



The Buzz about Online Education

Author : Mike Smith

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There is a lot of buzz these days about the future of higher education, and much of it revolves around online education. Harvard and MIT have committed \$60 million to provide free online courses, and [two Stanford faculty members have created a company, Coursera](#), that offers courses from top universities for free. My understanding is that most of the courses are lectures and that you cannot get academic credit toward a degree. I don't understand their business model, but I support the idea of broadening access to knowledge. The question these and other initiatives raise is whether and how they threaten the traditional bricks-and-mortar university, including places like Carolina.

David Brooks had [an interesting piece about this in the New York Times last week called "The Campus Tsunami."](#) Given what we have learned in deciding to partner with 2tor on MPA@UNC, I am struck by the narrow assumptions that most people make in thinking about the potential of online education. For example, Brooks asks if "online learning will diminish the face-to-face community that is the heart of the college experience?" He also writes that online education mostly helps people absorb information, but it doesn't address the rest of the learning process—reflection, dialogue, and synthesis. Brooks makes the case for a blended model that involves local professors guiding their students to first-rate online lectures and then providing "the rest of the learning process." "The local professor would do more tutoring and conversing and less lecturing."

Brooks and many others assume that online programs must be limited to one-way lectures, with the students serving as empty vessels that a lecturer fills with information, "a commodity that is cheap and globally available." That is not the model that 2tor has used with its other programs, and it is not the one we will be using with MPA@UNC. The online platform will enable our students to interact with the faculty member and with each other. They will have the opportunity to reflect and think about the information—through engaging work before class and then through an



interactive classroom experience. They will do group projects and other activities to help them analyze and synthesize what they are learning.

Last Thursday Chancellor Holden Thorp attended the Deans Council meeting and asked us to think about how Carolina can position itself to be a leader in charting the future of higher education. For the first time in my memory, the University's senior leadership had a discussion about the importance of online education as a part of Carolina's future. Holden indicated that he had not favored online education as Dean of the College, but he has changed his mind and now wants to explore its role at Carolina. That is good news.

I feel lucky that the School is partnering with 2tor to develop a new model that has the potential to transform online education and how people think about it. Our colleagues at the Business School are very happy with the quality of the educational experience for their students in the MBA@UNC. Brooks closed his editorial by saying "it will be easier to be a terrible university on the wide-open Web, but it will also be possible for the most committed schools and students to be better than ever." On that point I agree, and we are committed to offering an educational experience for online MPA students that will be better than ever.



Speaking of "student engagement," [here is an interesting story from the online MSW that the University of Southern California's School of Social Work offers in partnership with 2tor](#). "[T]wo of our MSW@USC students not only became close friends, but shortly after meeting in a class group project, they fell in love! These two students, who lived on opposite sides of the state of California, were recently engaged and sat down with us to share their story." This is not your traditional online program. Just sayin'.