

The Future of Higher Education Looks Nothing Like the Present

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Updated: July 10, 2013 | 12:35 p.m.

July 10, 2013 | 12:00 p.m.



Robert Shireman, executive director of California Competes and former deputy undersecretary in the U.S. Department of Education, discusses the future of higher education at a policy summit Wednesday. (Kristoffer Tripplaar)

More and more students are attending two-year colleges instead of four-year schools. Within five years, [minorities will make up](#) more than half of the country's under-18 population. And, by 2020, two thirds of all jobs [will require education](#) beyond high school—up from roughly a quarter 40 years ago. There are major changes in store for the nation's higher-education system, and it needs to adjust accordingly.

Who students are, where they learn, and what they're taught are all on pace for—or in need of—major changes over the next decade, a panel of experts [said Wednesday at the *National Journal* New Knowledge Economy policy summit.](#)



Atlantic Media Editorial Director Ronald Brownstein (left) moderates a discussion on the future of higher education in the U.S. with guest speaker Robert Shireman. (Kristoffer Tripplaar)

The shift toward measuring achievement and competency rather than what's being taught will enable institutions to more flexibly teach students with different needs and backgrounds, Robert Shireman, executive director at the higher-education think tank California Competes, and other experts said.

The first two years of a four-year college experience could be very different than they are now. During those early years, students might rely more heavily on online instruction outside of class, while doing more work on teams in class. Faculty could serve as educational coaches rather than instructors, and classwork could be more heavily combined with internships or service-learning experiences.

"What we can do is try to do a much better job of using these new technological tools that we have ... to have a combination of human touch and a technological learning environment that is again much better than what people are getting," said Kevin Carey, director of the Education Policy Program at the New America Foundation.

There's a misconception, Carey said, that campus instruction is personal and individualized, while online instruction is not.

"Often it's the opposite," he said. "Particularly in your first and second years, there's nothing interpersonal about sitting in a lecture hall twice a week watching someone talk ... whereas good online learning environments can be customized to you personally in a way that can actually rival or surpass what can happen in a traditional classroom."

Online, software can adapt to a student's learning patterns and habits and do so much more cheaply than an educator in a classroom filled with dozens of students, Carey said.

Of course, thinking that simply posting videos of lectures online will somehow change education "is rather ludicrous," Shireman said. But that doesn't mean there is no role for technology.

"I cannot assure you that the kind of learning that we need is happening in our traditional colleges and universities," he said. "You can go into a gym and you can tell whether people are actually exercising. A lot of colleges you go in and you can't tell" whether students are learning, he said.

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