. Students took a test at the beginning, in the middle of the course and again at the end. The test measured how a person’s creativity changed over time.

“Helping people just recognize their own creativity is first and foremost,” Burnett said. “We're not looking
at, 'Oh, you're going to be the next Steve Jobs or the next Picasso.'"

**The coursework**

The course consisted of 47 lessons over six weeks, with students watching videos, reading, completing assignments, doing peer reviews, participating in online group discussions and developing a portfolio. The course required three to four hours a week of study, though each lesson was broken down into small, manageable parts, allowing students to leave and return to the lesson as their time permits.

“They can sit for five minutes when they're waiting for the kids to finish football practice,” Burnett said.

Nine teaching assistants helped Burnett and Cabra monitor the course, answer questions and fix any glitches. The two professors posted their own comments periodically, “just so students know we are reading their posts and we are active and interactive,” Cabra said.

The first assignment required students to take an ordinary light switch plate and personalize it with decoration. The idea was to be as creative as possible with an otherwise utilitarian item. Burnett also suggested using a fork, a wine glass or a light bulb for the exercise. Students went to work. One photocopied her intricate notebook doodles and glued them to a switch plate. Another attached a favorite postcard to the plate, then matted and framed it, like a photograph or painting. And another student combined a light bulb with a cocktail glass, red gift-wrap paper and a decorative cocktail umbrella to make what he called “A Light Drink.”

Students then photographed their “mini-masterpieces” and posted them to an online forum, where other students weighed in.

The discourse among students remained remarkably civil, a rarity in the online realm. Three or four people were dismissed from the course for comments deemed too critical or for personal attacks, Cabra said. But “given the number of people that signed up, it is striking that the decorum overall has been fantastic.”

But is the online course the equivalent of the in-class experience?

It depends on who you ask.

“We get a little more in depth in a seated course,” Burnett said.

The MOOC can serve as a gateway into a deeper exploration of creativity, she added.

“For people who are interested in something but don’t necessarily have the time and money to pay for something big, it's an easy way to get people engaged at a low cost on all ends,” she said.

Cabra offered a different view. The online version measures up to the classroom course, he said. Some students in the creativity MOOC even expressed surprise at the amount of work they had to put into the course.

The professors said they will have a better gauge of the online course’s effectiveness after they examine student portfolios and the results of the student testing. Cabra believes the quality of technology and MOOCs will improve, and it's only a matter of time before colleges and universities begin to offer credit for them.

“Any technology when you first introduce it, it's clunky, it's not smooth,” Cabra said.

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