

Learning to Earning | Higher Education and the Changing Job Market Session Summary

**Civic Ballroom
Sheraton Centre Toronto
123 Queen Street West, Toronto, M5H 2M9**

Thanks to Ian Hartlen and Adrian Philp, recent graduates from the Master of Public Policy Program at the University of Toronto, for their work in summarizing the conference.

Day One | Thursday, November 1, 2012

Lunch Keynote

Mark D. Milliron, Western Governors University

Upward mobility is “under siege.” Intergenerational transmission of poverty is higher than ever. Education is a powerful way to stop this. For many, especially lower income people, education is a game changer in the quest to “reclaim the American dream.”

Milliron wants to put learning in the centre of the dialogue. The deep structural changes required of education mean that the dynamic between novelty and entrenched interests must involve catalytic conversation that centres on learning. The core question should be “are people learning?” When the focus is on learning, it is possible to get better results in less time. Different groups have different needs. For example, some groups might benefit more from learning online, or in person, or a blend of both.

Milliron addressed frustration and scepticism surrounding online learning, asserting that online learning is a basic skill. In his view the most challenging part is finding the best way to test if students have mastered specific competencies. Online learning makes it easier to work with two important assumptions that traditional educational institutions do not emphasize: students come to institutions knowing different things and they learn at different rates.

The dominant policy conversation around education is “hijacked” by the traditional student model of a young person advancing straight from high school to an on-campus environment. However, this model is now a minority in the student population.

Milliron advises that we stop pushing for “one best way” and embrace the fact that there is no one best way. He spoke positively about the “E-Harmony effect”- the right student, at the right school, on the right pathway.

The most common reason non-traditional students drop out is “life happens.” The complex lives most learners have means that the flexibility and freedom of online learning serves them better than a more rigid, four year, residential model.

Despite the positive appraisal of online learning, Milliron recommends that we get over the question of whether online or in-class learning is better. Blended models work. The focus should be on how to use all the tools available to focus on learning.

The key is to get good data to the right people in real time. This allows for informed and timely decisions. When people are informed they can rise to the challenge. Innovation is useless if the students themselves don't show up with a sense of tenacity and engagement. Assume that students are willing to do the work. The result will be deeper learning.