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First-of-Its-Kind Online Master's Draws Wave of Applicants

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By Douglas Belkin

In the past three weeks, Georgia Tech received nearly twice as many applications for a new low-cost online master's program as its comparable residential program receives in a year. The degree—which uses Massive Open Online Course technology—is the first of its kind, and its popularity suggests a growing demand for online learning.

The Georgia Tech program is the first master's degree from a top-ranked university based on the technology that drives MOOCs. The only difference is it is not "open," or free, as a MOOC is traditionally defined. Students have applied from 50 states and 80 foreign countries, according to the school. To graduate, they will never have to step foot on campus and will pay about $6,600, compared with about $44,000 for residential students.

The application period for the computer-science master's program, which ended on Sunday, marks another inflection point in the growth of MOOCs, as corporations, schools and online providers team up to create more such credentialed programs.

Millions of people have taken individual online courses, but most MOOCs don't lead toward degrees, and critics argue they don't help students land jobs.

Now, a handful of schools have started to offer credits for MOOCs. And last month Udacity, a Silicon Valley company specializing in MOOCs, announced the Open Education Alliance, which allows students to earn a free certificate based on a series of online courses developed with input from Google and AT&T, among several other companies.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, along with its MOOC partner edX, is starting a course sequence called the XSeries, For up to $700, students will be able to take a test and earn a "verified certificate" in subjects like computer science and supply-chain management.

"I think this is symptomatic of a lot of what we're going to be seeing in the future," said Ronald Ehrenberg, the director of the Cornell Higher Education Research Institute.

Also notable among the batch of applications for the Georgia Tech program, which starts in January, is the 14-fold increase in U.S. residents. Zvi Galil, the dean of its College of Computing, said 1,854, or 79%, of the 2,359 applicants were U.S. citizens. For the residential class that began this fall, just 128, or 9%, of the 1,371 applicants were U.S citizens. Only about

150 students enrolled in the residential program, while most of the online students are expected to matriculate.

Graduate engineering programs have been dominated by foreign nationals for decades. Nearly two-thirds of all computer-science graduate students and over 70% of all electrical-engineering graduate students studying in the U.S. are from other countries, according to Stuart Anderson, author of **a recent report on the subject for the National Foundation for American Policy**.

"The problem is that there is no guarantee that we're always going to be able to attract talented foreign graduate students," said Mr. Ehrenberg. "We don't know what the immigration policy will be or what job opportunities there will be here relative to these people's home countries so the notion of providing more of your own is certainly important."

Sebastian Thrun, the CEO of Udacity, which is partnering with Georgia Tech as well as AT&T to create the program, said the large number of U.S. applicants highlighted a demand among adult students. "There is a really huge number of people in this country that would love to get an education while having a job or raising a family or staying at home," Mr. Thrun said. "But that need is being unmet."

Mr. Galil said he hopes to expand the Georgia Tech model to 10,000 students. The school hires an additional teacher for every 60 or so students to facilitate online chat discussions.

Every applicant with a four-year college degree who graduated with at least a 3.0 will be accepted, but that acceptance is conditional on making at least a B in the first two courses. The residential program accepts fewer than one in five applicants and that selectivity is good for the school because it enhances prestige—but Mr. Galil said qualified applicants are turned away.

A residential student recently approached Mr. Gail and complained that the online program would devalue his degree if it grows too large because so many more people would have it.

Mr. Galil said he told the student: "You're not here because you're good, you're here because you're lucky. When we admitted you, we turned away 500 other students who were as good as you or maybe better."

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