Off Campus: If ignorance is expensive, so can be a college education

Massive open online courses (MOOCs) can offer teaching at an affordable price.

By JOSEPH McDONNELL

The "Saturday Night Live" character Father Guido Sarducci once performed a comedy routine about "The Five Minute University" based on the premise that he could teach in five minutes everything the average university graduate could remember five years after graduation and all for only $20 including tuition, refreshments, cap and gown rental, picture and diploma.

What made the idea funny (and damning to higher education) was that it struck a responsive chord among many university graduates.

Father Sarducci's comedy raises serious questions about the cost, relevance and value of a college education, especially when so many students graduate with dubious skills, piles of debt and limited job prospects.

The retort to Father Sarducci's proposal is that the lasting effect of a college education is not found in remembering the specific content of course material but in the habits of mind, widening of interests, development of character, and the commitment to continuous learning and civic engagement that graduates obtain from their university education. And we should wish only that this were true.

Colleges up to the middle of the 20th century were committed to teaching intellectual, moral and civic virtues. But only a remnant of liberal arts colleges today organizes around these ideals. Even the early professional schools socialized students into the professions by instilling a commitment to noble ideals.

The modern university does not reject these ideals, but it has evolved with a different emphasis, organized around academic disciplines with scholar-specialist faculty committed to generating new knowledge. Faculty members in a modern university still serve as role models and mentors, but those activities are no longer integral to the job or the mission of the university.

Universities evolve like other organizations in response to changes in society. Today, we are at another inflection point as universities shift yet again in response to globalization, the digital revolution and escalating university costs.

Organizing universities by disciplines and three-credit courses is only one way to structure an educational experience. This industrial model with students sitting in desks arranged in rows and teachers in front of the room will likely become a thing of the past. Already teachers are "flipping the classroom," engaging students in applied work in class, and arranging for more traditional teaching to take place in an electronic format.
New models are still in an experimental stage, but hints of the future are emerging. Last winter, 33 universities entered into a consortium to develop and deliver massive open online courses (MOOCs).

In its pilot phase, the consortium has enrolled 1.35 million students from across the globe. Last year, a Stanford University professor taught a course in artificial intelligence that attracted 160,000 students. The majority of these courses have been free and non-credit bearing, but some universities are contracting with MOOC providers to begin accepting these courses toward a bachelor's degree.

MOOCs will attract significant funding to create engaging online lessons that will be hard for most universities to match. They will not provide the personal attention of the small class setting, but for most universities the small class education model comes at a price they can no longer afford.

The only way universities are now able to offer small classes is through a disproportionate number of low-paid, adjunct faculty members. The Chronicle of Higher Education reports in its 2012-13 Almanac that adjunct professors now make up 70 percent of the professorate in higher education in this country -- hardly a sustainable model, especially considering that tuition even at state universities is now out of reach for many students and their families.

In the future, MOOCs combined with personal attention in face-to-face settings may provide the right mix for students -- a 21st century university with engaging learning experiences and personal attention -- all at a reasonable price. The focus of such a university may be more on competencies than courses or even degrees -- competencies that demonstrate mastery of particular skills and material, exhibited in student portfolios of their projects.

Universities in Maine will have to rethink the educational experience for students who have grown up in a digital age and can no longer afford the current model.

It will take considerable investment to create first-rate MOOCs, but it will result in long-run savings for Maine taxpayers and university students.

As the University of Maine System looks toward the future, marrying electronic forms of education capable of reaching large audiences with small classroom experiences that reflect a university's role in intellectual, moral and civic development may well provide an avenue to fiscal stability and increased value for students.

We are in the midst of an exciting experiment in creating a new form of higher education -- one that might compete with Father Sarducci's university.

Joseph McDonnell is dean of the College of Management and Human Service at the University of Southern Maine and a Muskie School of Public Service faculty member.