MOOCs and 'Mad Men'

Many believe that technology offers the remedy for many of the problems facing both public and higher education. The recent legislative proposal to buy every Utah K-12 student an iPad is just one variation on the theme that technology is the panacea for education. In higher education circles, the technological redeemer de jour is the Massive Open Online Course or MOOC.

A MOOC is an online course in which content is delivered at little or no cost to thousands of students. One of the earlier and best-known examples was a class titled Introduction to Artificial Intelligence that two Stanford University professors offered to 100,000 students. Today, the website MOOC-List offers a comprehensive listing of classes that are available. Educational corporations, such as Coursera and UDACITY, offer hundreds of courses to millions of students. Free courses range from Introduction to Pharmacy to Principles of Electrical Circuits to Programming Handheld Systems.

The rapid ascendance of MOOCs has led some to speculate that the days of traditional college education are numbered. Students will simply pick and choose from a wide variety of free online classes to amass the knowledge and skills they need to be successful.

In an article titled "Disrupting the Diploma," Reid Hoffman, the entrepreneur and co-founder of LinkedIn, wrote, "As long as [the business world] continues to depend on a 12th Century communications device, the diploma, as its preferred gateway to entry, we won't be able to fully capitalize on 21th Century innovations in technology and education."

In an article published in The American Interest, Nathan Harden was more conclusive: "In fifty years, if not much sooner, half of the roughly 4,500 colleges and universities now operating in the United States will have ceased to exist. The technology driving this change is already at work, and nothing can stop it. The future looks like this: Access to college-level education will be free for everyone."

Will traditional college education cease to exist? Should today's college students pack it in and sign up for a dozen MOOCs? To answer this question, it is helpful to dig into what employers actually want from their employees.

On a regular basis, the American Association of Colleges and Universities surveys hundreds of employers to determine their perspective on the type of learning individuals need to succeed in the modern economy. Other organizations conduct the same type of survey. Arguably, the most robust finding from these surveys is that employers want both specific technical competencies and a broad range of softer skills. The softer skills include the ability to communicate both orally and through writing, the ability to function in a real-world setting, creativity, teamwork, and collaboration.

In other words, employers want someone who resembles the lead character in the television series Mad Men. Don Draper is technically skillful. Don possesses insight into consumers and understands how markets function. He regularly develops compelling advertising campaigns for his agency's clients. Don is also the master of softer skills. He is charismatic and visionary. He can recognize talent in his subordinates, and he understands what motivates them. Don also knows how to appease the most prickly clients. He can do all this and still have the energy to devote a considerable amount to time to what could euphemistically be called socializing.

What employer surveys do not reveal is that employers know that Don Draper doesn't really exist. The number of people in the real world bearing any resemblance to the multi-faceted Don Draper is extraordinarily small. For this reason, employers tend to bifurcate what they need from their employees.

Top of Utah Voices

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Commentary

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For the most technically skilled employees softer skills are desirable but, to some degree, optional. If a currency trader can regularly produce double-digit returns, some deficiencies in interpersonal skills may be overlooked. If a computer programmer does her best work at 2 a.m. in an office littered with Diet Coke cans, that can be tolerated.

Moreover, employers tend to be fairly flexible with regard to exactly where their employees acquired their technical skills. If technical competencies can be demonstrated through experience or reputation, a college degree may not be required. For this reason, MOOCs may play an important role in the education of technical workers.

At the same time, businesses need individuals who can organize and motivate others. They need people that are self-directed but open to feedback and criticism. Corporations need employees that can work in and navigate their way through large and complex environments. They need folks that can reason their way through complex problems that are not always quantifiable. Increasingly, businesses value people who are comfortable working with diverse groups both inside and outside the corporation.

Much of the education that college students receive, both inside and outside the classroom, is largely focused upon this second skill set. At the same time, many degree programs build upon this set of softer skills with education and experiences in one of the professional fields such as business, engineering, computer science or health care. Perhaps most importantly, a college degree provides some level of verification that certain knowledge, habits of thought, and skills have been attained.

Rather than annihilating colleges and universities, it is more likely that existing universities will adapt some elements of MOOCs to deliver the type of education that MOOCs can deliver. At the same time, colleges continue to engage in the complex task of educating students in a far-reaching set of skills and capabilities so they may contribute to both industry and society. For this reason, the total demise of colleges and universities is as unlikely as the creation of an actual Don Draper.