



## Low-Cost Online Master's Program Debate Between Josh and Eddie

Arguing about what the graduate degrees from edX and Coursera really mean.

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### Josh:

According to my count, there are now over 20 online graduate degree programs being offered by universities with global brands at a cost for students ranging from about \$10,000 to roughly \$40,000, with the average price coming in around \$25,000. These are full-fledged master's programs from universities such as Illinois, Penn, Michigan, Indiana and ASU.

As you and I have been discussing with some colleagues, I think the emergence of comparatively low-priced online master's degrees from highly ranked universities on the edX and Coursera platforms is a very big deal.

From what I can tell, this is just the beginning. Over the next few years, we are likely to see an enormous growth in roughly \$25,000 online master's programs from top schools. How is this not a huge deal in higher education? With so much talk about the growth of tuition costs and student debt, how come everyone is not talking about this trend?

**Eddie:**

OK, interesting question, but I'm still confused by it. Well, maybe I should say I'm more interested in being confused by this than I actually am. It's clear there is something is happening here, but I'm not sure we should yet be giving it the accolades you would like, at least not without further interrogation. So, let's say I'm playing confused on the internet for the moment.

So, here goes. None of this is actually new. Traditional (research, public, private, etc.) universities have had relatively inexpensive master's programs for decades. **Many**, though not all, are taught in professional studies programs where degrees (**online** and face-to-face) can be as (relatively) inexpensive as \$5,000 per degree (but tend to hover in the \$25,000 to \$35,000 range).

Like the programs from Coursera and edX that you're interested in, master's degrees offered by continuing and professional education schools and programs unpack much of the educational bundle that drives up costs.

It seems to me that the proposition is rather simple. Unlike the more traditional professional studies model (where costs are reduced in other ways), the MOOC platform as new model argument suggests that a better model is to widen the application pool funnel in order to enroll more students at a lower cost. Doing so means adopting a teaching and learning model that privileges efficiency over other types of faculty-student engagement. Is this the model we want for all graduate programs?

**Josh:**

Eddie, you are right that a large number of highly selective universities offer open enrollment programs through their continuing and professional education arms -- including online master's programs -- at prices that are comparably lower than their "main" degree programs.

I can see why you might say that the edX and Coursera programs are really nothing new. But you are wrong.

The reason why these new online programs are such a big deal is that they are becoming the “main” program. At every university with a continuing/professional education school, the online programs offered are complements to the core residential (and sometimes executive and online) master's. They exist, but they exist alongside -- and usually at the margins of - - the central focus of the institution.

*[Eddie, jumping in: Actually, many of the professional master's programs I'm referring to are unique to those programs. They are not just low-cost alternatives. They are the degree at that school in things like project management, real estate management, etc.]*

What an admittedly small number of top universities seem to be deciding is that the institution's reputation does not necessarily -- and at all times -- need to be a function of scarcity. That at least for some programs (a small number, I admit) it is possible to grow the number of students that can be served to match the demand for the credential.

The universities that are launching low-cost master's with edX and Coursera appear to be treating these degrees as the main act. Everyone receiving an online degree from these schools will matriculate in the new low-cost program. They are substituting for traditional online programs, and perhaps even some residential programs. They are at the center, rather than the margins, of the strategy for graduate education at these universities.

This seems to me to be both a shift in academic philosophy and an evolution in the university business model.

The philosophical change is that the schools working with edX and Coursera seem to be recognizing that part of their mission has to do with impact, and that graduating only a small number of students with master's degrees will ultimately do little to create opportunities for individuals or benefits for the places where their students live.

**Eddie:**

I understand the argument for a philosophical change and appreciate that this change is motivated by a different kind of scarcity (fewer graduate students applying for graduate school). I'd argue, though, that the creation of schools of professional studies was already a recognition of need, impact, value and mission at the schools that developed them.

Colleges and universities, through professional studies programs and other degree programs, are increasingly making high-quality online programs that require a significant investment of time and resources. In some cases, *where* the degree is offered may be a more dynamic consideration than it once was, and it may point to the increased presence of value proposition of online across the full landscape of offerings rather than a question of a MOOC platform onslaught on traditional graduate programs.

It's not clear to me that these edX and Coursera master's programs will actually substitute for anything, at least not yet. There are many more residential master's programs than new open-admission/low-cost online degrees at these schools. Last year, U.S. institutions **conferred over 800,000** master's degrees. The "low-cost" programs that you mention enroll only a few thousand at most.

The real story here is not that universities are embracing low-cost online education. They have already done that, to one degree or another. Where we go from here still seems to me to be a very open question.

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[https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/technology-and-learning/low-cost-online-master%E2%80%99s-program-debate-between-josh?utm\\_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm\\_campaign=f18fab2ef1-InsideDigitalLearning\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1fcbc04421-f18fab2ef1-200040001&mc\\_cid=f18fab2ef1&mc\\_eid=20a6b0e480](https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/blogs/technology-and-learning/low-cost-online-master%E2%80%99s-program-debate-between-josh?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=f18fab2ef1-InsideDigitalLearning_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-f18fab2ef1-200040001&mc_cid=f18fab2ef1&mc_eid=20a6b0e480)