



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on January 26, 2012

MIT's Online Threat to the Higher Education Cartel

Tamar Lewin, writing in the *New York Times*, said that MIT will allow “anyone anywhere to take MIT courses online free of charge — and for the first time earn official certificates for demonstrating mastery of the subjects taught.” This augments MIT’s decision 10 years ago to offer all of its 2,100 courses online for free, courses that have been accessed by more than 100 million students worldwide since then. The upgrade will now allow those students to participate in online laboratories, self-assessments, and interaction not only with students taking the same class on campus at Cambridge, Massachusetts, but those enrolled online as well.



There is no charge to take the courses online, but to obtain a credential that proves mastery will cost something. Harvard provost Rafael Reif said:

I think for someone to feel they’re earning something, they ought to pay something, but the point is to make it extremely affordable. The most important thing is that it’ll be a certificate that will clearly state that a body sanctioned by M.I.T. says you have gained mastery.

The impact of that credential from MIT will be huge. Richard DeMillo at Georgia Institute of Technology, said this is “a very big deal because the traditional higher education reaction to online programs [in the past] was, yeah, but it’s not a credential. So I think MIT’s offering a credential [is] quite a splash. If I were still in industry and someone came in with an MITx credential, I’d take it.”

The *Times* noted that MIT would open its MITx software platform to any other university around the world to offer their own courses online for free. And that is going to change the entire paradigm of higher education. Writing for [the Chronicle of Higher Education](#), Kevin Carey saw immediately the threat the MITx program presents to its peers:

Most world-famous universities got that way through a process of exclusion. Their degrees are coveted and valuable precisely because they’re expensive and hard to acquire. If an Ivy League university starts giving degrees away for free, why would anyone clamor to be admitted to any Ivy League university?

The biggest threat is the virtual challenge by MIT to other colleges and universities to use its “open learning platform.” To stay with the traditional classroom and lecture hall model of imparting information is to invite irrelevance and bankruptcy. Anant Agarwal, a leader of MIT’s upgrade, said that “human productivity has gone up dramatically in the past several decades due to the Internet and computing technologies, but amazingly enough the way we do education is not very different from the way we did it a thousand years ago.”

And that is the threat: Can colleges and universities mired in the old educational paradigm change fast



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enough to remain viable? Carey was doubtful:

This sensible and profound instinct sets a new standard for behavior among wealthy, famous universities. Elite colleges all allege to be global institutions, and many are known around the world. But it is simply untenable to claim global leadership in educating a planet of seven billion people when you hoard your educational offerings for a few thousand fortunates living together on a small patch of land.

Professor Gary North was [quick to note](#) the challenge MITx presents to the university's peers. In his members-only newsletter he wrote: "All over the world, bright students will be able to get the best education on earth for the price of an internet connection. They will be able to get certified by MIT for less than the price of a degree at a backwater third world college. This degree will open doors in their nations. It will represent a real education."

With the MITx upgrade, the higher education paradigm of exclusivity purchased at a price (on-campus students at Harvard pay \$60,000 plus a year for the privilege) will disappear. Says North:

The higher education cartel will be in trouble. Any school that does not imitate MIT will be perceived as anti-poor people, anti-third world. The horror! But as schools imitate MIT price competition will take over. Some schools will offer a low-tuition regular degree. That will smash the pricing structure of the cartel.

Any school that holds out and refuses to go online with its entire program will be suspected of having a third-rate program, which probably is the case. Going online will reveal just how poor their programs are. This will lead to greater competition.

The university is the last bastion of liberalism. This will force open the barriers to entry in education. It will bankrupt hundreds of schools.

The president of Harvard, Susan Hockfield, said that the improvement will "create learning opportunities that [will] break barriers to education everywhere." This is what Michael Hart, an early pioneer of the Internet and founder of the Gutenberg Project, predicted back in 1971 when he discovered the potential power of the internet "to overturn all established power structures." Higher education's paradigm of providing expensive pieces of paper only to the elite who can afford them is happily evaporating. What's ironic is that the overturning is being driven by one of their own.



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