Foresight in Higher Education: The US Perspective

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Abstract

The state of foresight in higher education in the US remains precarious. Only a few programs have been able to maintain a long-term presence in academia. The landscape is littered with programs that have been started and unable to survive very long. Indeed, a new graduate program is launching in the Fall. There are single courses scattered across the country, but overall the climate for small niche programs has been historically and currently very challenging in US higher education. A mini-case study of the University of Houston program is offered, as it is the longest-running and currently only dedicated graduate program in the US. Its ups-and-downs may be instructive for others considering the establishment of a foresight graduate program.

Keywords: foresight, futures studies, higher education, University of Houston

INTRODUCTION

The state of foresight in higher education in the US, despite is central role in kicking off foresight in higher education globally, is a mixed picture. It is characterized by slow, uneven development. It is fair to say that its development has lagged both the corporate and public sectors.

On the one hand, previous work found that the formal study of the future got its start in the US in 1945 (Hines, 2019a). Since then, however, it has made uneven progress in the academic corporate, and the public sectors. It took nearly thirty to establish the first dedicated graduate program in foresight at the University of Houston-Clear Lake in 1974. While the program is doing well today, it was nearly discontinued in the 2000s, and remains the only master's program in the US. In the public sector, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was the Congressional Clearinghouse of the Future, and the Congressional Research Service, and the Office of Technology Assessment. These promising agencies helping the US government make sense of the future were each eventually eliminated. But today we find a Federal Foresight Community of Interest (FFCOI) that has a small but thriving network of foresight practice scattered throughout government agencies (Scoblic, 2021). Foresight in the corporate sector thrived to a degree on the basis of Shell's early success but suffered greatly in the downsizing and re-engineering movements of the 1980s and 1990s. But it has been picking back up again since the 2000s (Schlehuber, 2020).

In short, foresight overall has had a difficult time getting established in the US, and it has arguably had the most difficult time getting established in higher education. Given this context of uneven development, the focus is more sharply turned to state of higher education.

HISTORY

First, a note on terminology. In the early days, the field was referred to primarily as future studies. Over the last few decades, foresight has emerged as a preferred term for many futurists and organizations. There is not a clear "winner" and the two terms are still in fairly widespread use. The Association of Professional Futurists, for example, refers to the professional practice as foresight and academic study as futures studies (Hines et al., 2017). The University of Houston program renamed itself from Futures Studies to Foresight in 2012 (Hines & Gold, 2013).

This brief survey is not intended to cover every course that has been offered, but is rather intended to provide a representative sample. It is designed to give the reader a big picture view of how foresight education has evolved in the US.

The first course in foresight was developed and taught by Dator in 1967 at Virginia Tech (Dator, 1971). He later took that learning to the University of Hawaii, where he established the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies for research work in 1972. From there, he developed the concentration in futures studies within the political science Master's degree in 1977 (Dator, 2002).

The University of Houston – Clear Lake was the first to set up a full-blown graduate degree entirely focused on futures studies in 1974. In the US at that time, many experimental degree programs were being tried, with futures studies being one of many. The program's proximity to NASA (literally right across the street) helped it to gain traction as NASA sponsored research on the long-term future of space with the program.

Houston and Hawaii have been the two consistent programs in the US. Several others have come and gone. There have also been many universities offering single courses on the future. The author's introduction to the future came from an undergraduate course at Salem State University on "History of the Future," which was taught in the history program. The typical pattern is that an academic interested in the future would find a way to weave a course or two into their academic programs, but historically they were unable or uninterested in establishing full degree-granting programs. Some examples include Bell in sociology at Yale, Riner in anthropology at Northern Arizona University, Wagar in history at State University of New York (SUNY), Binghamton, McHale and Cole in urban and regional planning at SUNY Buffalo, Shostak in sociology at Drexel, and Halal in management at George Washington University (Dator, 2002). An interesting development that lasted for several was the established of futures courses and an Institute for the Future at a two-year community college, Ann Arundel Community College (2009). It lasted for several years until its leader, Steele, retired.

An approach in between a single course and a full graduate program is the establishment of a center or institute. In 1971, the Center for Futures Research was established at the University of Southern California with a focus on studying social change, policy, and strategies. It carried out client projects and produced research publications (Wilson, 1975). It lasted until 1987. A few years later in 1978, the Institute for Futures Studies and Research at the University of Akron was established by Gappert, which mostly focused on publications relating to the future in general

using, environmental scanning, trend analysis and strategic planning (Gappert, 1988; Gaylord et al., 2002).

In the early 2000s, the Mendoza College of Business at the University of Notre Dame started requiring all undergraduate students to take a course titled "Foresight in Business and Society." The leaders of the course called for all business schools to follow suit, but it appears that none have taken up the call. (Miller et al., 2012)

In 2006, the Christian faith-based Regent University launched a Masters in Strategic Foresight and added a foresight major to its Doctor of Strategic Leadership a year later. The Master's folded about a decade later, but the doctoral program has continued on. This follows a global pattern in which the faculty teaching in a discontinued Master's program can sometimes offer PhDs in Foresight. Indeed, the author received his PhD from Leeds Metropolitan University in the UK from a faculty from a discontinued Master's in Foresight (Gary, 2010; Hines, 2016).

The California College of the Arts in San Francisco launched an innovative MBA in Strategic Foresight in 2014 that integrated business, design, innovation, and foresight, but it folded a few years later. Some of the courses continue to be offered by the degree is no longer offered (Business Wire, October 14, 2013).

The latest entry is a new program in Futures and Design from Arizona State University is set to launch in the Fall of 2023 ("Arizona State University," n.d.). They have been offering foresight courses for the last several years and are making the jump to a full-blown degree program.

Again, this brief survey is not capturing every course or program, but it is indicative of a basic pattern of small number of single courses scattered in universities that typically only last as long as the faculty that introduces them. Graduate courses are sporadically launched but have a difficult time establishing a secure foothold.

CASE EXAMPLE: UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON FORESIGHT PROGRAM

Since the University of Houston Foresight program has been around as the longest dedicated foresight program in the US and the world, its journey is offered a useful case study. The major developments and shifts from its inception in 1974 to today are briefly highlighted.

FOUNDING

The Foresight program was originally called Studies of the Future when it was established in 1974 in the School of Human Sciences and Humanities. The University hired two faculty members to initially staff the program—Fowles and Dede as well as borrowed Bowman and Kierstead from the Education program, and Coomer from the Public Administration program. These five were all tenured faculty – below, a shift away from the use of tenured faculty is described.

SHIFT IN FOCUS

The focus of the early years was on the big issues of the day. They were catalogued, studied, and debated. There was no particular emphasis on action, but rather it was helping students become more informed. It became obvious early on, however, that a purely academic program was not going to be sustainable as enrollments began to dip at the end of the decade. As a result, the faculty recruited Markley from the Stanford Research Institute where he had done a number of futures studies on education to explore a new strategic direction. By this time, Bishop joined the faculty with a background in research methods and statistics in Behavioral Sciences. Markley and Bishop shifted the program its early emphasis on the study of big issues to a focus on being a professional program that prepared students for careers as futurists.

INTALTNERATIVE APPROACHES & EXPERIMENTS

The program experiment with alternative approaches over the years. In 1995, it offered an Intensive Summer Program. Many prospective students from around the country and from around the world had expressed an interest in pursuing the degree, but they could not locate to Houston. This pilot program invited students to Houston for six weeks in the summer of intensive class work, with assignments to be completely remotely over the following year. Those who participated found it a rich learning environment although completing the assignments during the rest of the year was definitely a challenge. Eventually it was discontinued – many students noted the irony of hosting an in-person even in Houston in the summer, as the heat and humidity is challenging. After a few years, the experiment was ended, and the decision was made to an online option.

The strategy for the shift to online courses was to introduce it gradually over time. In 2002, Bishop started converting one class a year to an online hybrid format, in which classes were still held physically, but students could also join remotely. The conversion to hybrid was complete by 2007, when another major shift took place – the move from the Clear Lake campus to the main campus in downtown Houston.

A very fruitful innovation from Bishop was the development of a week-long boot camp to teach the basics of foresight to a general audience. About 20-30 students typically attend in what was initially a twice-annual offering. It has since expanded to a quarterly offering that includes a virtual version. This has greatly expanded the reach of the program, helping to recruit students but also helped with the development of a research program.

An important contribution to the field that emerged from the program's alumni retreat in May 2001. The purpose was to celebrate the program's 25th anniversary and to involve alumni preparing the program for the next 25 years. During the two-day event, a key conversation involved whether to put time into developing an alumni association or to support the development of a professional association. The choice was to champion the development of a professional association for practicing futurists. Several members from the group later convened a larger group of futurists the following year at the "Seattle Summit," and a year later the Association of Professional Futurists (APF) was founded (Hines, 2004).

A NEW HOME AND A NEW MODEL

The economic situation in the state of Texas in the 2000 led to a drop-in support for the program, resulting in only one tenured faculty, Bishop, remaining. The Clear Lake program indicated a preference to eliminate small programs. Fortunately, the College of Technology at the main campus, led by Ezell from the Department of Human Development and Consumer Science, invited the program to come aboard in 2007. The program adapted to a model that relied heavily on adjunct professors, which remains the approach to this day. Hines, a tenured professor, operates the program through a network of adjunct faculty. In 2012, the program changed its name from Futures Studies to Foresight to reflect the growing use of that term in professional practice.

Another significant shift in the operation model, made when the author took over for Bishop upon his retirement in 2014, was the establishment of a robust research program. There had been an Institute of Futures Research established a few decades previous that did a few projects but it was unable to gain long-term traction. Hines brough a rich background in project work and was able to gradually establish a robust pipeline of sponsored research projects of roughly 1-2 projects per semester. This not only brough in money to the university, which makes them happy, but students are employed on the projects and gain real-life experience.

THE PANDEMIC "BOOM"

The most recently development of interest was a big surge in enrollment in response to the Covid pandemic. Incoming students questioned how the world could have been so unprepared and wanted to learn how to do better. The enrollment more than doubled almost instantly. As the pandemic has lessened, the enrollments have gone down some, but seem to have stabilized at a much higher level.

IN SUM

The Master's program has graduates more than 400 students, with perhaps ten times that number taking some classes in the program but not graduating. More than 1,000 students have gone through the week-long boot camp. The influence of this program is clear whenever futurists gather together. It has not been an easy journey and program leaders would admit that there were many times they were concerned about whether it would join the several other programs that were discontinued. Currently, the program is doing a strategic plan to consider its next wave of evolution.

DISCUSSION

ACCREDITAITON COUNCIL

A very positive global development for foresight education is the introduction of the World Futures Studies Federation Accreditation Council in 2021 and launch a year later (Van der Laan, 2021). Prior to that, there was no mechanism for a Foresight program to receive program-level accreditation. Hines, a member of the Accreditation Council, participated in the research to identify potential graduate programs for accreditation. Eleven were identified. This was based

primarily on web research, it is possible the list is either shorter or longer, but it close to this number. Compared to the number of graduate programs in any discipline worldwide, this is obviously a tiny number. It suggests that the small number of programs in the US is on par with the global situation, although one might expect greater numbers from the US given its position as a founding country for the field.

STATE OF US HIGHER EDUCAITON IN GENERAL

The University of Houston Foresight program has conducted two studies on the future of higher education in general, that is not specific to foresight, that provide some insight into the current and emerging context or playing field for higher education (Hines, 2019b; Hines, 2017). In short, it is challenging. There is little appetite for new programs, especially for small niche programs such as foresight. The emphasis is on large programs that can bring in student numbers and research dollars. Smaller programs are being consolidated or eliminated (Christensen, 2016). Beyond this, another significant threat to programs in higher education is the growth of private alternatives badges, boot camps, micro-courses, online short courses, certificates, certification, (Massively online open courses (MOOCs)/open courseware, apprenticeships, consortium of shared courses, online course, vocational programs, cooperative education, and lifelong learning. Granted, many of these are options that universities could, and perhaps should, choose to pursue. In the Foresight space, an entire "university," Singularity University has emerged as a competitor – it is not a university per se, but it's focus on the technological future has proven to be quite popular (Romeo, 2017). Several foresight consultancies are offering regular certificate training programs, including the Institute for the Future, The Futures School, and the Future Today Institute.

IN CONCLUSION

Why has it been so difficult? Might it change? Three factors seem to make it particularly challenging for foresight to establish a strong presence in academia in the US. As noted above, the climate for small niche programs is not and has not been favorable for decades and is particularly hostile at present.

Another factor is foresight is inherently trans-disciplinary – it fits both everywhere and nowhere. It does not fit neatly into the schools that are typical of US universities. Should it be in humanities, business, technology? Yes and no.

A third factor is that the programs started out and have continued as graduate programs. There has not been an undergraduate major successfully developed in the US. An undergraduate program not only feeds a graduate program with potential students, it also provides a larger number of overall students than a graduate-only program can.

While today's context is challenging, it is not inconceivable that the pendulum might swing back to experimental innovative programs again. The founding of the Houston program in 1974 was part of a wave of innovative new program. One could imagine a movement back toward innovation when the current consolidation wave has run its course.

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