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March 9th, 2011

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## Does online education put traditional universities at a 'grave risk'?

An expert on 'disruptive innovation' says ed tech could change the way powerhouse universities operate



By **Dennis Carter**, Assistant Editor  
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Sixty-six percent of

respondents to a recent survey said online college classes were "the same or superior" to face-to-face classes.

A university's stockpile of faculty members with Ph.D.s soon could be irrelevant if online learning continues its rapid growth and provides flexibility for students of every age, said Clayton Christensen, an authority on how innovative technologies affect businesses and economies.

[Christensen](#), a Harvard Business School professor and author of *The Innovator's Dilemma* and *The Innovator's Prescription*, delivered the keynote address to an audience of higher-education officials March 7 at the [American Council on Education's Annual Meeting](#) in Washington, D.C.

Christensen outlined the ways upstart, innovative businesses have toppled the giants of industry—such as Toyota's rise coinciding with American automakers' downfall—and how that model might translate to colleges and universities.

While online college classes have grown more available and affordable over the past decade, Christensen said a major shift had not yet occurred in higher education. Not until online learning grew in popularity was higher education even "amenable" to a major "disruption," he said.

"When technology gets good enough, it sucks customers out of the old into the new," he said, referring to institutions that have specialized in online learning, rather than traditional schools that have slowly adopted online college classes. "It doesn't work the other way around."

That move away from traditional powerhouses of education, he said, likely would happen in the next 20 years, and elite schools should be prepared.

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