THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Wired Campus

The latest on tech and education.

February 11, 2015 by Jeffrey R. Young

Meet the New, Self-Appointed MOOC Accreditors: Google and Instagram

Some of the biggest MOOC producers, including Daphne Koller's Coursera, may have figured out how to get employers to accept free online courses as credentials: Get big-name companies to help design them. (Neilson Barnard, Getty Images, for The New York Times)

A big question for MOOCs, the free online courses that hundreds of colleges now offer, is whether employers will take them seriously as credentials. But some of the biggest MOOC producers may have figured out how to jump-start employer buy-in: Get big-name companies to help design them.

On Wednesday, Coursera, one of the largest MOOC platforms, announced that it had teamed up with more than half a dozen companies (http://blog.coursera.org/post/110731449067/top-companies-work-with-university-partners-to) that will help create capstone projects for its course series. The companies include the tech giant Google as well as Instagram and Shazam—all names likely to entice students looking to get a start in Silicon Valley.

Nineteen colleges now work with Coursera to offer what amount to microdegrees—it calls them Course Specializations (https://www.coursera.org/specializations)—that require students to take a series of short MOOCs and then finish a hands-on capstone project. The serialization approach has proved an effective way to bring in revenue to support the free courses—to get a certificate proving they passed the courses, students each end up paying around $500 in fees.

By helping develop MOOC-certificate programs, companies are giving a seal of approval to those new credentials that may be more important to some students than whether an accredited university or a well-trained professor is involved.

Daphne Koller, a co-founder of Coursera, says that teaming up with companies can "really drive home the value proposition that these courses are giving you a skill that is valuable in the workplace." She says it also lets Coursera play a role in "bridging the gap" between higher education and industry.

Coursera has been running a pilot of the approach since last summer, in a Data Science Specialization (https://www.coursera.org/specialization/jhudatascience/1) by the Johns Hopkins University that involved a company, called SwiftKey, that builds keyboard apps for smartphones.

Johann Posch, a senior data scientist at GE Global Research, is one of the first students to finish that series, and he says he appreciated that the capstone project involved real-world problems and data in collaboration with a company.

"The combination of having academia and companies work together I think is very good," he said. "Now you have the professors who have really good education and are deep into research, and then you go to these companies who are out in the field and producing something, and I think the blend is actually very good."

Mr. Posch says the credential helped him get a spot on a data-science team at his company: "I have a master's degree, but most everybody here has a Ph.D. This gave me a good credential."

Coursera is hardly the first MOOC provider to bring in companies to help design its online courses. Udacity, a MOOC company with millions of students, is working on a high-profile project with the Georgia Institute of Technology, with backing and input from AT&T, to develop a $7,000 master's degree in computer science. (http://chronicle.com/article/Ga-Tech-to-Offer-a-MOOC-Like/139245/) It also works with Google and other well-known companies to develop other course series that it calls nanodegrees. (https://www.udacity.com/nanodegree) And edX, a nonprofit MOOC provider started by Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, says Google has helped support the development of some of its courses as well.

The strategy has already worked well for Udacity, says its founder, Sebastian Thrun. Udacity has decided not to involve universities at all, and works only with industry to develop its courses and nanodegrees.

"We're discovering that there are a huge number of willing and eager lifelong learners that are underserved" by higher education, he says. "We're getting to the point where we'll be profitable as a company."