College credit recommended for free online courses

TERENCE CHEA, Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) -- Students may soon be able to receive college credit for the free online courses that are reshaping higher education.

The American Council on Education announced Thursday that it is recommending degree credit for five courses offered by Coursera, a Mountain View-based company that provides "massive open online courses" from leading universities.

Many colleges and universities use the association's recommendations to determine whether to grant credit for nontraditional courses.

Molly Corbett Broad, the council's president, said the decision is "an important first step in ACE's work to examine the long-term potential of MOOCs and whether this innovative new approach can engage students across the country and worldwide."

Over the past year, dozens of leading universities have begun offering free, digital versions of their most popular courses, allowing tens of thousands of students to take a class at the same time. But so far, few institutions have offered degree credit for them.

Allowing students to get credit for the massive online courses could help make it easier to earn a college degree, said John Aubrey Douglass, a higher education researcher at the University of California, Berkeley.

"As long as we can assess and ensure quality, it's providing one more way that students can receive an education at an affordable cost," Douglass said.

The American Council on Education, which represents U.S. degree-granting institutions, is recommending credit for five entry-level classes: Algebra and Pre-Calculus from the University of California, Irvine; Introduction to Genetics and Evolution from Duke University; Bioelectricity: A Quantitative Approach from Duke University; and Calculus: Single Variable from the University of Pennsylvania.

The courses themselves are free, but students seeking credit will need to pay between $100 and $190 to verify their identities, take exams monitored by webcam and receive transcripts with the council's credit recommendations.

Ultimately, the institution where the student wants credit will decide whether the units will count toward a degree.

"There are many working adults today that do not have a college degree. I hope the convenience of an online class can be a first step for many of these adults to go

back to school to earn their degrees," Andrew Ng, a Stanford University researcher who co-founded Coursera, told The Associated Press.

Coursera, which now offers more than 200 open courses from 33 institutions, plans to seek the council's credit recommendations for more classes in the future, Ng said. Many of the courses are automated and require little oversight from instructors.

The announcement comes less than a week after Coursera suspended an online course offered by Georgia Institute of Technology because of technical troubles. The course, which was about how to run an online course, will be offered again at later date, Ng said.

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