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## What's AHEAD Poll # 1: Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

Laura W. Perna

*University of Pennsylvania*, [lperna@gse.upenn.edu](mailto:lperna@gse.upenn.edu)

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This report is limited to respondents working at public, private not-for-profit, and for-profit colleges and universities in the United States. We also excluded three surveys with incomplete responses.

The final number of respondents included in this report is 153. The findings over-represent the perspectives of leaders of private not-for-profit four-year institutions, as 73% of respondents were from institutions in this sector. About one-fifth (19%) of respondents are leaders of public four-year institutions, 3% are from private for-profit four-year institutions, and 5% are from public two-year institutions. Half of respondents (46%) are in administrative roles, 33% in academic positions, 10% in finance positions, and 11% in student affairs. About 29% of respondents work at institutions that currently offer MOOCs. This report also includes results of a content analysis of comments contributed by 17 respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs and 51 respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs.

Additional commentary is available at <https://ahead-penn.org/whats-ahead/moocs-commentary>

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### Keywords

College leader perceptions of MOOCs, Massive Open Online Courses

### Comments

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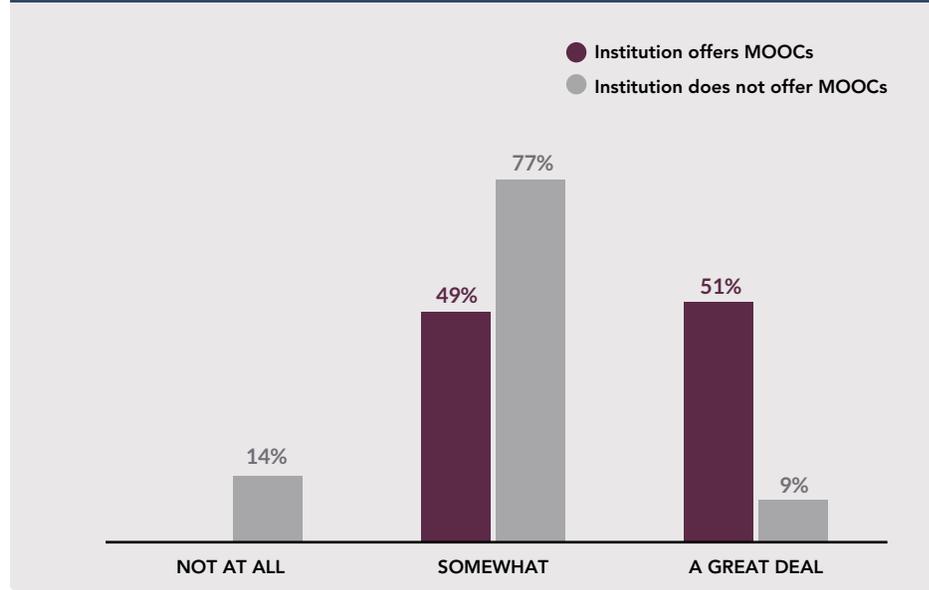
What's AHEAD produces ongoing insights into important trends in higher education management. In the first of a series of polls of higher education trend spotters, we focused on Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs).

The results suggest that, although MOOCs remain on the radar of higher education leaders, the institutions that are talking most about MOOCs are those that are offering MOOCs. Many higher education leaders are uncertain about the benefits of MOOCs for students or institutions and are skeptical that MOOCs can have a real impact on reducing the high costs in higher education.

### There is more discussion of MOOCs now than a year ago at many institutions.

Half (51%) of leaders at institutions that offer MOOCs are talking about MOOCs "a great deal," compared with 9% of senior administrators at institutions that do not offer MOOCs.

FIG. 1 Distribution of respondents by degree to which their institutions are talking about MOOCs



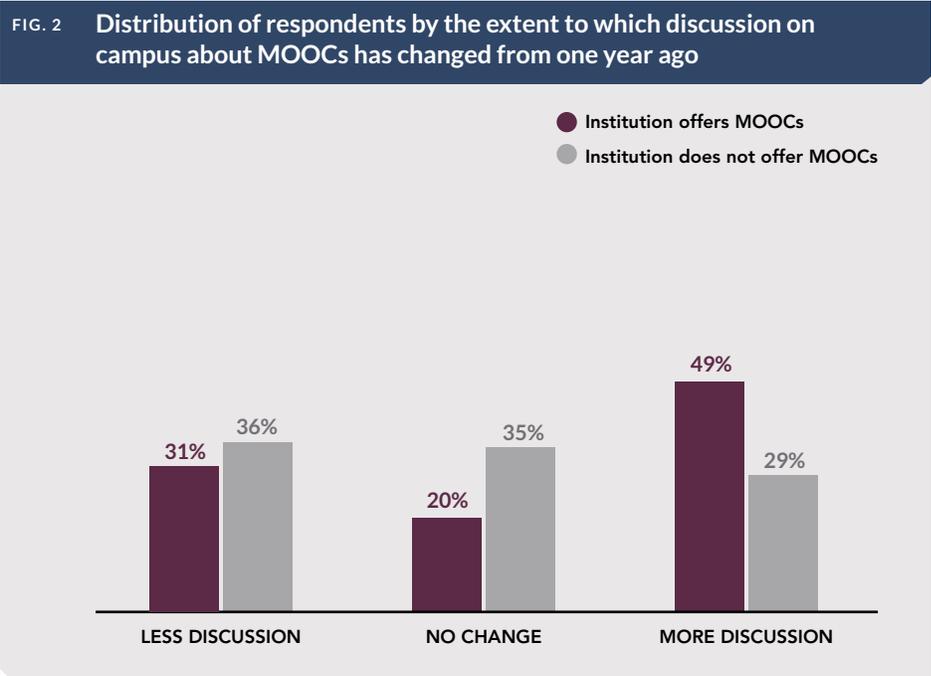
Comments by several leaders provide insight into why some institutions are offering MOOCs. A leader of an institution that offers MOOCs stated that offering MOOCs is an opportunity for the institution to "play a leadership role in shaping how education changes in the years to come." Another wrote that "there is an element of 'being around the table' with others involved in MOOCs."

Several leaders of institutions that do not offer MOOCs provided comments to the effect that "MOOCs are not necessarily consistent with the institutional mission of many campuses." Other respondents said that MOOCs are for "elite institutions," with one respondent stating:

*MOOCs are for the top tier institutions in the country who have 'brand recognition' and faculty with the initiative, creative interest, flexibility, and reputation to 'attract' a class. Public institutions in the middle segment of higher education are just observers, not participants. MOOCs are for the 'Medallion' institutions that have the resources to invest and world-renowned faculty who can draw a crowd.*

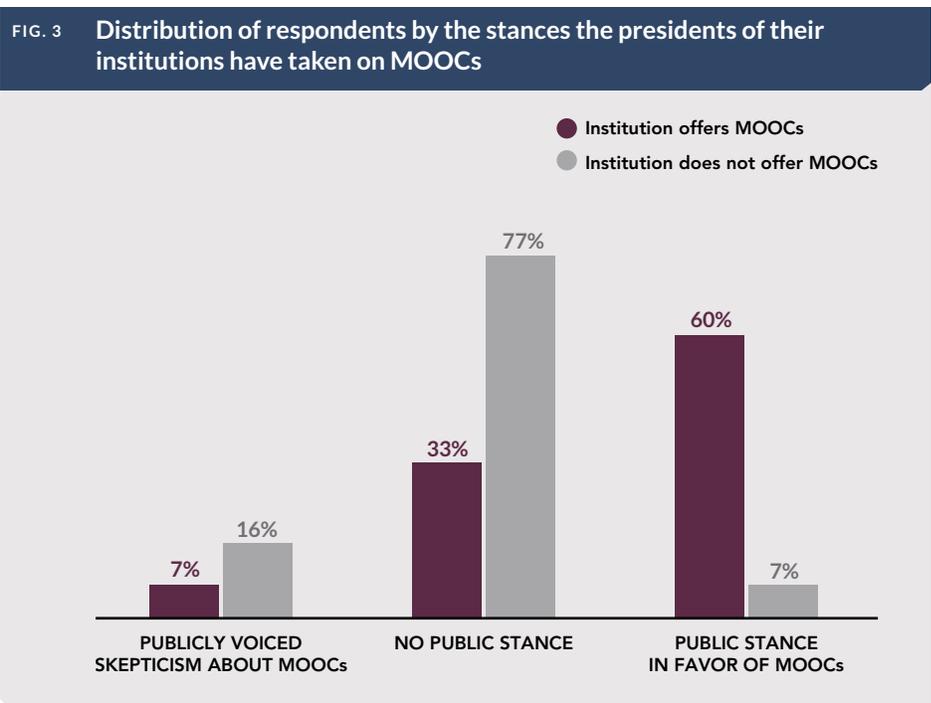
**There is more discussion of MOOCs now than a year ago at many institutions.**

Half (49%) of respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs report more discussion of MOOCs now than a year ago, compared with 29% of respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs.



**Few presidents have publicly voiced skepticism about MOOCs.**

Most respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs report that their president has taken no public stance on MOOCs (77%). By comparison, 60% of respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs report that their president has taken a public stance in support of MOOCs.



**Higher education leaders are uncertain about the benefits of MOOCs, whether they offer them or not.**

A plurality of respondents report uncertainty about the benefits or returns of MOOCs to institutions or students as a reason for not offering them (32% of respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs) and a challenge for offering MOOCs (58% of respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs).

**FIG. 4 Biggest challenge to offering MOOCs**

CHALLENGE	INSTITUTION OFFERS MOOCs	INSTITUTION DOES NOT OFFER MOOCs
Uncertainty about benefits to institutions or students	58%	32%
High cost to develop / deliver	13%	9%
Lack of interest of faculty	9%	12%
Infrastructure constraints	7%	6%
Other approaches used to deliver education online*	—	15%
Inability to compete	—	6%
Lack of interest of senior administrators	—	2%
Other	13%	19%

\*Option only for respondents at institutions not offering MOOCs.

The comments of several leaders provide additional insight into the uncertain benefits of MOOCs. A leader of an institution that offers MOOCs succinctly stated, “The concern is that MOOCs do not provide an educational experience that is equivalent to a traditional classroom.” A few leaders at institutions that do not offer MOOCs indicated that, despite some level of interest in MOOCs, their institution “is taking a cautious approach” until the benefits are better understood. Along these lines, one leader at an institution that does not offer MOOCs wrote:

*We have adopted a ‘wait and see’ attitude regarding MOOCs. At present we don’t need MOOCs, and we are very skeptical about their supposed benefits – including cost reduction. For now, we will let others experiment and either prove or disprove the theories about MOOCs. Ultimately, the market will decide.*

*Leaders of institutions that offer MOOCs tend to be more positive than leaders at institutions that do not offer MOOCs about their potential benefits.*

About half of respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs strongly agree that MOOCs may be a potentially effective mechanism for improving access to higher education students in underserved communities in the U.S. and around the globe, compared with about a fifth of respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs.

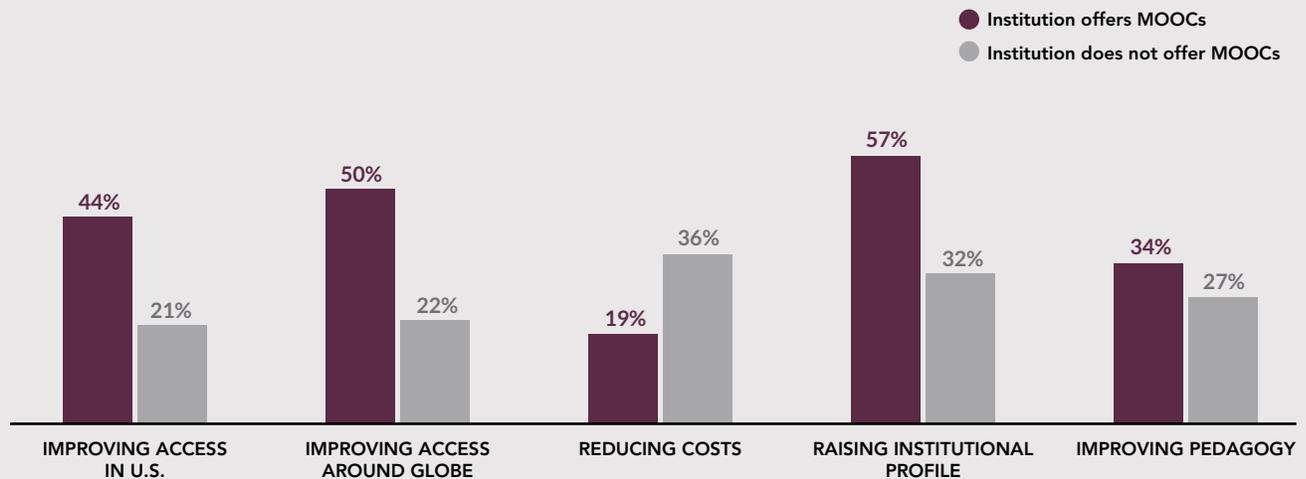
Several respondents wrote in comments about other potential benefits of MOOCs. A few leaders from both institutions that do and do not offer MOOCs stated that MOOCs could be a potential tool for connecting with alumni. Leaders at institutions that do not offer MOOCs also suggested that MOOCs may be a potential mechanism for promoting the transition of students from high school into college, as well as delivering non-credit instruction.

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Many higher education leaders are uncertain about the benefits of MOOCs to higher education institutions and students.

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FIG. 5 Percentage of respondents that “strongly agree” that MOOCs may be a potentially effective mechanism for accomplishing various goals



*Leaders of institutions that offer MOOCs tend to agree that offering MOOCs may raise their institution's profile.*

More than half (57%) of respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs strongly agree that MOOCs may be a potentially effective mechanism for raising the institutional profile, compared with 32% of respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs.

*Relatively few leaders at institutions that offer MOOCs strongly agree that MOOCs may be an effective mechanism for reducing the costs of higher education.*

Only 19% of respondents at institutions that offer MOOCs and 36% of respondents at institutions that do not offer MOOCs strongly agree that MOOCs may be a potentially effective mechanism for reducing the costs of higher education.

Optional comments from respondents shed further light on the role of financial costs. One leader from an institution that offers MOOCs succinctly stated, “We are tuition-driven. If MOOCs are free, they are not feasible for us.” Another reported “concern that there is no upside on the spending that justifies cost and effort.” A leader from an institution that does not offer MOOCs also described uncertainty about the financial returns of MOOCs, stating: “The institution is interested in profitable revenue growth and does not understand how a MOOC could contribute to profit.” Another leader reported that “the lack of direct financial incentives in the public college sector hinders the adoption of MOOCs.”

### About This Poll

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