



TEACHING

Starting an Online Conversation

Rochester begins to map a course as the world of higher education adjusts to rapidly changing technology.

Interview by Kathleen McGarvey

LAST FALL, THE UNIVERSITY ANNOUNCED that it planned to partner with nine peer institutions to explore an innovative initiative in online education. Rather than leap into the world of so-called “massive open online courses,” or MOOCs, that have made recent headlines, Rochester and its peers—Brandeis, Duke, Emory, Northwestern,

▲ **LOOKING AHEAD:** Rob Clark is heading a University effort to explore the best options for deploying technology in the classroom and, potentially, online.

UNC—Chapel Hill, Notre Dame, Vanderbilt, Wake Forest, and Washington University in St. Louis—hope to test a different model, one that remains true to the values of residential colleges.

As part of the new initiative, the universities will be partners in a consortium to support an online course program called Semester Online. The consortium will work with the company 2U, which was created in 2008 to develop for-credit online courses.

Rob Clark, dean of the Hajim School and interim senior vice president for research, is leading Rochester’s participation in the new initiative as well as a University-wide

task force to make sure that Rochester is a “part of the conversation” about fast-evolving developments in higher education.

Why are universities exploring online models of instruction?

It’s clear at this point that online education and technology are here to stay. Better online delivery platforms, social networks, the capacity to personalize instructional material—these are all making online education a more feasible option than it has ever been before. The technology is more readily available, and there’s a fair bit of momentum. Stanford and other universities, such as Princeton, Johns Hopkins, the University of Pennsylvania, and Duke, have joined Coursera, a company that offers more than 100 MOOCs that can draw millions of

students from across the globe. Stanford announced in the fall that it has also established Class2Go, a new open-source platform for online education that already hosted two MOOCs. There's no question that we're at a moment of transition for higher education, as technology and online education create new options for instruction.

What has Rochester done to date?

Our faculty have been exploring the role of technology in education for some time. For example, in the late 1990s, faculty in the Department of Mathematics developed WeB-WorK, a web-based interactive system to improve teaching and learning in math, that was later used by universities across the country. At the Eastman School, some faculty have used the web to provide supplemental instruction as well as web-based courses in theory and other areas. The School of Nursing has offered online courses since 2002. It's a program they established to meet the needs of their students, whose work and family commitments created a need for them to have more flexible instruction. They offer 41 online courses or hybrid online programs, and 26 percent of their enrollment last year was in online programs.

For the University as a whole, we want to find the right approach, the one that works best for who we are. There are a number of directions we could take, but we want to have an active dialogue with faculty and with students to explore what we think works best for us.

A benefit of working with the peer institutions of Semester Online is that the consortium is made up of institutions that see the same value in the residential experience that we do—and they're also interested in

exploring the options that technology is creating.

What will be offered through Semester Online?

The idea is to offer academically qualified students an expanded selection of courses from some of the country's best schools, giving them freedom to work, travel, and participate in off-campus research programs, or manage personal commitments as they pursue their academic goals. Unique offerings at one consortium school may become accessible to students at other consortium schools. Curricular options may be expanded for our students who want to study abroad.

For students in areas such as engineering, where there are fairly rigid curricular requirements, that's a very valuable benefit.

How is Rochester developing its plans?

Our faculty are engaged in active discussions about instruction and how we can improve our work as teachers. Part of that discussion, increasingly, involves technology and how—and when—to leverage it in ways that are appropriate to what we do. I'm currently working with a newly established, University-wide task force, the Committee on Online Learning, as well as other groups within academic divisions, to discuss possible online learning initiatives. We're informally surveying faculty on how they're already using technology, and the task force is working to identify technologies that could benefit broad groups of faculty and students.

What are the implications of online education for brick-and-mortar institutions?

I'm more interested in how we deploy technology on campus than what we do online. It's possible that things that work well on campus could also work well online.


But there's no reason to see online education as an "either-or" proposition. I can't imagine that institutions like Harvard and MIT—which are offering free online courses as part of an online learning project—are coming together to put themselves out of business.

I think there's something about the residential piece of education—bringing a community together, physically—that online education can't duplicate. I'm confident that in 20 years, the residential experience will be thriving. We may be able to develop online courses that are as good—in some cases, perhaps, that are even better—than what's offered in the classroom.

But online education will never substitute for the residential experience.

What benefits do you see for Rochester? What risks?

I'd rather that we be part of the conversation on online education than sit on the sidelines and see what other universities are doing. Projects like Semester Online are an opportunity to explore things that work and don't work. A large benefit of the project is that it puts us in conversation with like-minded universities to see if we can shape online education. And we're really at no risk, because if the institutions find that we should go in a different direction, it would be in the best interest of both the consortium and 2U to terminate the initiative.

Beyond that, it's a matter of our doing very small experiments in a number of areas involving technology and instruction to see what works best for the students and faculty at Rochester. From humanities to medicine, music to engineering, and beyond, we have different audiences, and how technology is deployed to enhance learning will have to be worked out differently for all those groups. 

Peer Group

Rochester is one of 10 institutions in a new consortium exploring online education. Others are:

- Brandeis
- Duke
- Emory
- Northwestern
- UNC-Chapel Hill
- Notre Dame
- Vanderbilt
- Wake Forest
- Washington University in St. Louis

The idea is to offer academically qualified students an expanded selection of courses from some of the country's best schools, giving them freedom to work, travel ... or manage personal commitments as they pursue their academic goals.