College Credit Eyed for Online Courses

By TAMAR LEWIN

While massive open online courses, or MOOCs, are still in their early days, the race has begun to integrate them into traditional colleges — by making them eligible for transfer credits, and by putting them to use in introductory and remedial courses.

On Tuesday, the American Council on Education, the leading umbrella group for higher education, and Coursera, a Silicon Valley MOOC provider, announced a pilot project to determine whether some free online courses are similar enough to traditional college courses that they should be eligible for credit.

The council’s credit evaluation process will begin early next year, using faculty teams to begin to assess how much students who successfully complete Coursera MOOCs have learned. Students who want to take the free classes for credit would have to pay a fee to take an identity-verified, proctored exam. If the faculty team deems the course worthy of academic credit, students who do well could pay for a transcript to submit to the college of their choice. Colleges are not required to accept those credits, but similar transcripts are already accepted by 2,000 United States colleges and universities for training courses offered by the military or by employers.

Coursera, founded last year by two Stanford computer professors, Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng, has 33 university partners and nearly two million students, who currently can earn certificates of completion, but not academic credit, for their work.

“I feel strongly that degrees are really valuable to people, and having MOOCs allow for credit down the line will increase the number of students with the confidence and wherewithal to complete degrees,” Professor Koller said. “If you’re a random student from another country, what are your chances of being admitted to a university here? But if you can show you’re a motivated student who’s completing five courses and done well on the proctored exam, I think a university would pay attention.”

The project is being watched closely by higher-education experts who expect MOOCs to broaden access to higher education and bring down the costs.

“With the additional benefits of ACE credit recommendation for Coursera courses, students will have an unprecedented opportunity to obtain recognized credentials for their work,” said
William G. Bowen, the former president of Princeton University and the Mellon Foundation, and senior adviser to Ithaka, a nonprofit group devoted to digital technologies in higher education.

Also on Tuesday, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced 13 grants, totaling more than $3 million, for MOOC research. The grants are intended to encourage the development of MOOCs in introductory courses, like developmental math and writing, to see how they might be integrated into community colleges to bolster completion, and to develop a pathway for MOOC transfer credit.

While there is some overlap between the Coursera project and the Gates grants, only four of the nine schools that received grants are putting their MOOCs on Coursera, while the others use different platforms.

The largest grants go to three groups — the American council, Ithaka and the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities — that will explore the credit issue, consider a possible consortium for collaborating on digital courseware, and research the University of Maryland’s experience with MOOCs.

“It certainly appears that there is potential here, and we ought to kick all the tires and see what we can learn,” said Molly Corbett Broad, the president of the American council.