"Hybrid education" gives faculty more flexibility in teaching

University Joins Leading Online Course Platform edX

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Azer Bestavros, who cochairs BU's council exploring technology and education, says the online platform edX is a perfect fit for the University.

IN A PARTNERSHIP THAT will give Boston University professors more flexibility in designing their courses and discerning which educational methods work best with students, BU has joined edX, the Harvard- and MIT-led online learning platform that shares the University's commitment to using technology's benefits for students on campus as well as off.

Membership obligates BU to offer five MOOCs (massive open online courses) via edX, says Jean Morrison, University provost. MOOCs typically enable people around the world to take a university class for free, without credit. But BU and edX also espouse blended, or hybrid, courses: for-credit classes that mingle face-to-face instruction with online work, says Elizabeth Loizeaux, associate provost for undergraduate affairs and cochair of the University's Council on Educational Technology & Learning Innovation (CETLI).

Dan O'Connell, edX spokesperson, says hybrid courses allow professors to shift time normally spent on lectures to one-on-one or small-group teaching, to field trips, or to additional lectures delving more deeply into topics. O'Connell says early results from a pilot project that edX is running in California show decreased failure rates in a hybrid course, compared to the traditional classroom version.

"The hybrid model provides the best of both worlds," says Loizeaux, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of English. "It promotes the face-to-face nature of classroom interactions," both students-to-teacher and between students. It simultaneously offers students "the flexibility to access content online at their own pace," while allowing faculty to use technology for "presenting information and assessing learning outcomes in ways that are not possible in a traditional classroom setting."

BU President Robert A. Brown is delighted that the University is joining the edX consortium. "I am pleased to help pioneer the development of digital learning environments," he says. "And I'm excited about the opportunity to use these enhanced learning tools for our residential students, and to invent new hybrid educational platforms as the next step in our ongoing significant commitment to online learning, especially for our students in graduate professional programs."

Homework: *The ABCs of MOOCs*

Anyone with a web browser can take a MOOC (massive open online course) for free. Here's how it works.

Most MOOCs start on a specific date, require several hours per week, and last about a semester.

Each course includes learning materials and assignments that become available weekly, links to resources for further exploration, and sequences of video lectures, exercises, tests, and discussion groups.

Students learn at their own pace; videos and other materials are available 24 hours a day to anyone with an internet connection.

Students who complete the course successfully are granted a certificate of mastery, which is delivered online.

EdX will also extend the University's significant global reach, both by making BU professors and courses accessible to a global audience and by increasing global connections for BU students. For example, study abroad might be enhanced by online minicourses before, during, and after the main course; online modules or courses could connect BU students with other students around the world; and online courses might even enable students whose schedules currently keep them at home to study abroad.

EdX's ability to help professors evaluate how well students are learning course material was a big factor in the University's choosing it over other platforms, Loizeaux says. The edX platform is designed to capture data on how students learn, she says, a capability that put it head and shoulders above other platforms BU considered, because it will aid professors in understanding which pedagogical approaches best advance student learning.

"We are talking about 'big data' from hundreds of thousands of learners," O'Connell says. (According to edX, 700,000 students currently use its platform.) "EdX collects every click, and also, along with collaborating universities, conducts surveys throughout each course."

Azer Bestavros, CETLI cochair and a CAS professor of computer science, says that course evaluators can see how often a student rewinds to review parts of lectures—possibly indicating that clarifications are necessary. He notes that for any hybrid courses the University develops on edX, "we will have full control regarding what we measure and how we analyze it, and that data will not be shared with other institutions." Only aggregated data from all edX members is shared, he says. As a nonprofit in a field filled with for-profit competitors, edX "aligns with CETLI's sense of values and what we believe to be BU's best interest," says Bestavros, who is director of the Rafik B. Hariri Institute for Computing and Computational Science & Engineering.

The first hybrid courses on edX likely will be available "within the next couple of years," says Loizeaux, while the MOOCs will be available in one year. EdX will complement, not replace, the University's Blackboard e-learning system.

Along with BU, edX recently welcomed several other institutions, including Cornell University, Davidson College, Berklee College of Music, Université catholique de Louvain (Belgium), Munich's Technical University, the University of Washington, China's Tsinghua University, Japan's Kyoto University, the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong University of Science & Technology, Seoul National University, Karolinska Institutet (Sweden), and the University of Queensland (Australia).

They join the founders plus the University of California, Berkeley, Rice University, the University of Texas, Wellesley College, Georgetown University, École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (Switzerland), Australian National University, Delft University of Technology (the Netherlands), and Canada's McGill University and the University of Toronto.

"EdX is thrilled to welcome Boston University," O'Connell says. Calling the University "a world-class institution with top faculty and courses," he says the partnership will benefit both: edX will help BU "incorporate sophisticated online course work into its on-campus curriculum," while BU "will help us extend our range" of courses reflecting "the diversity of the people on our platform." **RB**

Athletes Excel in NCAA Academic Ranking

Perfect scores go to 7 teams, 21 top their sport's national average

The most recent NCAA ranking suggests that Terriers perform as impressively in the classroom as they do on the playing field. Highlighted by perfect scores for 7 teams, 21 BU athletic programs exceeded their sport's national average in the latest multi-year NCAA Division I Academic Progress Rate (APR) data, released in June 2013. That pursuit of scholarly excellence should serve BU athletes well in the academically focused Patriot League, which welcomed many BU teams to its fold July 1.

Now in its ninth year, the APR ranking factors in eligibility, retention, and graduation in its calculation, providing a clear picture of each individual team's academic progress. The rating spans the four-year period ending with the 2011–2012 academic year, and gives student-athletes one point per semester for remaining academically eligible and another point each semester for staying at their current school or graduating.

STEVE MCLAUGHLIN

MEN'S CROSS COUNTRY is one of seven BU teams with a perfect Academic Progress Rate.

Teams scoring below 925 out of 1,000 can face penalties, such as scholarship losses and restrictions on practices and competition, particularly in NCAA postseason events.

"We're proud once again to have outstanding APR scores here at BU," says Michael Lynch, a BU assistant vice president and director of athletics. "Year in and year out, our coaches recruit student-athletes who are serious about both athletics and academics, and those efforts shine through in this data." TOM TESTA