MIT Deems MicroMasters a Success

Administrators at Massachusetts Institute of Technology say they are "floored" by the quality of students in its half online, half in-person master's degree program. Expansion plans are in the works.

By

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The first of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's half online, half in-person master's degree programs is making a profit and bringing dozens of new degree-seeking students to campus.

The results from the blended program in supply chain management are beginning to influence how MIT accepts students and offers graduate-level education. New programs are "bubbling up through the system," one administrator said. And the institute's Center for Transportation and Logistics, which offers the program, is "giving serious thought" to changing its admission processes, said Yossi Sheffi, the professor of engineering who serves as the director of the center.

"We are so impressed by what we are seeing that there's a debate within the Center for Transportation and Logistics if we should replace standardized tests like the GMAT and the GRE with taking one full [online] course and seeing how [students] do," Sheffi said in an interview.

MIT launched the blended program in supply chain management in October 2016, taking an existing one-year professional program and splitting it in two. Learners in the blended program take the first semester's worth of courses through the massive open online course platform edX, which MIT helped create. The courses are available for free, but learners who complete five courses and

pay $150 in identity-verification fees in each can earn a credential known as a MicroMasters. Those learners are then eligible to take a comprehensive final exam. Earning a passing grade makes them eligible to apply to complete the master's degree during a semester on campus.

MIT calls that process "inverted admissions," as prospective students are able to complete courses before they are technically admitted to the program.

Numbers MIT shared with *Inside Higher Ed* show that nearly 200,000 learners have signed up for the online courses to date. Most of them have taken the courses for free, but MIT has awarded nearly 19,000 certificates.

A group of about 1,100 learners last month became the first to finish the five MOOCs required to take the comprehensive final exam. Nearly 800 did took the test, and 622 passed. Of those, about 130 have so far applied to finish the full degree at MIT, beginning in January. Space restrictions limit MIT to accepting around 40 of them. The residential program also seats about 40 students.

Other learners may choose to finish the degree elsewhere. A handful of institutions -- Curtin University and the University of Queensland in Australia, the University of Zaragoza in Spain (which partners with MIT for its logistics program), and the Rochester Institute of Technology -- accept the MicroMasters credential as credit toward a master's degree.

Learners based in the U.S. make up about 17 percent of everyone who signed up for the MOOCs, followed by learners from India, Brazil, Canada and Mexico. U.S.-based learners are overrepresented among those eligible to take the final exam -- they make up about 31 percent of that group -- which Sheffi credited to MIT working with companies in the U.S. to encourage their employees to enroll.

MIT's blended program, like similar MOOCs-for-credit initiatives at Arizona State University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has been closely watched in higher education. The results so far suggest graduate students are particularly interested in the model.

In December, prior to learning the full results from the blended program in supply chain management, MIT announced a second program in that mold in data, economics and development policy. Those learners won't come to campus to finish the degree until 2019.

Sanjay Sarma, vice president for open learning at MIT, said in an interview that a "bunch" of similar programs are in the works. Out of respect for the faculty governance process, he declined to say which departments are considering launching their own hybrid programs.

"For us, what this is proving is that it's an extraordinary fishing line for talent," Sarma said. "I am enthusiastic, and a lot of colleagues are … but it will expand at the pace that faculty sees wisdom in it."

As an added bonus, Sarma said, the supply chain management program is "more than" breaking even.

Sarma said the concept of inverted admissions reminds him of the entrance exam required by the Indian Institutes of Technology (he received his bachelor's degree from the Kanpur institute). While he stressed that he is not suggesting MIT require an entrance exam, he said it is "inevitable" that the institute will create new ways to surface talented students.

The blended programs are also producing useful information as MIT debates how to change the way it delivers education. A 2014 report suggested MIT in the future could deliver the first and final years of a bachelor's degree program online, giving students more flexibility by reducing the time they are required to spend on campus.

MIT last fall gave undergraduates the opportunity to take a course offered on campus as a MOOC, and a study released last month showed students in the online course found it significantly less stressful.

Replacing freshman year with MOOCs is "not for MIT at this point," Sarma said, adding that he is personally not "gung ho" about that idea. "As for now, [this model] works for these specific types of programs, but it could certainly expand," he said.

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