Citing disappointing student outcomes, San Jose State pauses work with Udacity | Inside Higher Ed

After six months of high-profile experimentation, San Jose State University plans to "pause" its work with Udacity, a company that promises to deliver low-cost, high-quality online education to the masses.

The decision will likely be seen as a setback for a unique partnership announced in January by California Gov. Jerry Brown in a 45-minute news conference with university officials and Udacity CEO Sebastian Thrun.

The pause is also the latest in a series of developments that may dampen the often hyperbolic enthusiasm that has surrounded massive open online courses, even though the companies that provide MOOCs have received millions in venture capital money.

Thrun, a prominent Silicon Valley figure who invented the self-driving car and worked on Google Glass, said in January that his work with San Jose State could "change the life of Californians" by expanding access and lowering costs. So far, that future is elusive.

San Jose State Provost Ellen Junn said disappointing student performance will prompt the university to stop offering online classes with Udacity this fall as part of a "short breather."

Junn wants to spend the fall going over the results and talking with faculty members about the university's online experimentation, which extends beyond the Udacity partnership and has proved somewhat controversial. She said the plan is to start working with Udacity again in spring 2014.

"I think the commitment is to look at the data carefully and make adjustments," Junn said in a telephone interview Wednesday.

Preliminary findings from the spring semester suggest students in the online

Udacity courses, which were developed jointly with San Jose State faculty, do not fare as well as students who attended normal classes -- though Junn cautioned against reading too much into the comparison, given the significant differences in the student populations.

Preston Rudy, vice president of the San Jose State chapter of the California Faculty Association, said the university must be cautious with what he called its experiments on students.

"It's wise to reevaluate and pursue something based on the evidence rather than the advertisement," Rudy said.

Udacity, which is fueled by venture capital money, released a statement Wednesday evening in which its officials said they remain optimistic about the efforts in San Jose, which are known as San Jose State Plus.

"While the pilot gave many students the opportunity they would not have otherwise had to earn college credit and move closer to their academic goals, we will be pausing enrollment in SJSU+ until the spring in order to work with SJSU on improving the student experience," the company said in a statement. "In the meantime, SJSU MOOC courses will continue to remain available and we encourage students to avail themselves of this learning opportunity offered by SJSU."

San Jose State is one of Udacity's few university partners, though the company recently signed a major deal with the Georgia Institute of Technology to eventually offer a low-cost online master's degree to 10,000 students at once.

While San Jose State's work with Udacity is paused, the university plans to keep working this fall with edX, a nonprofit founded by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

EdX and Udacity, along with Coursera, are part of a trio of closely watched MOOC start-ups. MOOCs are not-for-credit, free online courses. The three star-

tups are also branching out into other teaching and business models.

At San Jose State, neither the edX or Udacity offerings are technically MOOCs because they are not massive or open.

Students in the edX experiment are actually doing better than normal San Jose State students. But not so for the Udacity students.

This spring, Udacity and San Jose State offered three online for-credit math courses for $150 to 100 students per course. Of those students, half were San Jose State students and the other half were un-enrolled students who might have come from high schools or the military.

Junn said this makes it tough to compare the online students taking the Udacity courses with regular San Jose State students. Still, the Udacity students fared significantly worse than their in-class peers, according to preliminary findings Junn presented to fellow California State University System provosts last month.

A copy of that internal presentation, which Junn repeatedly emphasized was preliminary, was obtained this week by *Inside Higher Ed* from the California Faculty Association. According to the preliminary presentation, 74 percent or more of the students in traditional classes passed, while no more than 51 percent of Udacity students passed any of the three courses.

Junn said students who are enrolled in Udacity courses this summer appear to be faring better than students from the spring semester. That is, in part, because of lessons learned this spring, Junn said. Some spring semester students, for instance, were enrolled in the online courses even though they did not have reliable access to computers.

The spring courses – a remedial math course, a college algebra course and an introductory statistics course – were chosen in part because of the wishes of Bill Gates, whose foundation gave the effort a grant, Junn said. Gates, the founder

of Microsoft, is a fan of math and science education and wanted the offerings to include remedial math, Junn said.

The courses were also put together in a rush. That's apparently because of the timing of the deal with Udacity. The pilot project was announced a fortnight before classes started. (Like other similar deals, it was also the result of a no-bid contract.) The deal came together at the highest levels: On June 16, 2012, Brown e-mailed and called Thrun to talk about how Udacity could help California's higher education systems. "We need your help," Brown said, according to Thrun.

But, because of the haste, faculty were building the courses on the fly. Not only was this a "recipe for insanity," Junn said, but faculty did not have a lot of time to watch how students were doing in the courses because the faculty were busy trying to finish them. It took about 400 hours to build a course, though the courses are designed to be reused.

Another factor in the disappointing outcomes may have been the students themselves. The courses included at-risk students, high school students and San Jose State students who had already failed a remedial math course.

"We stacked the deck against ourselves," Junn said of the Udacity partnership.

While the Udacity deal is being examined, San Jose State's partnership with edX is going well, Junn said.

Unlike the Udacity partnership, which is designed to replace the classroom experience, San Jose State is using edX material only to supplement the classroom experience. Enrolled students are expected to review edX material before they come to class. Faculty, in turn, have more class time to work with students and are able to devote less time to lecturing, the faculty members have said in interviews.

In fact, San Jose State students using edX are outperforming students who do

not. Junn said the university is preparing a paper on that project and hopes to have it published in a peer-reviewed journal.

Student performance data from the San Jose State/Udacity courses are expected to be released in coming weeks.