Dear alumni, family and friends,

HAVE YOU HEARD OF MASSIVE open online courses (MOOCs)? MOOCs offer anyone around the world the opportunity to take, for free, an online version of a traditional course. This morning I went online to look at the spring 2013 course offerings available through edX — a nonprofit collaboration involving MIT, Harvard University, the University of California, Berkeley and other university partners. I could sign up for “Introduction to Statistics,” billed as the online equivalent of a 15-week course taken on the UC Berkeley campus every year by about 1,000 students. Or I could choose “The Ancient Greek Hero,” based on a course taught at Harvard. Students who complete and pass the course are eligible to receive a certificate indicating their mastery of the material. The courses do not yet carry academic credit and do not count toward a degree, though some MOOC providers are exploring this possibility.

What does all of this mean for Clark University and our students? First of all, it is important to remember that online courses are not new. At Clark, some of the courses in our accredited M.B.A. program have been offered in a blended learning format — where some coursework is completed online and other pieces of the course are presented in a traditional face-to-face classroom setting. The judgment our faculty members make is figuring out what parts of the curriculum can be taught effectively online, and what parts are better suited to the classroom. The online platform is effective for developing mastery of basic concepts, such as how to calculate a debt-to-asset ratio. When it comes to combining concepts and understanding implications, like how ratio patterns lead to valuation decisions, the real-time interaction between faculty and students is beneficial. Feedback from our M.B.A. students about online courses is quite positive. It seems clear that online learning will continue to grow rapidly and, over time, Clark will expand its online offerings, especially in professional graduate education.

What distinguishes MOOCs from other online courses is that they are both “massive” and “open.” That is, anyone can register (currently, in most cases, at no charge) and the courses are designed to handle very large numbers of participants — as many as 100,000 from around the world for some courses. Some commentators in the media have taken these features of MOOCs to be the basis for a profound restructuring of higher education.

For me, however, the most significant consequence of MOOCs is the considerable amount of resources being invested in understanding the context within which online courses are effective, and how we might develop technology-enabled courses in ways that strengthen student learning. For example, we know from research in the learning sciences that students benefit from rapid feedback on assignments. The platforms and some of the tools being developed to support online courses allow instantaneous, computer-derived feedback to students as they test their mastery of concepts and skills. This research will inform the decisions we make at Clark in coming years as to the role of online education in our academic programs.

It is risky to predict the effect online instruction will have on colleges and universities. In the past year the media have reported everything from the impending demise of the traditional residential campus experience to the prospect of dramatically expanding access to higher education around the world.

Here are the three issues that I am focused on as president of Clark University; how we address them will serve us well in navigating change and help us emerge as a stronger, more impactful university. First, how do we promote transformative learning and educational outcomes that fully prepare and launch our students for successful careers and meaningful lives? Our LEEP (Liberal Education and Effective Practice) model offers a bold response to that question. Second, how do we ensure that the excellent education available at Clark is affordable and accessible to the talented students who seek to enroll here? We at Clark are working hard to contain costs and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of all that we do. Third, how do we marshal the research work of our faculty, and the contributions of talented staff, students and the entire Clark community, to ensure we make a difference in developing solutions to the world’s most challenging problems? Engagement with important problems locally and globally has been a hallmark of Clark over the decades, and connects strongly with our LEEP initiative.

I have no doubt that online education offers fresh opportunities for Clark to respond to all three of these core priorities. For example, are there prospects for students to take courses online, whether at Clark or elsewhere, that reduce the cost of education without undermining the transformative results we seek? Can we use online learning to enhance the influence of Clark’s world-class research in communities around the world? Can Clark strengthen its resource base and broaden access through new graduate programs taught predominantly online? All of this is but a means to an end. The key here is to remember that online courses are another vehicle with which to achieve the educational results and research impact that define the University’s mission. We must be open to taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by online education while remaining focused on our primary goals. A task force at Clark is developing recommendations on how best to do so. I look forward to sharing updates with you and welcome your comments and reflections on these ideas.

Sincerely,

David P. Angel
President