

California's Move Toward MOOCs Sends Shock Waves, but Key Questions Remain Unanswered

By Lee Gardner and Jeffrey R. Young

Supporters of newly proposed legislation in California hope to reduce the number of students shut out of key courses by forging an unprecedented partnership between traditional public colleges and online-education upstarts. But on Wednesday specific details of how the deal would work were hard to pin down.

Senate Bill 520, sponsored by State Sen. Darrell Steinberg, a Democrat who is president pro tem of the Senate, calls for establishing a statewide platform through which students who have trouble getting into certain low-level, high-demand classes could take approved online courses offered by providers outside the state's higher-education system. If the bill is passed by the Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, state colleges and universities could be compelled to accept credits earned in massive open online courses, or MOOCs, bringing the controversial courses into the mainstream faster than even their proponents had predicted.

But right now SB 520 is just a two-page "spot bill," a legislative placeholder to be amended with details later. And for those concerned about the consequences of a sudden embrace of a relatively new enterprise such as MOOCs, the devil may be in those details. Who will approve the courses? What role will faculty members really have? Will student financial aid apply to paid online courses? How will the revenue collected by the companies benefit the colleges? The students?

At a news conference announcing the bill, Mr. Steinberg acknowledged

that such a bold move could be expected to cause "some fear, and sometimes some upset." He took pains to emphasize that the legislation "does not represent a shift in funding priority" for higher education in California, and is not intended to introduce "a substitution for campus-based instruction."

"This is about helping students," he said. "We would be making a big mistake if we did not take advantage of the technological advances in our state" to do so.

Students may stand to gain, as does California, if Mr. Steinberg's legislation helps more college graduates join the work force. MOOCs and the companies that offer them stand to gain enormously as well. But right now, no one knows for sure what will happen.

The Class Crunch

Everyone involved in state higher education in California agrees that [access to classes](#) is a problem. Declining state support has led to cut-backs in the number of course sections offered, just as student demand has risen. For example, more than 472,000 of the 2.4 million students enrolled in the California Community Colleges last fall were [put on a waiting list](#) for a course that was already full.

The community-college system's chancellor, Brice W. Harris, was one of several state higher-education officials who lauded Mr. Steinberg's attempt to deal with the class crunch. "Anything that increases the opportunity to access higher education in California after the last four years that we've had rationing of education is a good thing," he said.

The language of the measure, as currently written, outlines a platform

that would apply to all three state systems: the University of California, California State University, and the community colleges. A nine-member faculty council [established last year](#) to oversee open-source digital textbooks would come up with a list of the 50 lower-level courses that students most need to fulfill general-education requirements—courses that are, as Mr. Steinberg put it, "identified as the most difficult for a student to get a seat." The council would then review and approve which online courses would be allowed to fulfill the requirement and count for credit as conferred by state institutions.

Mr. Steinberg repeatedly emphasized that the quality of the new outside courses would be rigorously vetted and monitored by the faculty.

Robert Samuels, a lecturer in the writing program at the University of California at Los Angeles and the president of Local 1990 of the University Council-American Federation of Teachers union, remained dubious.

"Every step of the way, we've been told, 'Oh, the faculty will drive this,' and then it comes top-down from the governor, it comes from the president of the university, it comes from the Legislature now," he said. He had not had an opportunity to read the bill himself, but he said he had received "at least 20 e-mails today from different faculty saying we need to push back on this."

A statement released by the California Faculty Association, which represents the faculties of the 23-campus California State University system expressed its commitment to working with Mr. Steinberg to improve student success. But it also noted that the association's members "want to maintain academic credibility and the delivery of accessible, quality public education, rather than chase the latest private-sector fad."

A Dire Situation

The three state systems have started their own online classes with varying degrees of success. The California Community Colleges are the largest providers of online education in the state, according to Mr. Harris, with one in four students enrolled in a course online. Meanwhile, the University of California's [UC Online program](#) has struggled to attract students, despite the UC brand.

Sebastian Thrun, a Stanford University computer-science professor who founded Udacity, which offers MOOCs from dozens of well-known professors, said he was involved in discussions that led to the bill. He said the goal was to "force the systems to really offer to their students the type of stuff that they can't offer themselves."

Daphne Koller, a Stanford computer-science professor who is one of the founders of Coursera, which offers free online courses from 62 colleges and universities, stressed the importance of online education for students' sake. "It's important to maintain academic freedom, but it's important for faculty to understand the constraints that students are living under," she said.

Her company was founded primarily to serve students who were not enrolled on a traditional campus, and she acknowledged that online education was not right for all students.

Another business that stands to gain from the measure is StraighterLine, a for-profit company that offers low-cost online general-education courses. The company has formal agreements with about 40 colleges and universities, but many traditional colleges and universities have been [reluctant to accept](#) its courses for credit.

"Symbolically, it's a really important step," said Burck Smith, founder of StraighterLine. "It says there are lots of potential providers for online education."

Mr. Thrun said his biggest question about the proposed platform was whether the courses could be delivered online at very low cost while maintaining the rigor of a traditional class. "My main concern is quality—it has to work, it has to be really high quality," he said. The quality of a Udacity [pilot project](#) featuring three classes at San Jose State University is currently being put to the test. Its effectiveness is being studied, in research supported by the National Science Foundation.

Ms. Koller said she hoped the Senate bill would spark a nationwide discussion of how MOOCs could play a larger role to fill in gaps when colleges cannot offer enough courses to meet student demand. Her company has had discussions with lawmakers in several states, she added. "There is a lot of MOOC-related legislation that is being discussed in a lot of states," said Ms. Koller.

Mr. Smith and Mr. Thrun said they had been talking to elected officials in other states as well.

On the Fast Track

Mr. Steinberg was one of those lawmakers not long ago. He attended a [conference](#) in January put on by the Twenty Million Minds Foundation, a nonprofit organization dedicated to open-source textbooks. Mr. Smith and Ms. Koller attended too. The gathering of higher-education officials and online education boosters reportedly galvanized Mr. Steinberg to propose SB 520.

Dean Florez, president of Twenty Million Minds, is also a former California Senate majority leader. He said the bill may change as it works its way through the Legislature, but he doesn't recall that any bill ever put forward by a Senate president pro tem was killed. "I think he's got a fast track to the governor's desk," Mr. Florez said.

Not that the process of remaking online education in California will be easy, he added. "Creating process and structure and how people will operate will take lots and lots of time with all parties at the negotiating table," he said.

And while faculty members may have their reservations about the proposed platform, providers may find the universities' demands too rigid. For instance, Mr. Steinberg's legislation may insist on using free, digital open-source textbooks. "I don't know if the providers will want to do that," Mr. Florez said.

Many other nagging issues remain. In addition to faculty concerns about academic rigor, Mr. Samuels pointed out that online courses often have a high dropout rate, especially for first-generation, lower-income, and underprepared students. There are real questions about whether relying more on such courses is "going to help move people through the system in a more efficient manner," he said.

Another potential snag is that not all students have ready access to **fast Internet connections**. Many online courses rely on hours of video lectures, which work best with broadband connections. Only about 66 percent of American adults have broadband access at home, according to a survey last year by the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

While it appears that federal student aid could pay for the third-party

online courses, through the institution awarding credit for them, "the legislation does not speak to that issue directly, and it is an issue that merits further discussion," Rhys Williams, a spokesman for Mr. Steinberg, said by e-mail.

At the news conference on Wednesday, Mr. Steinberg made it clear that he felt that, ready or not, the time has come to tackle the state's troubles with overcrowded classes. "We can either shape this MOOC movement, or we can watch it happen and hope it all works out OK," he said.

He fielded questions from reporters about the start-up cost of the platform—about \$10-million, roughly divided between public and private money—and whether the same specific courses would be offered to students at all three tiers. "Possibly," he said.

Asked how many credits from such courses would be eligible to be transferred from tier to tier, he said, "That's a great question. I don't have an answer at this point."