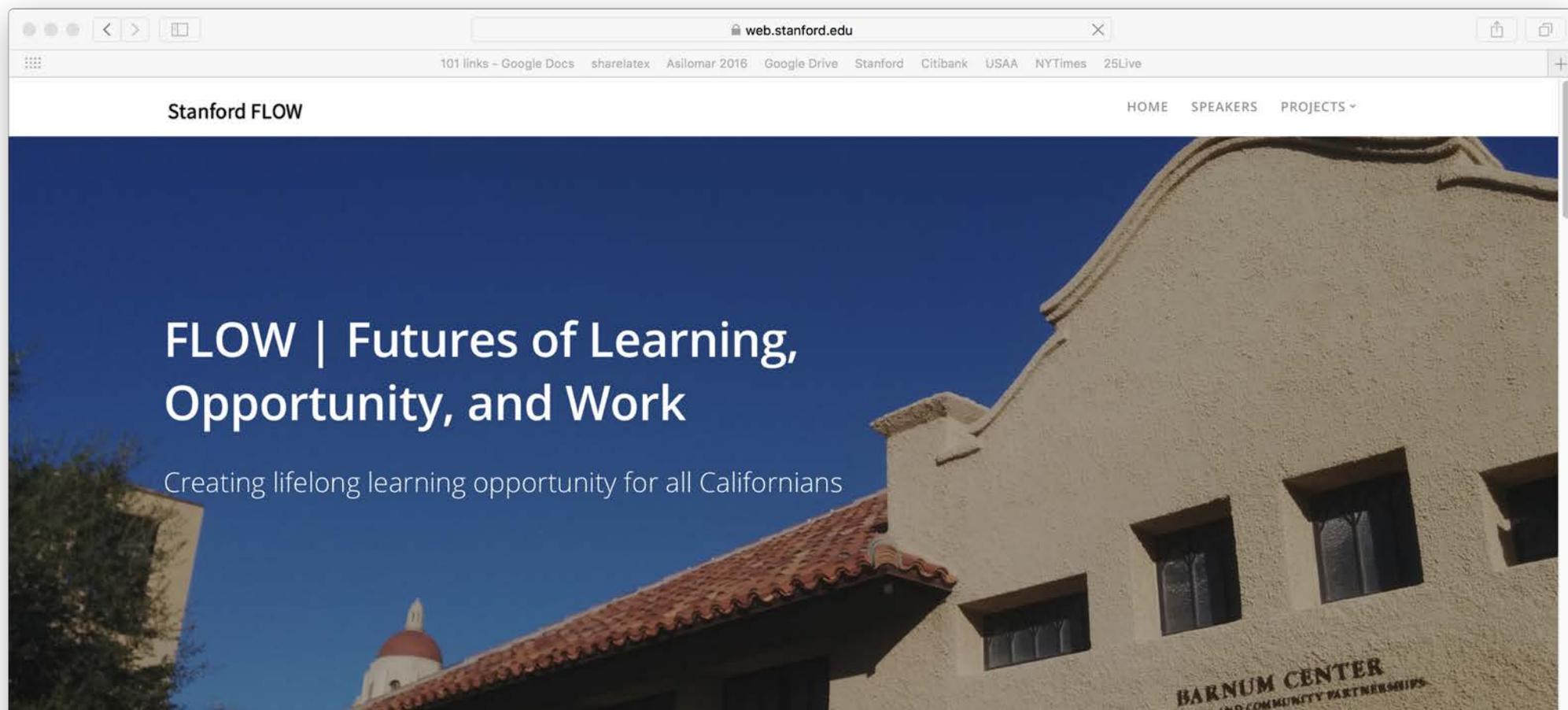


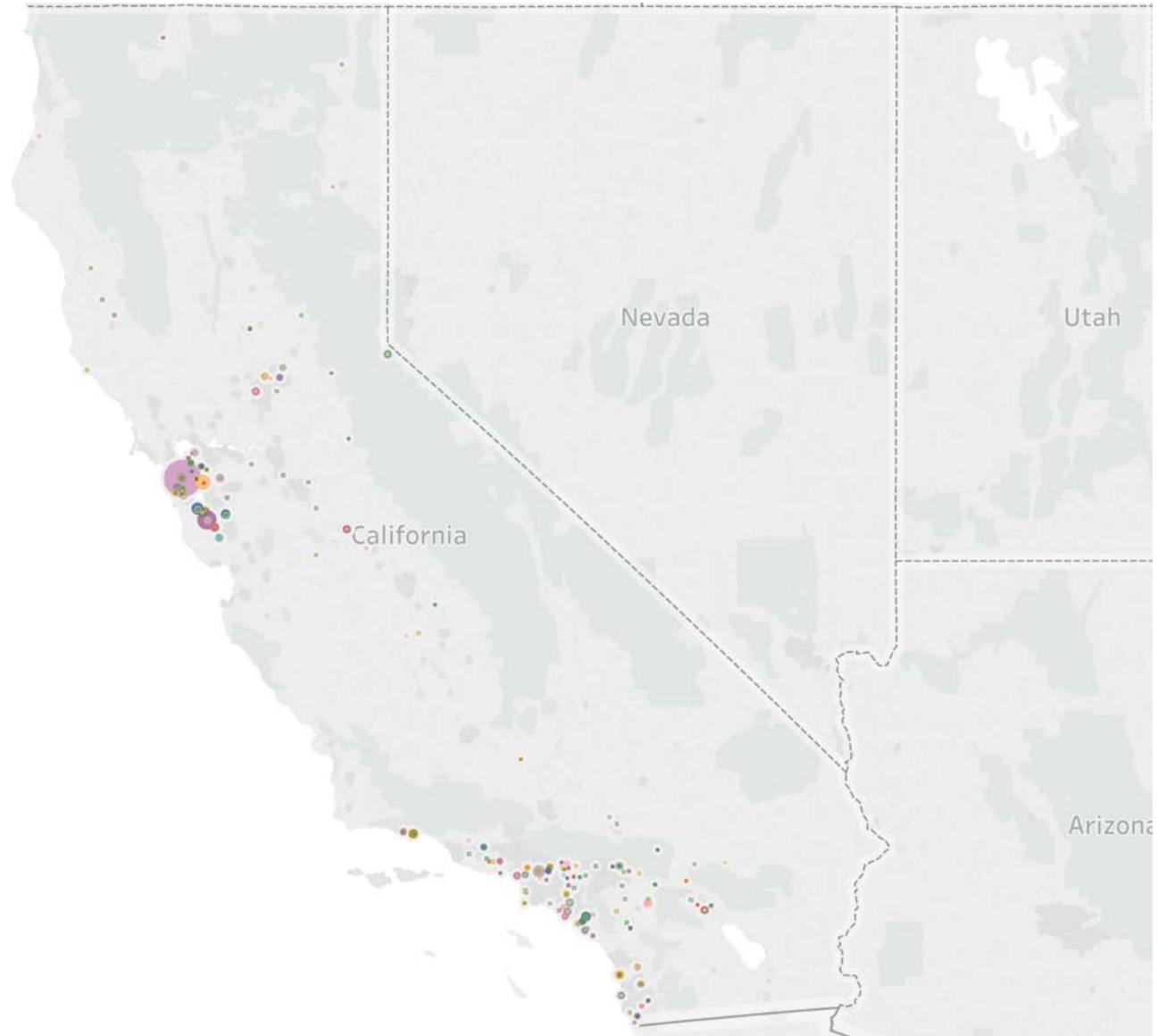
# Doing Things with MOOCs: Utilization Strategies of Stanford's California MOOC Learners

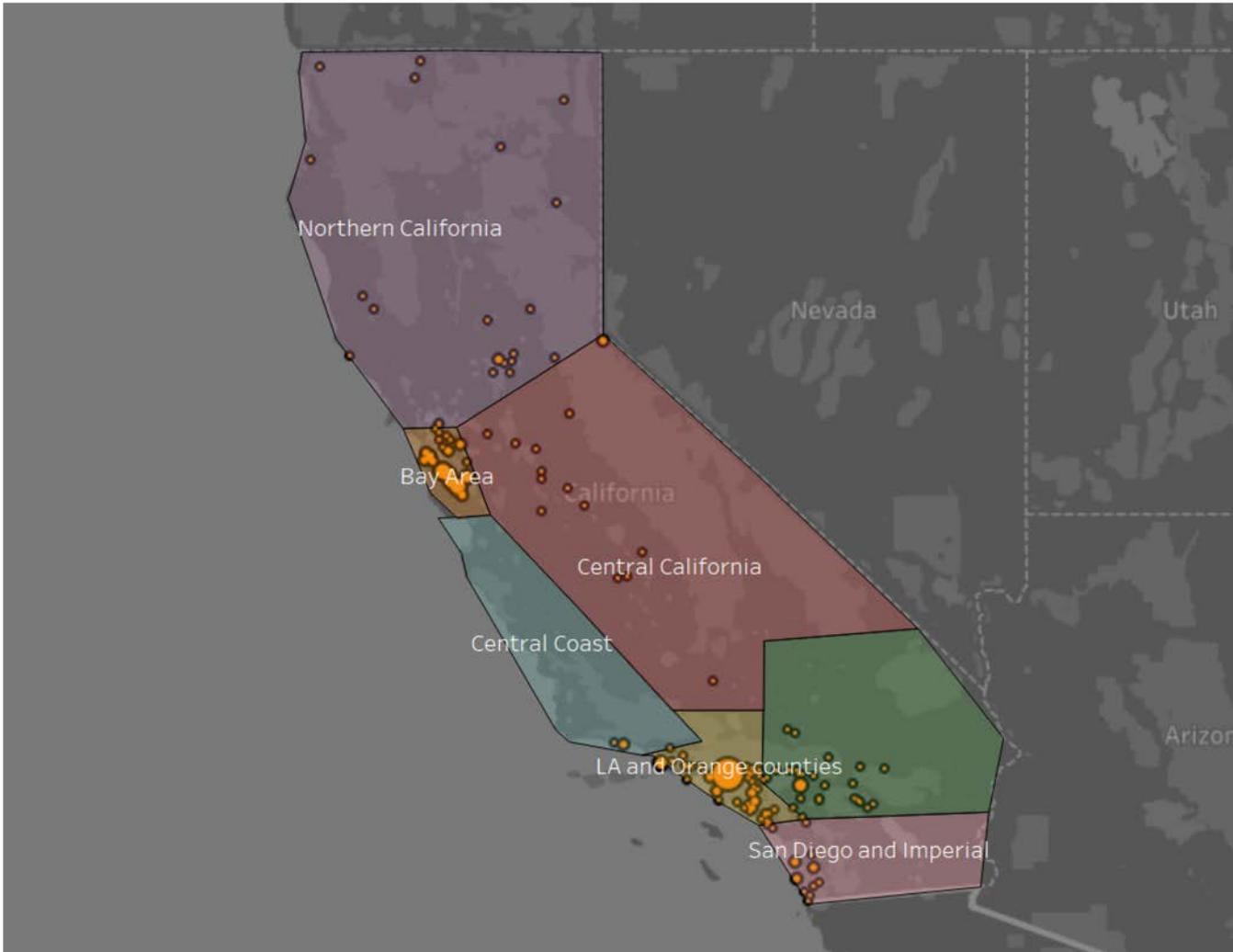
a work-in-progress by Stanford's FLOW & CAROL teams  
Zach Lam, Kathy Mirzaei, Andreas Paepcke, Krystal Smith,  
& Mitchell Stevens

lab session w/ MIT Colleagues 26 October 2018

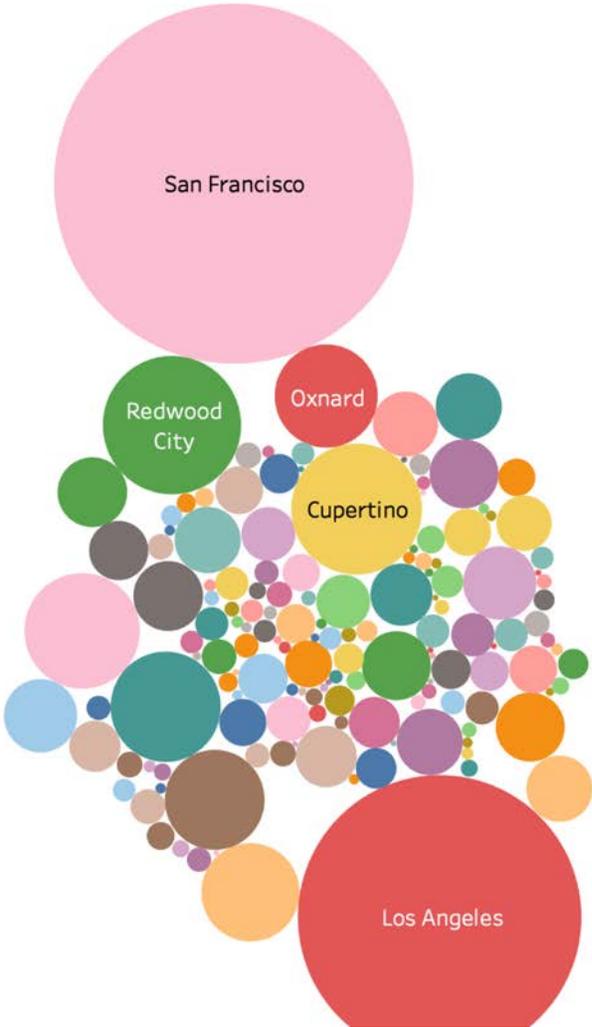
# Motivation (I): Stanford in service to California







# California Learners by City



## Motivation (II): What's a MOOC?

- Many argue that MOOCs are poor substitutes for “real” college courses
- But “college course” is only one way of conceptualizing MOOCs, which, in their 2012-forward incarnations, were something new under the sun:
  - offered by the world’s most elite universities and top specialists
  - free
  - ubiquitously available
- Not even their providers knew how to think about them, e.g.:
  - are MOOC takers students? Alumni?
  - what organizational unit should they go in?
  - does FERPA apply?
  - what constitutes success and failure?

# Question: What do people do with MOOCs?

- Non-trivial numbers of often well-educated people are investing substantial amounts of time in MOOCs. Why?
- A UX approach: people co-create and evolve the value of cultural products through use, e.g.
  - Romance novels
  - Time at college
- Researchers should be agnostic about what constitutes proper or ideal use

# The interview sample

N = 60

All were or are California residents who consumed at least 25% of the videos of one Stanford MOOC

## **Gender:**

Female = 23

Male = 37

## **Educational attainment:**

< BA = 2

BA = 23

MA = 24

PhD = 5

# Preliminary findings

- Respondents use MOOCs for
  - acquiring / enhancing skills
  - self-care/ self-improvement
  - Informing / enabling life transitions
- The value of MOOCs *as credentials* is ambiguous

## Acquiring / enhancing skills (I)

English is not my first language. And so this, I took [course in science writing] in 2013, right after I moved to the U.S., and at the time, I felt like half of the time I don't even understand clearly what people are saying in the way just like, British English, and American English. Of course they're English but they also different. I remember that this course really helped me start changing the way I wrote and also gave me some ideas of where I look for more information. -- *Bella, 39, PhD student, Roseville CA*

## Acquiring / enhancing skills (II)

I legitimately think anybody who works in business or consulting and uses Excel, you should know SQL, right?... like in this day and age where we deal with the mountains of data that we do. I think they really needed to make this more foundational in terms of teaching this in college. – *managing director at consulting firm, 38, Los Angeles*

## Acquiring / enhancing skills (III)

[The course] brought me up to speed on advances in the database management system world. You know? Now I know that “no SQL” doesn't mean there is no SQL, it means “not only SQL.” And I understand a new way of getting mass quantities of data into binary trees. I never used that term, but I understand it. So I learned a whole bunch of what exactly what I wanted to learn. It did exactly for me what I was hoping: it brought me up to speed. – *Beatrice, 61, elementary school tech manager, Menlo Park*

## Self-care

I was working a lot of hours at that time, at a pretty high stress, high pressure job. And I was very explicitly trying to do things for myself, to keep myself sane. And so one of the things I did was to take this course on a topic that I cared about. And so I was probably working I don't know, 60 to 80 hours around that time. And then that's why some weeks I didn't have time to come home and do the course after work, I would do it on the weekend. But I made it a point that even if I was getting home later, like, you know, I'd be home at 8pm, I would turn on the course lecture, and I would eat my dinner and listen to it and it was a way for me to just almost like de-stress from my normal day while also learning something useful. – *Denise, 35, consultant, San Mateo*

## Life transition (I)

I work full time and I have children. So if I was going to be doing any sort of masters coursework, it would be online. So being able to have that sort of, like, practice experience of doing this type of education online. Like, if I can be successful at it here, it's highly likely that I will be successful at it in a degree program. -- *Erin, 35, mother and non-profit administrator, San Luis Obispo*

## Life transition (II)

*Sherwin (73, retired, San Francisco) took a course in palliative care to help him care for his wife, and told us:*

The information I learned in it is going to be with me for the rest of my life. And I may be in that situation where somebody else may be giving me care. And I may need to think about how to frame my mind on how to get through the difficult situations in my life.

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## Ambiguous credential value (I)

I wasn't a good student in college. And I was so proud taking a course from Stanford. And until the last moment, I was hoping I'm going to pass it, you know, and I'm going to make a good grade, that kind of thing. And when I passed it, and I got the certificate, I still have the certificate, you know, I'm proud of it, you know, it was mainly because it was a Stanford course that I really enjoyed it. -- *Syman, 62, "working from home," San Francisco*

## Ambiguous credential value (II)

I have the paper to back it up, you know what I mean, I have a little certificate thing, it's in black and white, it doesn't matter. I think that's also important to mention that if someone gets something they can print at the end of it to show that they actually took it and didn't just say they took it. We know that fraud exists. People pretend they have degrees, and they get away with it until they don't, you know what I mean? So being able to prove that and that's why I didn't put the medical education [course] on there, because I didn't pass...I didn't really complete it.

– Elizabeth, “over 45,” healthcare systems trainer, Los Angeles

## Ambiguous credential value (III)

It doesn't matter if a person completes it, right? If I'm a professional, why would I care about a certificate or a degree? It doesn't give me anything. I'm doing it purely for learning purposes.

*-- Denise, 35, consultant, San Mateo*

## Ambiguous credential value (IV)

This doesn't really appeal to me too much, but I know this will help others. Friends [are enrolled in] a few courses like this having some sort of, like, certification. I know, it sounds kind of cheesy, because I don't really need a certification to tell me that I've taken or completed a course. But it does help others. So they can put something on their resume or have some sort of, like, hard, you know, proof that they've taken the class. For me, I could care less, All I have [is] an email confirmation telling me that my class starts tomorrow or whatever, it's fine. -- Kyle, 29, product manager, financial technology, San Francisco

# Takeaways

1. Calling MOOCs suboptimal college college courses misses the point, which is:
2. The meanings and utilities of MOOCs are varied and evolving
3. Users are cannier in their utilization of MOOCs than MOOC providers are in representing them
4. The value of MOOCs as credentials is ambiguous: this has both opportunities and risks for their providers