Today is a New Day

Futurist thinking in institutions of higher education

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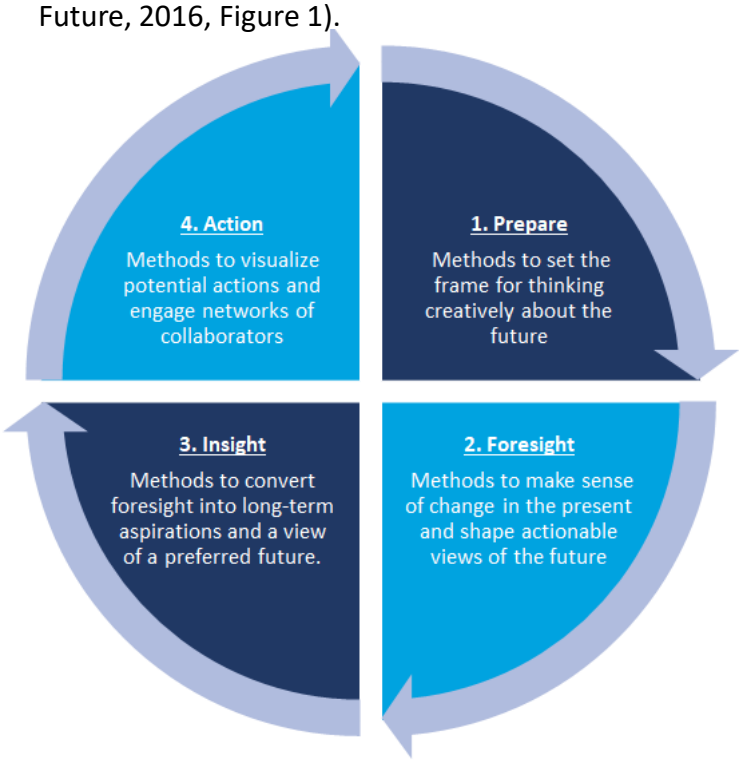
Like no other time in the history of higher education, what the future holds seems like an increasingly complex and abstract question. This is particularly true when leaders are focused on responding to a crisis the scale of the coronavirus global pandemic.

Despite the need to manage the current circumstances, there is also a critical need to help institutions navigate an uncertain future. This requires strategies to defuse the noise of daily crisis response and turn an eye towards the future. Futures study offers a framework for doing this important work.

The purpose of futures study (also known as futures thinking) is not to predict the future. That is an impossibility. Rather, one of its cardinal features is knowledge generation that helps address future challenges and crises. Conceptually, it looks to understand the future from at least four frames: futures that are "possible (might happen), plausible (could happen), probable (likely to happen), and preferable (wanting to happen)" (Liedtka, 2018, p. 137).

The study of the future is highly interdisciplinary with a rich array of methods, techniques, and tools.

A helpful organizing frame in thinking about these diverse methods is displayed in Figure 1 and shows an iterative cycle of methods to prepare and engage in foresight, insight, and action (Institute for the Future, 2016, Figure 1).



When futures study techniques are used for organizational planning, they are often referred to as *strategic foresight*. Strategic foresight can be used as a mechanism to inform long-term planning and as a cultural practice within an organization.

This latter deployment of strategic foresight is meant to develop ongoing ways of thinking about the future inside an organization. In this way, foresight serves as "micro-interactions" among members of the organization for thinking about the future and developing organizationally useful ways of planning for the future (Paliokaite, Pacesa & Sarpong 2014, p. 163).

There are no facts about the future and as such there are no experts. Everyone's voice and experiences are valuable in thinking about the future. As such, an additional and growing element of foresight is the value placed on perspectives and participation from individuals with diverse backgrounds.

This is often referred to as *participatory foresight*, designed to involve "experts, citizens, stakeholders or nongovernmental activists, in the process of anticipating and planning the future" *(*Nikolova, 2014, p. 3).

A diversity of perspectives can lead to a better understanding of change and how it might shape the future. Additionally, collective efforts in thinking about the future can strengthen participation in strategies to implement change for the future (Vuori, 2015).

While the use of foresight is increasingly evident in other sectors, both corporate and non-corporate, this is not yet the case for higher education, especially as a cultural and participatory practice.

The purpose of this article is to offer an introduction into three common foresight techniques and to suggest ways leaders in higher education might deploy them within their institutions.

SCANNING AND SIGNAL DETECTION

Writer William Gibson famously stated, "The future is already here – it's just not evenly distributed" (*The Economist*, December 4, 2003). Meaning, there are signs of the future perceivable in the present.

The work of foresight is to identify change happening now and reflect on how that change might impact the future. This work begins first with an understanding that there are driving forces that shape the future.

These are often described through the heuristic of STEEP, or social, technological, economic, environmental, and political drivers of change (Table 1). Changes occurring in each of these areas will shape the future. They will also interact with one another in unexpected ways.

Foresight involves analysis of trends and signals of change across the areas of STEEP. Trends are measurable and evident signs of change in the present.

These serve as a baseline for potential directions of change. For example, one trend impacting higher education in the United States within the social category of STEEP is the overall declining numbers of high school age students expected in the years to come.

Many trends reports have been written speculating about how this social trend will impact institutions of higher education. Many new trends across the categories of STEEP will also emerge in the years to come as a result of an event the scale of the coronavirus global pandemic.

Foresight methods seek to detect emerging phenomena that have the potential to grow in scale and distribution and form into future trends. Change starts somewhere.

These early 'signals' of change can suggest a potential new innovation or disruption, such as an event, local trend, or the development of a new product, practice, market strategy, policy, or technology.

We witnessed this during the coronavirus pandemic. There were early signals of change occurring as the disease began to emerge before it spread to a global scale.

Similarly, historically, there have been early signals of change in the development of technologies like personal computers, internet, and 3-D printing, that are now prevalent technological trends shaping the future. These examples of early signals of change that became trends are evident across the categories of STEEP.

The goal of foresight is to regularly look for these early signals of change. This is known as environmental scanning or signal detection. Formal categories of signal detection can be established, such as regularly scanning the media/literature or regularly interviewing external experts to seek information on the types of change they are detecting.

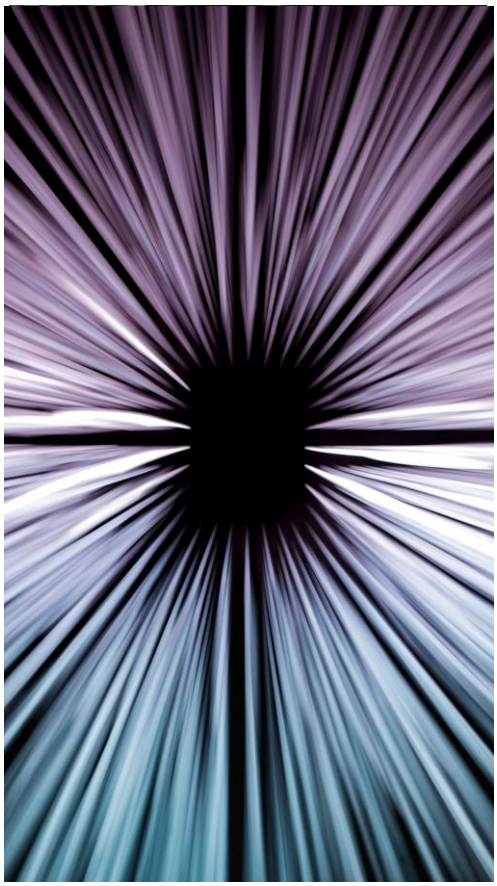
Cultural practices of foresight within an organization can also be used to engage the members of the organization in routinely scanning their environments and sharing signals of change they are detecting from their unique perspectives, experiences, and expertise. Database, clustering and summary tools are then used to speculate about what these signals might suggest, their growing prominence, and any possible trends that may be emerging.

This is a speculative and qualitative process, rather than a numerical or predictive process. A key principle of foresight is that, "the future is fuzzy" (Benston, 2018, p. 195). Meaning, even when actively seeking signs of change, our knowledge about their exact meaning is imperfect.

There are no future facts, but even partial or suggestive future directions of change can be helpful to organizations in stimulating creative thought and innovation for the future.

FUTURES SCENARIOS

The concept of scenarios should be familiar by now to most individuals in institutions of higher education. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, procedural and near-term scenarios have been used by health agencies and government entities to describe possible phases of the pandemic. They have also been used by institutions of higher education to consider near-term future possibilities like reopening campuses to in-person instruction.



Futures scenarios are an important part of foresight, but scenarios for the purpose of foresight vary in purpose, depth, and time arc from the types of scenarios that have become more common place in addressing the coronavirus pandemic.

Futures scenarios are not forecast and predications, but rather narrative stories and illustrations meant to spark imagination and to elicit creative thinking when considering the question, 'What would happen if….?' They are built to be rich in detail, typically illustrating many aspects of the STEEP framework.

Despite uncertainty about the future, futures scenarios are designed to have internal validity by grounding them in trends across the categories of STEEP and using the intuitive logic generated from signal detection and environmental scanning.

Although there is not a prescribed time arc for futures scenarios, mid-to-longer time horizons are typically pursued. Ten years into the future can be a common frame for thinking about the future. This is a time period that has enough uncertainty about the future to spark imagination and creative thought, but is a near enough future that individuals can still envision changes that might occur.

There are many different types of scenarios used in foresight to serve slightly different purposes.

Contextual scenarios describe possible futures *outside* an organization, while normative and goal-oriented scenarios are framed specific to the organization itself, such as describing a preferred or desired future state of the organization (normative) or scenarios that depict versions of the organization within different alternative futures (goal-oriented) (Van Duijne & Bishop, 2018).

There are an infinite number of possible futures scenarios that institutions of higher education might develop. Several examples include: futures scenarios around an entirely virtual campus; an institution within a future environment where natural resources are significantly limited; or scenarios in which the institution serves future students who are different from their current population.

One way to create a scenario is by considering a specific axis of uncertainty and its possible continuum of change (Future Today Institute, 2019). For example, an axis of uncertainty considered prior to the coronavirus pandemic was how education will be impacted by artificial intelligence (AI). This axis of uncertainty spans a continuum of fully human-facilitated learning to fully AI-facilitated learning. Another axis of uncertainty recently amplified by the coronavirus pandemic is that of physicality of learning and an axis of uncertainty from fully remote learning to fully in-person learning. To consider possible futures, scenarios can be built to describe possible change at the ends of one or more axis of uncertainty spectrums.

There is not one correct or perfect scenario as they are used to provoke thinking about possible futures, not to predict the future.

FUTURES PERSONAS

The basic premise behind personas is likely familiar to those in higher education as we often consider different profiles (or personas) of students when we make decisions. As an example, when campuses made decisions about implementing credit/no credit options as a result of the transition to remote instruction during the coronavirus pandemic, the differential impacts on certain groups of students was no doubt discussed.

The formal use of personas for decision-making and planning has a rich history in product and service development and in design thinking.

Futures personas are used to think creatively about how different individuals might experience the future.

In contrast to a single dimension, futures personas are rich in detail and reflective of a variety of identities and experiences. They can include personal factors like demographics, basic life facts, and assumptions about prevailing values and preferences (Fergnani, 2019).

Futures personas are used to enrich futures scenarios by showing how change may impact the daily lives and interactions of individuals in the future.

They can also be used to think creatively about the kinds of products, services, environments, and experiences that may be present in an alternative future.

In the case of higher education, these future personas might be built around different types of future students, but they might also be created specific to how future faculty and staff might experience an alternative future.

BUILDING FORESIGHT CAPACITY

Developing a culture of foresight within an institution of higher education is a multi-year effort. There are experts in the area of futures study and foresight that can be engaged for support and consultation, but a few initial steps might include:

1. DEVELOP FOUNDATIONAL KNOWLEDGE IN FUTURES THINKING

Institutions can offer campus community members a variety of in-person and virtual educational opportunities to learn about the concepts of futures study. Training can stress the importance of participatory foresight and the idea that everyone's voice is needed in understanding and shaping the future. Guest lectures, 'futures' forums, and other events focused on the future can also be used to share information about specific futures topics.

Institutions of higher education are fortunate to have intellectual expertise across a wide variety of topics.

In essence, we already have experts (faculty and staff) who have thoughts about the future and have been collecting signals of change in their respective areas, even if they have not been labeled as "futurist" practices. Enlist their help in starting conversations across campus about the future and in talking about the future in their respective areas.

2. ESTABLISH ROUTINES FOR SIGNAL DETECTION

Institutions can establish organizational routines and mechanisms for sharing signals of change. This is best done through routine activities and as a normal cadence.

This can be accomplished during regular meetings specifically for this purpose or during time set aside within established meetings when individuals discuss signals of change in their respective areas.

Institutions of higher education are also in a unique position to involve students in this process through courses and encouraging their participation in signal detection as part of the educational experience.

Across interactions, sharing signals of change should involve discussion as to why this might suggest a potential change and also if the signals presented across different individuals are similar, interconnected, and seem to emerge as a trend.

Ideally, sharing signals of change and thinking about how they impact the future becomes a regular part of the culture and interactions of the institution.

3. CREATE WAYS TO SHARE SIGNALS AND TRENDS

Institutions can create ways to share signals of change and trends with the broader campus community.

This could be technology-enabled, such as a drop-box or virtual sharing tool that allows individuals or groups to submit "Interesting Signals of Change" for others to view.

Low-technology versions could be central posting areas around the institution where individuals can write or post notes or other artifacts about signals of change they have detected.

To socialize this further, leaders within institutions can also establish a regular practice of communicating and requesting feedback about signals of change, something along the lines of, "This is signal of change I find interesting, what signals of change are you seeing – send me your thoughts."

Institutions can also involve external stakeholders in this process by encouraging alumni, community members, and employers to suggest signals of change they believe will impact the institution.

4. SYNTHESIZE SIGNALS AND PROVIDE A SIGNAL FEEDBACK LOOP

Institutions can establish a working group of internal and external stakeholders tasked with doing regular deep dives into the signals of change submitted from across the institutions.

True to the nature of participatory foresight, this group can be populated with individuals who bring diverse perspective and expertise. Individuals in units of institutional research may also support these efforts with trends analyses.

The group's charge is to begin to synthesize and cluster the institution's signals and, importantly, to share with the broader campus community and elicit feedback about any emerging themes and insight.

5. DEVELOP A WORKING SET OF UNIQUE FUTURES SCENARIOS AND PERSONAS

Institutions can form a working group tasked with conducting trend analyses and using the

information gleaned from cross-institutional scanning to develop a working set of well-crafted narratives about the future. Institutions of higher education are fortunate to be rich in varieties of expertise.

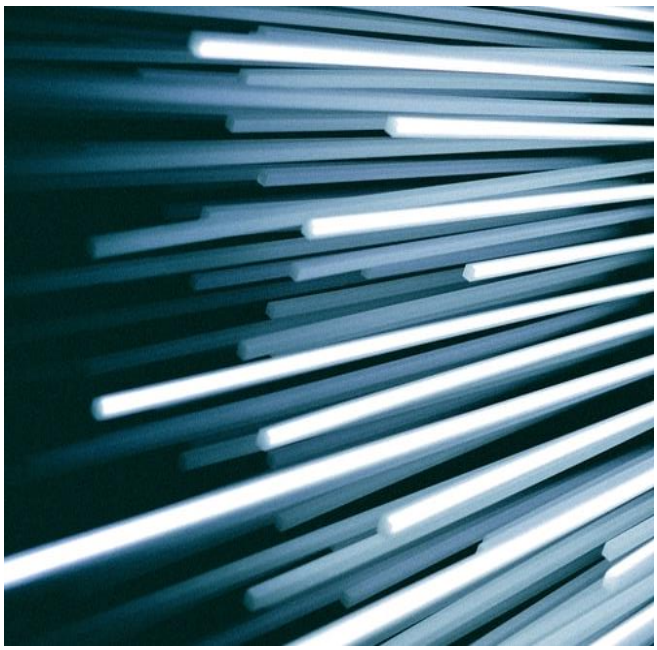
It is likely there are already campus community members (internal or external) with skills in scenario development or related expertise. Similarly, there are individuals that will emerge in the scanning and signals collection process that are excited about this work and eager to learn and contribute. Seek them out and enlist their help.

Consultants specialized in futures scenarios and personas can also be engaged in these efforts. Ideally, these scenarios and personas should be folded into the daily fabric of discussions across the institution and considered living documents that are revised and refined as new information and change unfolds. They can also be used as part of the strategic planning and implementation processes.

CONCLUSION

An event of the scale and reach of the coronavirus pandemic will dramatically shape society and higher education in unexpected ways for years to come.

As the title of this article suggests, today is a new day. There is no time like the present for institutions of higher education to develop a culture of foresight and to engage its many stakeholders in shaping a positive future.



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