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As Colleges Make Courses Available Free Online, Others Cash In

By JINGYING YANG

PARIS — A computer in Logan, Utah, holds syllabus details, lecture notes, problem sets and exams from more than 80 Utah State University courses: but this is no secret cheat-sheet site put together by rogue hackers and pirates. Anyone, anywhere, with an Internet connection — from Bill Gates down — can log on and download these materials without cost. The site, Utah State OpenCourseWare, http://ocw.usu.edu, is part of the OpenCourseWare network, itself part of an educational resources movement dedicated to opening and reshaping global access to higher education.

Since 2000, when the Massachusetts Institute of Technology established the first OpenCourseWare site, schools — including top names like Harvard and Stanford in the United States and Oxford and Cambridge in Britain — have been releasing educational materials to the public through platforms that include iTunes U, youtube.com/edu and their own sites, like Open Yale Courses.

The OpenCourseWare Consortium, which grew out of the M.I.T. project, now includes over 200 institutions worldwide and offers materials from more than 13,000 courses. OpenCourseWare makes it possible to profit from some of the content that comes with $50,000 annual tuition at an Ivy League school, without paying that hefty price tag.

The idea driving the movement is that information should be freely shared. Still, someone must pay for these materials, and with the recession squeezing university budgets, open course programs are vulnerable.

For an annual cost of $125,000, or a mere 0.05 percent of the university's $226 million budget, Utah State's four-year-old OpenCourseWare program attracted 550,000 page views last year, making it one of the most popular in the United States, according to Marion Jensen, its former director.

Former, because in July the university unceremoniously cut off financing for the program, citing budget constraints. The OpenCourseWare content is now being hosted on the DigitalCommons@USU Web site, the Utah State University branch of a digital content repository that allows various institutions to share cutting-edge research and knowledge.

Still, an entire ecosystem of commercially oriented organizations, like the open course aggregator Academic Earth, has sprung up around open course materials. On a philosophical level, the idea of making money from something available free might seem questionable. But Joi Ito, chief executive of Creative Commons, which issues the licenses defining user rights to most OpenCourseWare materials, supports the mixing of free and for-profit: "I think there's a great deal of commercial infrastructure that needs to be created in order for this to be successful," Mr. Ito said: "It can't all just be free."

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Indeed, that raises a key question: how can professors and universities afford to give away the course materials that are their very livelihood?

The answer, says James D. Yager, senior associate dean for academic affairs at the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, lies in why students pay to attend university in the first place. What OpenCourseWare offers, he notes, is not the full university experience: "We don't offer the course for free, we offer the content for free," Mr. Yager said by telephone in February. "Students take courses because they want interaction with faculty, they want interaction with one another. Those things are not available on O.C.W.

"O.C.W. is just the publishing of the content," he said.

Moreover, O.C.W. offers no accreditation and no degree, although that may soon change. Before Utah State ran short of funds, Mr. Jensen worked on a project to certify students who passed examinations after completing O.C.W. courses.

If just 1 percent of the 50,000 unique monthly visitors to the Utah State OpenCourseWare site had paid a $50 exam fee, the OpenCourseWare program could have been sustainable, he said.

Professor James C. Taylor at the University of Southern Queensland, Australia, has been working on a similar program. He wants to take it a step further by setting up an online community of academic volunteers who would interact with students the way professors do in the classroom. With this additional support, students would come closer to approximating a residential or distance education experience at a fraction of the cost, while the university would extend its outreach to a wider group of people.

Southern Queensland university already had a well-established distance learning program before joining the O.C.W. network. Since the content that it contributes to O.C.W. was developed expressly for online and distance use, it is particularly well adapted to independent learning.

That could cut both ways: Schools with existing distance education programs could be loath to provide free open courses for fear of losing paying students.

A study published in January at Brigham Young University in Utah by Justin K. Johansen might ease such concerns: Google Analytics data showed that during the period of the four-month study, 358 of the almost 14,000 visitors eventually paid to enroll in a course at Brigham Young. Still, whether the paying students would have enrolled if they had had the option to earn credit for their time on OpenCourseWare is unclear.

Schools have taken various approaches to online materials. Some, for example, have chosen to publish only parts of their courses online. Willem Koolhaas, director of corporate marketing communication at the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University, said his school posted special lectures, specifically-designed "to use for recruiting purposes."

"What we're doing at the moment from a recruitment and advertising perspective is the right thing to do," he said, though "if you would be talking now to the academic director of a program, they might have a different perspective."

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Steve Carson, external relations director for M.I.T. OpenCourseWare, and Diana E.E. Kleiner, director of Open Yale Courses, cite the philanthropic desire to spread knowledge as the strongest motivation to create open materials. But elite institutions also feel a contrary pull to maintain their exclusivity.

Paul Argenti, a professor of corporate communication at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, in New Hampshire, said :"We're in the dissemination of information business. On the academic side, you want as many people as possible to hear what you have to say. On the business side, obviously it's an exclusive experience."

"It's pretty hard to imagine how an elite institution like us or like Harvard or Stanford or any of the other top schools would stay in business if they didn't have some aspect of the program that was still relatively complicated and difficult to get to," Mr. Argenti said.

Reflecting that, Tuck does not offer complete sets of course material.

For lesser-known schools, the Internet offers an economical and easy way to showcase their strengths — almost any school can upload content in hopes of making a name for itself. Online, it is the quality of the material, rather than the brand name or ranking, that counts most.

"In some sense, Google does level the playing field," Mr. Jensen of Utah State said. "If you produce good content and people link to you, Google's going to recognize that."

Still, schools with an established reputation may have a head start. In December 2009, 33 percent of page views of Open Yale Courses, and 26 percent of M.I.T.'s page views, came from direct traffic — significantly more than the 15 percent that come directly to the Utah State University site.

Reputation makes a difference when procuring public funds for these projects as well. To help raise the $3.6 million that it costs annually to operate its Web site, M.I.T. holds semiannual fund-raising campaigns and has recently set up an underwriting program.

Mr. Carson, the M.I.T. external relations director, likened the institute's O.C.W. program to National Public Radio, the U.S. public broadcaster. "We're putting information out there for the public good, and we think the sources of support are going to be very similar," he said. M.I.T. has seen a roughly 70 percent year-on-year growth in funding over recent years, which Mr. Carson said was a good gauge of the site's public value.

Freely sharing materials over the Internet creates an incentive for universities to improve themselves, said Catherine Casserly, former director of the Open Educational Resources Initiative at the Hewlett Foundation, which finances many OpenCourseWare projects.

"I think that by putting some of the spectacular professors, and putting their approaches and pedagogical instructional strategies that they use with their students in front of the world, it sets a new benchmark for all of us to learn from," she said. "And I think that's actually one of the incredible powers of this open educational resource."