



by Jim Dator

There's more than one way to put up a residence hall, deliver a calculus course, and fund a research initiative. When leaders and stakeholders band together to envision and invent a preferred future for their institution, they readily spot alternatives to the status quo.

Most people in the United States, no matter how extensive their education, have never had a course dealing primarily with the future. But they have had at least one course, and probably many courses, dealing with the past. Most also have never questioned why the past is so emphasized in formal education while the future—the only arena over which we can have any true influence—is so utterly ignored.

As a discipline, the study of alternative futures is absent from almost every higher education curriculum in the United States. So it's not surprising that as a general practice, colleges and universities do not contemplate mission-critical decisions regarding students, programs, and infrastructure in the con-

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text of a range of futures. Yet, a collective consideration of possible and preferred futures can help administrators and faculty ask and answer important questions: What kind of curriculum may be needed by the students of tomorrow? Who will those students be? Who will or should pay for education and related services? What educational delivery systems might exist, and how might these alter the character of learning spaces? What global and other influences might impact the substance and governance of institutions as well as the design and management of campus facilities? What, in fact, ought a college or university campus look like?

Seriously considering many radically different alternatives is the key concept of futures studies. There is no single "future" that exists "out there" to predict. Rather, many alternative futures to forecast and preferred futures to envision, invent, and realize simultaneously exist. Futurists study images of the future—ideas, beliefs, fears, and hopes about things to come. From the tremendous variety of images held by a wide range of stakeholders, futurists then attempt to understand where these images come from and how they influence behavior. It is important to study these images because our present-day actions and decisions are, in significant measure, made on the basis of these images and what we think may be the consequences of our actions in years to come. These images are also important to study because they differ by gender, age, culture, language, class, experience, and many other factors (see sidebar, "Teaching Alternative and Preferred Futures").

Four Tomorrows

While any attempt to categorize our rich array of images of the future may seem to limit the richness of that array, four generic images can capture that variation, even across cultures. These images are helpful for understanding why we as individuals and institutions make certain decisions or hold certain beliefs about the futures.

1. Continuation. *Progress, development, and continued economic growth* are alternate expressions of the “official” image of the future of the United States. In fact, a primary task of our modern educational institutions, especially public institutions and land grant universities, is graduating individuals who collectively can and will keep the economy growing. On some level, every nation, society, corporation, and organization is formed around some concept of continuation. Because of the strong pull of this dominant view, it can be extremely difficult for institutions and individuals to consider futures not based on some model of sustained growth.

2. Disciplined society. Many voices say that while aspects of progress and development have been good overall, continuing on that path is neither sustainable nor preferable. While initially a “green” concern, this image is now held by a growing contingent of scientists who recognize the probability of climate change, limits to oil supplies, scarcity of clean drinking water, and myriad other environmental concerns. These will eventually bring economic growth to a halt if not refocused on *evolvability*—that is, the ability to evolve as conditions and opportunities change. This goes beyond the concept of *sustainability*, which some think may be too static and passive. Others call attention to what they consider basic unfairness and single-mindedness of the global economic system, concluding that it is not sustainable or preferable. These groups envision a future organized around a set of overarching traditional values that introduce disciplines and controls to prevent the destruction of cultures, environments, and fundamental beliefs and practices.

3. Transformational society. Individuals who support this image are usually of either a high-tech or a “high-spirit” variety. They foresee an end to current forms and the emergence of new (rather than a return to traditional) beliefs, behaviors, organizational models, and life forms. High-spirit advocates believe that new spiritual forces will drive these changes. The high-tech people believe that the technologies of artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and space exploration and settlement will transform human society and the once “natural” environments of Earth (and Mars) will become artificial, managed gardens.

4. Collapse. Among the many alternative voices to emerge during the past 50 years are groups that say continued economic growth is inherently destructive—whether from a social, cultural, environmental, or economic standpoint. They say unchecked growth will result in environmental overload; resource exhaustion; economic instability; moral degeneration and personal alienation; and the loss of ancestral values, be-

liefs, and practices. History is replete with examples of once sustainable, thriving societies that overextended, resulting in decline or disappearance. The difference this time, many fear, is that collapse may be not only local but also global. Moreover, even if societies persist for centuries, institutions within them come and go with alarming frequency. When anticipating the futures of any institution, its collapse—and its collapse as a *preferable* future—must be honestly considered.

In considering the future, it's important not to favor one category or image or to assume that one or more images is “good” or “the most likely” or “the best-case (or worst-case) scenario.” Rather, understanding that a variety of more or less reasonably held images of the future exists allows individuals and institutions to reflect on their own images; where these come from; and how robust they are by comparison to the images of other individuals, institutions, communities, and society as a whole. These generic images also can serve as the basis for *deductive forecasting* about the general characteristics of a family, institution, or society when its future is viewed through a collapse versus a transformational image, for instance. Once individuals and institutions break from thinking narrowly about a single future, they can work to shape a preferred future.

Looking Past Today

At the University of Hawaii, we have been discussing for many years whether to build a new four-year campus a few miles down the freeway from our current main campus. Pouring concrete is an easy solution, but is it the best one for serving not only today's students but also tomorrow's students? The University of Hawaii System is still funded by its state legislature at a higher proportion than many other state university systems. But we are also quickly moving from being the University of Hawaii to a university in Hawaii and perhaps eventually will become a global institution in cyberspace. For-profit educational options are already available, and online education opportunities offered by institutions worldwide emerge daily and are highly competitive.

Based on the continuation image, the “logical” conclusion or the “natural” inclination may be to erect a new campus, but from a transformational perspective, an equally strong argument exists for not constructing additional physical infrastructure. Perhaps in determining how best to deliver higher education to individuals who live away from a physical campus, the university should instead consider enhancing its communication infrastructure. Students may still need to physically gather, but could they do so in existing structures closer to them, such as libraries or community centers? And if we do decide to build a facility, how do we ensure that we design with optimum flexibility to accommodate the needs of future students instead of simply continuing, or improving upon, the way we've designed before? How do we frame these decisions?

Teaching Alternative and Preferred Futures

Most of us hold several, often contradictory, images of the future without realizing that we do so. For example, in my experience, when asked to describe a day in their life 30 years from the present, almost all young Americans paint an idyllic picture of themselves in a wholesome nuclear family. Yet, when asked to describe their community 30 years hence, the picture is not so pleasant. Crime is rampant, terrorists rage, drugs are ruining children, the environment is polluted, the weather is humid, and the seas are rising. Sadly, not much within their formal education encourages students to believe that they can or should influence the future except in the very narrowest personal sense.

One reason I've heard as to why futures studies are largely ignored is that it is impossible to teach about something that does not exist. And the future does not exist—*yet*. But schools teach about many things that do not exist, including history. Until time machines are invented, we can never travel back in time and validate through empirical, scientific methods what actually happened and why. Instead, historians must interpret various fragments from the past to determine what occurred prior. And because we are constantly uncovering new fragments or reinterpreting old evidence, our understanding of the past is in constant flux. By contrast, varied images of the future *do* exist in the present and can be studied empirically.

Many people will argue that the point of teaching history is that we must learn from the past to act more wisely in the future. I, too, am a fan of comparative history, anthropology, archeology, and evolutionary studies—all of which can help us understand how our pasts have shaped our present. In fact, I have long argued that futures studies should be a part of historical studies and that the two form a new science, perhaps called *chronology*, that would study humans past to present and into many alternative futures.

Indeed, why not teach history as a futures-oriented subject? For various known turning points in history, students could be encouraged to apply the theories and methods of futures studies to forecast what might happen next and to consider what they think *should* happen next. They could then compare their forecasts and preferences with various interpretations of what “actually” happened and why. By doing so they would first understand that what seems an inevitable flow of events from past to present is simply one of many futures that might have come to be. More importantly, if history were studied as steps in a series of alternative futures, students might find it natural to create alternative and preferred futures now and in an ongoing manner as they move forward in their lives, careers, and roles as futures decision makers.

Back to the Present

In 2007, the University of Hawaii will celebrate its 100th anniversary. As we plan celebrations from a historical standpoint, we also are gearing up to engage the larger community in “Hawaii 2100.” Our systemwide activities are part of a larger communitywide initiative to consider what we want Hawaii to be like in 100 years and what steps we can take now to get there.

As a capstone to our centennial activities, the university will host a three-day conference during which the University of Hawaii and the larger community will come together to discuss how the curriculum, delivery, governance, financing, and all other aspects of the system can be enhanced, expanded, or otherwise strengthened or reconfigured. Our goal is to outline how higher education in Hawaii helps the entire community become the kind of place its inhabitants now and in the future wish it to be. Our intention is to bring these future-focused conversations back to the present—to start from a *preferred future* and reflect back on what present actions we can take. This is markedly different from most planning efforts, which typically begin with an assessment of the present or past and project forward on continued-growth assumptions alone.

The images of the future held by young people are, and increasingly will be, much different from the images of many of today's decision makers. Therefore, college and university faculty and staff must also consider the possible and preferred images of *future generations* when mapping institutional directions. While I certainly don't know the shape of things to come in higher education, I do feel safe in wagering that higher education will increasingly focus on the learner rather than on the teacher, researcher, or administrator. In fact, it is here that futures studies raise their gravest challenge to educators: Until we have seriously assessed the alternative and preferred futures of the people we are teaching, how do we know what to teach?

It is highly likely that, left to our own devices and following past practices, we will unreflexively employ continued economic growth models as we plan for traditional university campuses and build curriculum around the concepts and needs of yesterday's students, faculty, administrators, and stakeholders. But we must remember that alternative images of the future that are not dominant now may dominate in the years ahead. While it is helpful to research current student demographics and job market trends, attention and policy discussion must focus on understanding how dramatically different student composition, educational needs, and delivery mechanisms may be 20 years hence. 🏰