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Is Online Pedigree an Oxymoron?



The educational revolution is underway and the catalyst is the internet. One issue that's going to be the subject of ongoing debate is whether online learning can be associated with other than a second rate education? Search "learn XYZ online" and you'll be bombarded with a broad variety of sponsored ads that offer anything from "MBA Fast" to a certificate in fields from Architecture to X-Ray Technician. The late comers to online schools are the well-heeled academia. They argue that human interaction is critical to accelerated learning and believe certain teachers (and pedagogical approaches) are better than others (especially those on their payroll). One must ask

whether they aren't also concerned that if they open up the flood gates to the world's best professors, they will find it difficult to preserve their elite status. What's the value of a luxury brand if it's access to anyone? Won't that lower the "perception" of quality and hence the demand? For the sake of what's best for humanity, I certainly hope not.

John Katzman, founder of the Princeton Review, believes even some of the holdouts are about to jump into online education with both feet. His goal is to show that top educational institutions can increase their breadth and depth online, initially in what may be the most critical arena, teacher education. Presumably they have little choice as the growth to education is coming from online and abroad. 2Tor intends to provide both the technological platform **and the services** so that programs that are now highly selective can scale more effectively to meet the growing demand for these brand names. Katzman will invest \$15 million from his own funds and from private investors.

Most of the growth and innovation in this space has been relegated to large for-profit providers (e.g., the University of Phoenix), niche for-profit institutions (e.g., Capella) and non-profit institutions (e.g., the Maryland University College). Katzman's clearly betting that a core part of the value of an education is the

brand and is confident that his company, 2Tor.com, will become **the** online platform for many of the most prestigious and successful graduate and professional in the US.

To prove his theory, 2Tor has partnered with USC's Rossier School of Education. Together they will create an online version of its MA degree in teaching, aka MAT@USC. His vision is to create an online version of USC's existing program which will allow the school to scale from 150 students a year to 5,000 or more. This will help meet the insatiable demand for teachers, especially in urban, rural, low-income schools. There's certainly no shortage of online institutions, including those that offer online teachers certification programs. Most charge far less than the \$40,000 at which USC intends to price its 13-month degree.

Is making education, and hence knowledge, broadly accessible inconsistent with pedigree? The University of Phoenix has shown that just as iTunes can transition music distribution to an online marketplace, armed with a robust platform, online education has a multi-billion dollar demand. What will happen when the exclusive and pedigreed brands of the world's most reputable institutions do the same thing or will it destroy their cache? In a future post I am going to explore the future of this market, an Ivy League quality education in a box. What would such a service include? Is there a business model that could support such a vision?

Stay tuned.

-jim pickell