



Thomas Edison to convert free courses into college credit

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By Diane D'Amico (2/24/13)

Feb. 24--Students who take free online courses through the Saylor Foundation will get college credit for some of those courses from Thomas Edison State College in New Jersey by paying a \$99 fee and passing a proctored exam in the course.

Thomas Edison officials announced the agreement with Saylor last week. The college foundation agreed in December to invest \$100,000 to develop competency-based degree programs that take advantage of free massive open online courses, or MOOCs, to create new degree options for their adult students.

MOOCs have been getting a lot of attention as some of the nation's top universities began putting popular courses online for free. But those courses offer no college credit or proof that those who take them learned anything. The agreement with Thomas Edison creates a bridge between the free courses and a bachelor's degree from a New Jersey state college.

More than 20,000 adults were enrolled at Thomas Edison in fall 2012. About 500 students in Atlantic, Cape May and Cumberland counties are earning their degrees through Thomas Edison's online and technology-based courses and assessments. The college is based in Trenton, but it has no physical classrooms.

"We are in the midst of the latest paradigm shift in higher education and look forward to leveraging our expertise in assessment to help our students to take advantage of it," said Marc Singer, vice provost of the Thomas Edison Center for the Assessment of Learning.

Singer said Saylor offers about 25 courses that closely match courses offered by Thomas Edison and could be tested using the same or similar exams in the Thomas Edison College Examination Program, or TECEP. The courses are being peer-reviewed, and three have been completed, including Introduction to Political Science, Network Technology and Statistics.

"We want to be sure that if someone takes the Saylor course, they can pass our test," Singer said.

The \$99 fee would make the courses far less expensive than the state's traditional public four-year colleges, where a typical course costs an average of \$1,200 this year, or community colleges, where the average cost per course is about \$415 this year. Singer said students taking the tests could also get credits transferred to other state colleges that accept TECEP credits.

"These are accredited college credits," Singer said. "And we are looking for courses and exams that fit into our program majors. This is a great option for people who don't want to spend a lot of money."

Thomas Edison will also create assessments for some of the most popular Saylor courses. The first six include: Introduction to Comparative Politics; World History in the Early Modern and Modern Eras (1600-Present); Management Information Systems; Negotiations and Conflict Management; Introduction to Mechanical Engineering; and Thermodynamics.

The \$99 fee covers the cost of the testing and the proctor. Students take Thomas Edison exams at a designated site, such as a public library, under the supervision of a proctor. Singer said Thomas Edison is also moving toward using ProctorU, a service that provides monitoring through the use of a webcam that could allow students to take the tests at home.

"There are people who watch them live online and track eye movements and keyboard strokes," Singer said.

Thomas Edison caters to adult students, most of whom work and have other commitments. Singer said they have been following the formation of MOOCs and saw the partnership as another affordable way for students to earn college credits by demonstrating what they know.

"This is just one more way to say that it's what you know that counts and not just sitting in a college seat," he said.

Devon Ritter, special-projects administrator for the Saylor Foundation and [saylor.org](http://saylor.org), said the agreement is a huge step forward for Saylor and its students.

"Our initial goal was to provide access to higher education," he said. "Now we have the possibility of college credits as well."

Saylor has 280 free online courses and some professional-development programs. It also has a credit agreement with Excelsior College in Albany, N.Y., but Ritter said the Thomas Edison agreement is unique because the college is actively developing exams for Saylor courses.

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