Georgetown OpenCourseWare

"The age of nations is past. It remains for us now, if we do not wish to perish, to set aside ancient prejudices and build the earth."
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The world has changed remarkably since Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. uttered those striking words which remain prominently affixed to the wall of the ICC, but today they ring as true as ever. The cosmopolitan character of both the Jesuits and Georgetown University reflect the sentiment of Teilhard and make a formative impression on students, faculty, and observers who look to Georgetown for scholastic leadership, an international perspective and innovative thinking.

Today, Georgetown has a unique opportunity to expand this institutional importance through the embrace of open educational resources. The international movement towards open educational resources has been made possible through improvements in information technology and an increasing recognition that openness is a necessary component of education.

While open education can take many forms, the most prominent is OpenCourseWare which freely publishes the educational materials from institutions of higher learning. Georgetown University must recognize the intrinsic value of this bold but attainable idea.

OpenCourseWare

In October of 2002, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) unveiled a large-scale, web-based publication of its internal course material. The initiative, which was the first of its kind, permitted anyone, anywhere, to access the syllabi, lecture notes, assignments, examinations and other materials from the courses taught at MIT. Dubbed MIT OpenCourseWare (OCW), the project established a movement toward increased university openness - a recognition of the "established tradition of sharing good ideas with fellow educators and the collaborative, interactive culture of the Internet. It is built on the belief that everyone should have the freedom to use, customize, improve and redistribute educational resources without constraint."[1]

Other respected universities have joined this emerging trend - in the United States alone, 14 institutions are now members of the OCW Consortium, including Tufts,

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[1] Cape Town Open Education Declaration. Open Society Institute. Cape Town, 2007. 8 June 2008 <http://www.capetowndeclaration.org/read-the-declaration>.

Notre Dame and Johns Hopkins. From China to Colombia, more than 100 universities have embraced this bold idea.[2]

Approaches differ in details, but the essential elements include universal access to the materials of at least ten courses and a dedication to spreading knowledge throughout the world. For Georgetown, not only is this an achievable goal, it has manifold benefits.

Benefits

Reasonable observers might question why a university would release its institutional knowledge for free. Are not the course materials the school's "crown jewels" that make it an attractive center for learning? Indeed, the embodiment of the intellectual prowess of Georgetown's faculty and students is an important resource, but an honest assessment of Georgetown's social commitments, long-term goals and external expectations makes OpenCourseWare an essential future component of our evolving educational institution. Though others may be identified, the strongest benefits of OCW, both on campus and abroad, are captured in the four following considerations:

- Social Justice
- Reputation
- Scholastic collaboration
- Increased quality

Social Justice

Unique to Georgetown is the level to which social justice is incorporated into its educational mission. Social justice is foundational to what it means to be a Hoya, past or present. It is not a separate sphere, relegated to time outside learning. OpenCourseWare recognizes that education is a non-rival public good - one person's use does not detract from the next person's experience. As development economist Amartya Sen writes, "The persons receiving education do, of course, benefit from it, but in addition a general expansion of education and literacy in a region can facilitate social change and also help to enhance economic progress from which others too benefit."[3]

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[2] "Consortium Members." OpenCourseWare Consortium. OCW Consortium. 8 June 2008 <http://www.ocwconsortium.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=32>.

[3] Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom. New York: Anchor Books, 1999. 129.

The institutions involved in OCW have seen an enormous demand for their course materials. This thirst for knowledge transcends borders and ethnicities, ages and income disparities. It has helped educators in Indonesia tailor their courses to better educate their students, provided supplemental resources to Greek college students, and helped self-learners in America pursue their personal development.[4]

By taking a firm position in support of human flourishing through education, Georgetown will be in line with its Jesuit identity.

Reputation

Georgetown is a community of forward-thinking intellectuals who have historically defined what it means to be a leading university. From hiring the first African-American head of an American university to embracing intercultural and inter-religious dialogue, Georgetown has established itself as the leader in international studies by championing the principles in both practice and belief. In turn, Georgetown has seen its prestige and reputation rise. OpenCourseWare is another step in this direction. A comprehensive approach to spreading knowledge will raise our profile both domestically and internationally and serve as a beacon to potential students and faculty. In a review of their OCW effort, MIT found that more than one third of their freshmen were positively influenced by OCW before deciding to attend.[5] Further, the dynamic and extensive offerings of OCW would serve to promote the individual academic departments more holistically than traditionally published materials. As Georgetown seeks to continue its leadership in defining higher education, OCW is a logical component of its mission and evolution.

Scholastic Collaboration

Academic progress is nourished by the free flow of information. It is this sharing which aggregates the dispersed knowledge of the academy and makes synthesis and breakthrough possible. When Isaac Newton saw further by "standing on the shoulders of giants," it was made possible by the ladder of scholastic collaboration. This realization is why findings are published and why peer review is so fundamental to academia. The

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[4] "OCW Stories." MIT OCW. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. 8 June 2008 <http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/web/about/stories/index.htm>.

[5] MIT OpenCourseWare 2005 Program Evaluation. MIT. 2005.

international movement towards open educational resources signifies a global recognition of their intrinsic benefits. By adding momentum, Georgetown will strengthen this movement and, in turn, reap the benefits of increased scholastic collaboration. After all, "openness is a breath of life for education and research."[6]

Increased Quality

OpenCourseWare also presents an opportunity to increase the quality of intellectual life on Georgetown's campus. A strong OCW presence can serve as a hub for intellectual discourse; at MIT, 71% of students, 59% of faculty and 42% of alumni report using OCW.[7] A well designed common repository of institutional knowledge will afford students and faculty an easier channel of communication and, as Hal Abelson found in his review of the effort, "MIT students and their faculty advisors are regularly using OCW for previewing and selecting subjects and courses of study…"[8]

If Georgetown begins an OCW initiative, it will place our campus in an expanding symbiotic ecosystem of OCW sources - providing additional resources for faculty to fine-tune their offerings and for students to advance intellectually.

Challenges

Although the technological, social, legal, and economic drivers of OCW are moving firmly in the direction of openness, barriers remain. If Georgetown decides to offer open educational resources, it will need to grapple with and overcome the challenges. Fortunately, our peer institutions who pioneered this movement demonstrate that this is a manageable task. These challenges are financial and legal.

The costs associated with OCW are not trivial. Utah State's initiative costs $127,000 per year and the South African University of Western Cape spends $44,000 each year. MIT OCW, by far the most comprehensive effort, has an annual budget of $4.3 million and produces more than 540 courses in open formats every year. The costs include staff to convert faculty material into publishable formats, technology, and clearing intellectual property rights which may appear in the course material.

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[6] Giving Knowledge for Free: the Emergence of Open Educational Resources. OECD. 2007.

[7] MIT OpenCourseWare 2005 Program Evaluation. MIT. 2005.

[8] Abelson, Hal. "The Creation of OpenCourseWare At MIT." Journal of Science Education and Technology (2007): 1-16.

In this evolving field of endeavor, the models of sustainability are continuing to mature. A number of well-endowed foundations have made previous efforts possible. The MacArthur Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Institute, Shuttleworth Foundation, Hewlett Foundation and Mellon Foundation have all provided financial assistance and leadership to universities pursuing open educational resources. In addition, government grants, corporate sponsorships, and user donations have served to offset costs.

Additionally, because this is a change for all involved in Georgetown, a robust conversation must take place to discuss the concerns of other stakeholders. For example, though some faculty may worry that their ideas will be plagiarized or taken out of context, previous examples of OCW demonstrate that agreeable solutions can be found and executed through the use of technology and policy.

These challenges might cause less-committed universities to avoid OCW, but the principles and goals of Georgetown make this a consideration that must include more than just the initial apparent bottom line. After all, the benefits of increased intellectual vibrancy, social justice, collaboration, and reputation are non-monetary in nature.

The Vision

Georgetown's commitment to OpenCourseWare may unfold in multiple ways. The scale, internationalization and interactivity all need to be addressed. MIT, the leader in this effort, publishes more than 500 courses annually with at least the syllabus, assignments and lecture notes, though some provide richer content. Yale University has recently expanded their effort in that endeavor by providing the full video recordings of seven introductory courses.

Georgetown could place itself on either side of the spectrum: few, but rich offerings or simplistic, yet expansive materials. The choice depends on the views of the multiple stakeholders including faculty, administration, students, and technologists, but it should ideally utilize Georgetown's comparative advantage in international studies. To begin, Georgetown could offer SFS courses in a rich format and focus on the international affairs that stand out at the SFS. This is particularly enticing due to its complementary character with other SFS ventures including Qatar and burgeoning efforts in India and China. By serving as an intellectual hub for learners around the

globe, the SFS would continue its mission to educate the next generation of world leaders. To be sure, this broad goal is not unique to the SFS and need not exclude other parts of Georgetown.

Now, in more than 10 years of evolution, the interactivity of the Internet has far surpassed any other medium ever designed. The vibrant communities evolving around political blogs, popular entertainment and a host of other interests demonstrate the value of social creation and learning. Any Georgetown OCW effort must recognize and welcome this phenomenon. Many teachers recognize the value of Internet discussion boards and utilize the Blackboard feature in their classroom. Increasing numbers of professors are utilizing blogs and wikis. Imagine the additional value if a Kenyan farmer could chime in on an African politics course or a philosophy enthusiast could debate the merits of Aristotle with his peers - at Georgetown and abroad. This proposal is not asking Georgetown professors to take an active role in these conversations, at least not anymore than they would with their own students. What it does propose is allowing intellectual discussions to grow organically around the seeds of Georgetown OCW.

Conclusion

Georgetown OpenCourseWare is a striking vision. Universal access to educational resources calls for an evaluation of the principles and goals of a university. It is my firm belief that not only is OCW in line with Georgetown's principles and goals, it should be a desire of those involved with this institution. Even a cursory understanding of the Georgetown Mission Statement supports this vision of OCW: it speaks of a "serious and sustained discourse" among broad groups of disparate people by embodying "our commitment to justice and the common good, our intellectual openness, and our international character."[9] The tradition of Georgetown is in breaking boundaries and typifying academic excellence. OpenCourseWare reflects those words of Teilhard, speaking of removing ancient barriers and uniting across them. As a student who desires the best for both Georgetown and the global community of learners, I hope this goal is realized and the sentiment of Teilhard's words recognized.

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[9] "University Mission Statement." Georgetown. Georgetown University. 8 June 2008 <http://www3.georgetown.edu/president/mission_statement.html>.