



HARVARD
Office of the Provost

Dear Colleagues,

Anniversaries offer an opportunity to reflect on the past and contemplate the future. One year ago, we announced the launch of both [edX](#), the not-for-profit open-source online learning platform created by Harvard and MIT, and [HarvardX](#), the partner organization which supports online pedagogy and its application to on-campus education as well as educational research.

Harvard's activities in interactive teaching and learning are part of a long tradition of pedagogical innovation. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Harvard Law School and Harvard Business School pioneered the application of the case method of teaching in professional schools. In 1885, the College instituted the elective curriculum, defining the undergraduate experience across the country, with President Charles William Eliot referring to the change as "the most generally useful piece of work which this university has ever executed."

Two centuries later, this spirit of educational innovation inspired one of the first undergraduate computer science degrees and a groundbreaking medical education curriculum that integrated clinical teaching and problem solving with basic science. Most recently, the FIELD program has revolutionized MBA education by immersing future business leaders in emerging global markets.

As digital technologies have advanced and become a larger part of daily existence, Harvard faculty have developed and sought new approaches, methods, and tools, applying novel models of teaching in the classroom. Through the Division of Continuing Education and executive education programs at our professional schools, Harvard has offered hybrid, distance, and online programs to learners around the world for decades. Local and integrated IT and academic computing efforts have also supported the development of dozens of educational technology projects.

By the fall of 2011, faculty and deans from across the University agreed to establish a more deliberate and coordinated approach to online, interactive learning—an approach that grew out of the work of faculty and decanal committees such as the [Harvard Academic Computing Committee](#), the [Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching \(HILT\)](#), and Harvard@400.

Conversations with colleagues at MIT, the institution that defined OpenCourseWare, revealed common pedagogical goals for online learning: to improve teaching and learning on campuses and beyond, to advance teaching and learning through educational research, and to expand access to education worldwide. Those conversations and shared values, refined further by faculty and leaders at both Harvard and MIT, led directly to the creation of edX.

EdX is distinguished by its clear sense of mission and, through HarvardX, our faculty are being

empowered to develop and test the highest quality educational tools and technologies for our students on campus and for learners around the world.

Towards that end, we have made considerable progress, including...

- Enabling HarvardX by building a [core support team](#) guided by [University-wide faculty committees](#)—one focused on course development, faculty support, and technical priorities (led by Rob Lue), and the other on data collection and research (led by Andrew Ho).
- Launching [six HarvardX courses](#) developed by Harvard faculty pioneers from across several schools and engaging more than 350,000 learners in topics ranging from classics to computer science.
- Bringing together course and research fellows and offering opportunities for our graduate students to learn about innovative teaching through activities like the [January Academy](#), made possible through collaborations with HILT.
- Identifying ways to integrate insights and new tools from online courses back into the traditional classroom and piloting research studies on learning.
- Expanding our breadth and depth of courses and modules, with a particular focus on the humanities; in the fall, HarvardX will offer everything from architecture to poetry to legal history to health care.

We have also learned key lessons...

- Many Harvard faculty are interested in experimenting with new online technologies to improve their own courses, advance pedagogy, and conduct research about how students learn. To balance demand for innovation with resources and infrastructure, we are building additional capacity, engaging with the schools, and finding ways to use existing centers, institutes, and expertise to further help faculty enhance all aspects of teaching and research.
- Building a high-quality online learning experience takes a great deal of effort and a significant investment of time among faculty and their teams. While creating customized discipline-specific interactive courses and modules is time-consuming, the effort is necessary to ensure the high quality of each HarvardX experience.
- MOOCs—massive open online courses—are only part of what HarvardX does and will do. Though they are often the focus of media coverage, MOOCs represent only one approach to online learning. HLS1x, “Copyright,” for example, limited enrollment to 500 participants to ensure a more interactive experience. And not every experience we offer will be a complete course. In the future, discrete learning objects, such as tools or topic-specific modules, may be widely applied to support individualized teaching and learning.

- Participants have diverse motivations for taking HarvardX courses—from the enhancement of current coursework and the acquisition of work-related skills to the desire to engage with others around a shared experience and an interest in learning for its own sake. These students are not only eager to learn online but also want to [learn together and in-person](#).
- HarvardX holds great promise for transforming the learning experiences of students on our campus. Online and in-person learning can be mutually reinforcing. For example, on-campus students are now using assessment tools and topic-based videos created for CS50x, and the Harvard School of Public Health is using their HarvardX courses to experiment with “flipping” classrooms, or having students watch lectures in advance and do “homework” in class. In both cases, online tools can inform the classroom experience and increase one-on-one time between faculty and students.
- Harvard faculty are eager to participate in HarvardX and edX but are also enthusiastic about having broader discussions about the future of higher education. Through the well-attended HarvardX Town Halls and other major events like the recent HILT conference, there has been widespread faculty dialogue about how to think about and guide new approaches to teaching and learning.

In the coming months, we will increase the capacity of HarvardX to support the needs of faculty and students, identifying both effective and ineffective approaches. As with all experiments, there will be successes and failures. This work will influence fundamental aspects of what Harvard is and what it means to the world. Thoughtful discussion and debate about what we discover will be essential.

In closing, I offer my thanks to everyone who has played a role in edX and HarvardX. I also encourage all of our faculty to let their deans, the HarvardX leadership, and me know how we can best meet their needs as we continue to promote innovative teaching and research. In the coming weeks and months there will be more opportunities for engagement through future HarvardX events, interactions with other faculty in the edX consortium, joint Harvard-MIT forums, and more events at the school and department levels.

I am inspired by the commitment of our faculty to improve teaching and learning continually. They are eager to innovate and to approach pedagogy and educational research in new ways, whether rethinking a course taught for decades or combining time-honored traditions with the latest technological innovations.

We have before us the extraordinary opportunity to shape the future of our University by enhancing the classroom and laboratory experiences that have inspired generations of great thinkers and teachers. It is an opportunity that I am confident we will seize, emboldened by our history of innovation in higher education and led by our commitment to advancing knowledge, promoting understanding, and serving society.

Alan M. Garber

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