

A training ground for professional futurists
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Andy Hines

Readers of this magazine likely agree that that the world needs more foresight and futurists. We agree on these ends, but not necessarily on the means. One area where we might start to diverge is on whether we need professional futurists. After all, one could argue that foresight should be a part of all disciplines, and that everyone should be a futurist. Noble goals indeed, but how to get there? How can the spread of high-quality, rigorous, and useful foresight be catalyzed? This is where the plot thickens.

The University of Houston Foresight Program long ago adopted the mission of preparing professional futurists. We remain committed to providing high-quality foresight training to help individuals and organizations in business, government, education, and non-profits. I recently assumed leadership of the program after more than two decades of practicing in the field as a professional futurist, following my graduation from the program in 1990. I have worked alongside many fellow alums as well as countless other professionals who did not receive formal training. In my experience, a lack of formal training by no means precludes one from doing excellent foresight work.

Our mission of increasing the number of trained professionals is intended as “additive” rather than exclusionary. Put plainly, our goal is to increase the supply of professional futurists, and we believe formal training helps to do that. Period. I proposed the formation of – and am currently working with – a Task Force exploring the role of “professionalization” for the Association of Professional Futurists. My personal motivation is to look for ways to spread the use of high-quality foresight. The task force is exploring whether professionalization can help with that. My view is that it can, but only the goal is expand our reach – to craft an ecosystem with allies -- rather than build walls that exclude.

The Houston program has designed a curriculum that incorporates a blend of the essential theory, a framework and methods for doing the work, and a relentless focus on application for clients in business, government, non-profits, and society in general. A recent compilation by my colleague Peter Bishop on what futurists agree on regarding core concepts and methods for studying the future -- shared at during last year’s WFS Conference -- found a far greater degree of consensus than commonly perceived. The work of defining our “core competencies” is just beginning, but it may be less difficult than we think. Part of that work is defining what is meant by “professional futurist” – for present purposes, at Houston, we include consulting futurists and organizational futurist, as well as the “futurizers,” who have mixed responsibilities that include a goal of trying to spread foresight within their organizations.

We believe that trained professional futurists can help catalyze the spread of high-quality foresight. We believe that the work we are doing at the Houston Foresight program is important. The world needs more foresight, and it’s our job to help provide that.

Dr. Andy Hines is Program Coordinator of the University of Houston Foresight Program. Among his books are two collaborations with Dr. Peter Bishop, *Thinking about the Future: Guidelines for Strategic Foresight*, 2007 and *Teaching about the Future: The Basics of Foresight Education*, 2012.

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