

INSIDE HIGHER ED

Arizona State Moves On From Global Freshman Academy

ASU's for-credit MOOC experiment with edX didn't meet expectations for completion or certification. The university has quietly moved in a new direction.

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[Arizona State University](#)'s Global Freshman Academy was supposed to open up undergraduate education to thousands of students, but it never quite lived up to the hype.

Hundreds of thousands of students enrolled in the academy's free online courses, but four years later, only a fraction have completed a course, and just a minuscule number paid to receive college credit for their efforts.

Of 373,000 people who enrolled, only 8,090 completed a course with a grade of C or better, just over 2 percent of all students enrolled. Around 1,750 students

(0.47 percent) paid to receive college credit for completing a course, and fewer than 150 students (0.028 percent) went on to pursue a full degree at ASU.

When ASU launched the academy in partnership with edX in 2015, it **caused a stir**. The idea of offering a MOOC-powered degree program was novel, and critics suggested ASU might cannibalize its own student pipeline by offering for-credit courses at a fraction of the cost of its existing online degrees. There were also concerns about quality and fears that traditional face-to-face education might be replaced by cheaper online options.

The **Georgia Institute of Technology** had already launched its affordable **online master's degree** in computer science with Udacity at the time. But Georgia Tech's program didn't look like a typical MOOC; it admitted a few hundred students on a selective basis. Global Freshman Academy was open to all and was pitched at the undergraduate level.

Anyone could register to take a free academy course, but students had to pay \$45 (later \$49) to verify their ID. After that, they could decide whether or not to pay to receive college credit at a rate of around \$200 per credit. The courses were between three and four credits each. To complete a full freshman year online, students would need to earn 24 to 30 credits.

The **Global Freshman Academy** edX page is still active, but course options have slowly depleted. Just four Global Freshman Academy courses remain active -- Precalculus, College Algebra and Problem-Solving, English Composition, and English Composition: Research and Writing. Other courses, such as Human Origins, Introduction to Health and Wellness, and Introduction to Sociology, have been **archived** with no future dates announced.

Philip Regier, university dean for educational initiatives at ASU and CEO of the university's central enterprise unit **EdPlus**, explained that while Global Freshman Academy is "still up and running on edX," the university has been focusing its attention on a new online initiative called Earned Admission.

He said ASU built around 20 courses for the Global Freshman Academy but over time “reduced that number to keep only courses that had high demand and higher chances of student success.”

Like Global Freshman Academy, **Earned Admission** allows students to earn credit toward their freshman year at low cost. Earned Admission courses can be taken for credit at a cost of \$400 per course and are hosted on ASU’s Open edX platform.

"Earned Admission is built using Global Freshman Academy courses," said Regier. A key difference between Global Freshman Academy and the Earned Admission initiative is the target audience, he said. Earned Admission is being marketed to employees of ASU's corporate partners and transfer students who are inadmissible because of their low GPA.

There were two aha moments that were the impetus for the creation of the Earned Admission track, said Regier. The first aha moment that something needed to change happened when a student who had completed five Global Freshman Academy courses was denied entry to an ASU degree program because of the poor GPA she earned at community college in the '90s.

"This was a 40-something professional working at a law firm. We realized there was something wrong with this picture," said Regier. "She should have been able to have a second start."

The second aha moment was when ASU, which partnered with Starbucks in 2014 to offer free online degrees to employees, realized that a quarter of Starbucks employees who were applying to study for undergraduate degrees were inadmissible.

"Initially, we told students that didn't have a good enough GPA to go off to community college," said Regier. "We had a high degree of confidence that we would never see those students again, and in fact, that was the case. We realized later that what we ought to be doing is creating a pathway to admission."

The Earned Admission pathway allows any person over 22 years old to gain admission to ASU if they complete four courses and earn a 2.75 GPA.

"At this point, the combined number of students who've earned admission to the university, including employees from Starbucks and other corporate partners, is around 400 students," said Regier.

So far the students who have taken courses through Earned Admission have demonstrated much greater motivation than those who studied through Global Freshman Academy, said Regier.

"We've learned that students need to have some skin in the game," he said.

Anant Agarwal, edX CEO and an MIT professor, said Global Freshman Academy was pioneering because it was the "first time that credit was awarded for MOOC courses." "This partnership between ASU and edX delivered on the founding missions of edX: the promise to innovate and transform education while increasing access to high-quality learning."

Agarwal described the launch of Global Freshman Academy as the "start of MOOC 2.0." It was unique because of its open admission, "pay if you pass" model and relative affordability. And "the fact that a learner could take an ASU course on edX and use that credit at another university, which approved the credit," he said.

David Soo, chief of staff at nonprofit Jobs for the Future and a former senior policy adviser at the U.S. Department of Education, said Global Freshman Academy was important "because it signaled that a major institution like ASU was willing to give credit for MOOC-based online courses."

Soo said it is not surprising that players in the space are still searching for the right business model.

"It's still early days, but ASU's efforts are emblematic of their drive to expand access and strive for quality outcomes."

Phil Hill, a partner at MindWires Consulting and publisher of the *Phil on Ed Tech* blog, agreed that the Global Freshman Academy was an important experiment. "I didn't think it would fail, but it was novel and we didn't know if it would work." By shifting its attention to the Earned Admission initiative, ASU will likely attract "much more motivated students," said Hill. "It makes sense that they would want to support upskilling the corporate workforce," he said.

Hill questioned whether ASU's financial partnership with edX has changed now that some courses previously offered on edX under the Global Freshman Academy moniker have been moved to ASU's Open edX platform. When the Global Freshman Academy program was announced, it was reported by *Inside Higher Ed* that there was a 50-50 revenue split between edX and ASU.

"Now that these courses have been moved, is edX still taking a share of the revenue?" asked Hill. An ASU spokesman and Agarwal did not directly answer this question, though the ASU spokesman said the shift to Open edX was "not a financial decision." Hill expressed frustration that ASU has not been more forthcoming about the outcomes of its experiments in online learning.

"There are many schools that look at ASU as an innovator and try to model some of the things that they do, so it would be helpful if they were fully open about what happened afterwards," he said. "It's not surprising that ASU would try new things and shift its approach -- the surprise is if you can get them to talk about it publicly."

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