

Researcher looks at the future of higher education

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Most forecasts about the future of higher education have focused on how the institutions themselves will be affected – including the possibility of less demand for classes on campus and fewer tenured faculty members as people take courses online. Some changes already have begun.

When researchers at the University of Houston tackled the issue, they focused instead on what [students](#) will need in the future, including improved mentoring, personalized learning and feedback in real time.

The UH researchers identified three key themes:

- A shift in the balance of power away from institutions, toward students.
- A "blurring" between all aspects of student life – living, learning, working, playing, connecting and participating – making it difficult to address any particular aspect in isolation.
- Information and communication technologies, such as artificial intelligence and big data, as both part of the problem and the solution, creating new possibilities along with new challenges in terms of student needs.

Andy Hines, coordinator of the Graduate Program in Foresight at the UH College of Technology, led the project for the Lumina Foundation, which has set Goal 2025 as one of its major projects. Goal 2025 calls for increasing the proportion of Americans with degrees, high-quality certificates and other credentials to 60 percent by the year 2025. It's now

38.7 percent.

Hines, who serves on Lumina's innovation advisory council, said most research into the future of [higher education](#) has assumed either that it will continue much as it has, with minor changes, or that there will be "massive disruption," with [free online courses](#), open-source textbooks and new models of teaching and learning.

But relatively little research has concerned how to better serve students, he said. He and other faculty, alumni and students from the foresight program began their assessment earlier this year with a grant from the Lumina Foundation.

Hines and his team didn't recommend how colleges and universities should change, although some changes already are underway. Colleges and universities are increasingly working to improve mentoring programs, for example, and offering more online courses as well shorter intensive semester options.

These are a good start, but they won't be enough, Hines said.

The UH researchers identified emerging needs that aren't being met, many of them driven by changing demographics, as fewer students fit the traditional picture of an 18-to-22 year old entering college immediately after high school. Hines said that accounts for just 28 percent of college students.

"That's a sizeable number, but it's a minority," he said. "The rest, if the traditional institutions don't serve them, somebody else will."

For-profit institutions, free online classes and other innovations aimed at older students have already stepped into the void. In the future, Hines said, there will be additional options, allowing nontraditional students to

leave institutions that don't respond to their needs in search of a better fit.

The UH report identified eight major needs for the future: mentoring; credentialing, or issuing academic credit for life experiences; personalized learning, and the need for continuously upgrading skills.

Also, the very notion of classroom is shifting – classes might meet in person, or virtually, or a mix, creating a need for spaces, templates and tools for students to create their own learning opportunities; providing continuous, real-time feedback for students, and developing frameworks for dealing with new uncertainties, whether that's related to technology or drugs that can improve academic performance.

The final issue identified deals with students' desires for a wide range of experiences, as traditional students may want something very different from older students.

Even nontraditional students won't be a monolithic block, Hines said. While first-generation students need help navigating the system, many older students need more pragmatic assistance, including childcare.

In the meantime, the Lumina Foundation's deadline of 2025 is looming.

"The clock is ticking," Hines said.

More information: A copy of the report is available at:
[www.houstonforesight.org/wp-co ... 025-final-report.pdf](http://www.houstonforesight.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/025-final-report.pdf)

Provided by University of Houston

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