

Online courses may not be changing colleges as their boosters claimed they would, but they can prove valuable in surprising ways.

A few years ago, the most enthusiastic advocates of MOOCs believed that these “massive open online courses” stood poised to overturn the century-old model of higher education. Their interactive technology promised to deliver top-tier teaching from institutions like Harvard, Stanford, and MIT, not just to a few hundred students in a lecture hall on ivy-draped campuses, but free via the Internet to thousands or even millions around the world. At long last, there appeared to be a solution to the problem of “scaling up” higher education: if it were delivered more efficiently, the relentless cost increases might finally be rolled back. Some wondered whether MOOCs would merely transform the existing system or blow it up entirely. Computer scientist Sebastian Thrun, cofounder of the MOOC provider Udacity, [predicted](#) that in 50 years, 10 institutions would be responsible for delivering higher education.

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