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Meet the Crowdfunded Professor

He's left his tenured job and gone online, solo

By Jeffrey R. Young

Kevin deLaplante quit his job as a tenured professor at Iowa State University to make courses on his own, at his one-man online institution, [Critical Thinker Academy](#). The courses are free, so to support himself and his family, he's asking "patrons" to donate small amounts of money each month — like a one-man public-radio station running a pledge drive.

Mr. deLaplante, who until recently was an associate professor in Iowa State's department of philosophy and religious studies, is not the only educator trying to make a living this way. Thanks to a service called [Patreon](#), hundreds of educators are seeking streams of donations to support their online courses and educational videos. While it seems unlikely that many full-time professors will leave secure jobs for the patronage model, the platform could attract adjunct professors whose job security is already uncertain.

Patreon's founders had no plans to disrupt education, or even to work with educators. The site was created by a musician, Jack Conte, to help artists make a living online. The idea developed out of his anger at the meager amounts he made from his music online, even after building a sizable fan base, he says. His [music videos](#) often draw a million views on YouTube (they feature [robots playing synthesizers](#)), but he says that adds up to only about \$250 in ad revenue. "I don't buy that my work and value to the world is properly being translated into dollars," he thought. "There's got to be a better equation."

So he opened Patreon in 2013, on the theory that a crowd of supporters could be persuaded to pay artists they like on a continuing basis — either a small amount every time a new work was published (up to a given maximum) or a set monthly fee.

That's a departure from the typical crowdfunding model, pioneered by Kickstarter and other sites, which allows creators to raise money for a single project. As Mr. Conte puts it, the site is designed to give a steady stream of income to artists so they can focus on creative work.

More than 15,000 people are raising money on the platform, and though most of them work in visual arts or music, about 13 percent are in education, at all levels, says Mr. Conte. "And some of our highest earners on Patreon are educators," he adds.

Could this utopian vision pan out? Early experiments show plenty of practical obstacles, but the effort does point out interesting possibilities for the future of online educational resources.

For Mr. deLaplante, a series of unusual circumstances led him to ditch his tenured job and try Patreon.

For one thing, inspired since childhood by Carl Sagan's vivid explanations of the cosmos, he had dreamed of leaving academe to become a public educator. Throughout his 16 years at Iowa State, he thought of one day working as a full-time philosopher-journalist, taking ideas from his classroom to the masses. That job didn't exist, so he'd have to make it up himself.

In 2010 he scratched the itch by starting the Critical Thinker podcast, aimed at a general audience. A couple of years later, he started teaching online courses using platforms that let anyone teach, and he learned enough web skills to build his own teaching hub: Critical Thinker Academy. Those projects had a looser and catchier voice than his classroom teaching did. A video about rhetoric, for instance, was promoted as a way to make students into "argument ninjas."

He charged a small fee for most of the courses, hoping to one day leave his university job to focus on the independent work. A major motivator was his desire to move back to his home city, Ottawa, Ontario. It wasn't as if he could just get another job as a philosophy professor there — the positions in Ottawa's colleges were filled. He wanted to find a way to make enough from his

teaching to match his salary. When this reporter wrote [an article](#) earlier this year noting that Mr. deLaplante was averaging \$2,500 a month in income from his side project, it raised eyebrows in his department at Iowa State, he says, and led some to question whether the moonlighting was appropriate. He insists that his work online followed all university rules, but he decided to dodge the issue by breaking free. So he left his job at Iowa State, and this summer he and his family moved to Ottawa, as he made the leap to independent teaching.

KEVIN DELAPLANTE IS CREATING
FREE VIDEO COURSES AT THE CRITICAL THINKER ACADEMY
 Learn HOW to think, not WHAT to think

Home Creator Posts 9 All Posts 11 Patrons 23

Give \$ 1 per month
 Become a Patron

Only patrons can post directly in a Creator's activity feed.
 Feel free to browse around and comment!
 Become a Patron

23 patrons
 \$121 per month

Milestone Goals
Remove all Google AdSense ads on YouTube videos
 \$2,000 per month
 One approach to supporting free content is to run ads on or near the videos hosted on YouTube. Ad revenue isn't nearly enough to support the Critical Thinker Academy, and is a major distraction for many viewers. I'd love to drop all the ads.

August 2015 Patreon supported
 Thank you so much for the support this month!

Kevin deLaplante
 Sep 1, 2015 at 2:59 am

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One thing bothered him, though: He didn't like charging students for his online courses, since his goal was to reach as wide an audience as possible. So he set up an account on Patreon a few weeks ago, as an experiment to see if strangers online would back his open-learning experiment. He figures it will take \$6,000 a month to support his family. "The Critical Thinker Academy becomes a sustainable project at this level," he writes on his Patreon page. If he reaches \$8,000 a month, he says, he'll start building a team to take the production to the next level of quality and consistency.

So far 23 people have pledged money, in varying amounts,

providing Mr. deLaplante with a collective income of about \$120 per month. But it has only been a few weeks. He'll assess the situation after about six months and change tack if necessary, he says, possibly going back to a pay-per-course model.

Why would anyone give Mr. deLaplante money each month, especially when most of his materials — as well as MOOCs taught by other philosophy professors — are free? As an incentive, he offers bonus content for those who pay at least \$5 per month, including access to a weekly podcast featuring extra material about the subject matter he's teaching. He devoted the first installment to telling the story of how he came to be an independent teacher, and notes that the experience has been liberating.

"I've been doing more reading and writing about philosophy now than I was as an academic working on my own narrow research program," he said in the podcast, "because I can indulge my interests and study and teach what I want, without worrying about whether I can get publishable journal articles out of it."

One of his backers is Miriam F. Ascarelli, a lecturer in the humanities department at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. She has never met Mr. deLaplante, but she stumbled across his Critical Thinker Academy a couple of years ago and signed up for a free sample of his video lectures. She found two of them particularly useful: one on how to write an argumentative essay, the other on how to cite sources and avoid plagiarism. "I've been pointing my students to those and using those two videos in class for at least two years," she says.

So when she got an email message from Mr. deLaplante a few weeks ago asking to back his new entrepreneurial effort, she pledged \$5 a month.

"I'm a journalist in a former life, and I advise the student newspaper, and I know how hard it is for hyperlocal sites to get traction," she says. "And I want to continue to use his materials and feel good about it. I don't want to just mooch."

he biggest challenge for those who want to follow in Mr.

TdeLaplante's footsteps, says a seasoned observer, comes down to one word: marketing. "You don't have to market if you are an adjunct or tenured professor," says Howard Rheingold, who has written several popular books about the social impact of technology and has tried out his own online institution, [Rheingold U](#). "You have a stream of students and an income."

The biggest hit in the education section of Patreon is [Crash Course](#), a slick collection of videos on history, economics, and other subjects by two fast-talking brothers with an animation team. They have attracted more than 6,000 patrons, who collectively give \$32,000 per month. The creators of Crash Course, John and Hank Green, had also started their own crowdfunding site, Subbable, which merged with Patreon this year. (John Green is the author of *The Fault in Our Stars*, among other popular young-adult novels.) And before they tried the patronage model, the Greens' effort had received plenty of mainstream exposure, including a partnership with PBS Digital Studios, making it easy for them to get the word out to potential supporters.

A look at the education section of Patreon's site reveals providers with a common theme — people with a passion for education who have a knack for creating videos that attract viewers online. The creators speak the language of viral videos in a way that most traditional professors don't.

More and more professors these days are looking for videos to use in their courses, especially if they experiment with flipped classrooms, in which they assign video lectures as homework and devote class time to discussion and interactive activities. Whether through Patreon or other models, more educators may find a way to make a living as freelance teachers online.

Jeffrey R. Young writes about technology in education and leads a team exploring new story formats. Follow him on Twitter [@jryoung](#); check out his home page, [jeffyoung.net](#); or try him by email at jeff.young@chronicle.com.

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