

Chapter 2

Exploring the Future to Create Pathway Opportunities That Empower Students

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ABSTRACT

The future is more uncertain than ever, and this uncertainty is creating challenges for institutions of higher education (IHE), especially as they seek to prepare students for the future. Students are seeking new models of education, and some are even putting together their own pathways to survive and thrive in this uncertain future. While it is not possible to predict the future, this chapter demonstrates how strategic foresight can help IHEs better position themselves to develop new models of learning to meet learner and societal needs. The chapter employs the Association of Professional Futurists Foresight Technical Competencies to demonstrate how this can be done. It also provides examples of IHEs that are beginning to build the capacity to employ strategic foresight across their institutions and others that have already done so.

“[C]ompanies are looking to provide reskilling and upskilling opportunities to the majority of their staff (73%) cognizant of the fact that, by 2025, 44% of the skills that employees will need to perform their roles effectively will change” (World Economic Forum, 2020, p. 8). This finding from the World Economic Forum highlights how the fast pace of change will impact workers and their need for training and education to thrive in the future.

Working adults have better adapted to the pace of change across society and in the workforce than have many institutions of higher education (IHE). One way working adults have done this is by creating their own lifelong education and training pathways to acquire the skills they need to attain their personal and professional goals. These do-it-yourself (DIY) pathways do not just include traditional degrees; they also include non-traditional credentials such as certificates, microcredentials, and training. The creation of these pathways recognizes that education can no longer be limited to the time a person

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spends completing a degree. Education has, by necessity, become a lifelong pursuit. Because they are in the workplace experiencing the results of these change, workers recognize the dangers of not evolving to meet the needs of employers or not having the skills needed to open one's own business, which has become increasingly common and has been made easier by advances in technology.

Preparing students for the future of work is difficult, especially with a traditional undergraduate degree completed in four or six years. The world changes substantially between the time students begin a degree and when they graduate. Additionally, given the time-consuming process required for curricular change at most IHEs, it is extremely difficult for IHEs to ensure degrees reflect the workforce's latest needs. This means that students may enter the professional world having been prepared for the world as it was four or six years prior. While certificates, microcredentials, and training can be adapted faster than traditional curricula, they too can lag behind the needs of the workforce. Additionally, IHEs have not devoted the resources to preparing and supporting students to create their own educational and training pathways following graduation. This is unfortunate given that students have unique goals that frequently change throughout their lives and are often in the best position to identify the skills required to adapt to the changing needs of the workforce.

Supporting students' efforts to create their own education and training pathways will empower them to thrive in a variety of futures and is consistent with the missions of IHEs. Supporting students as they create these pathways could also bolster enrollments at a time when fewer 18-24 year old students are pursuing degrees (National Student Clearing House Research Center, 2022), and significant numbers of adults are seeking educational opportunities but not necessarily degrees.

There are many reasons that IHEs as an industry are currently not supporting students in their efforts to create these pathways. Some do not see it as their role to prepare students for life and work after graduation, although enrollment declines over the past decade have provided an incentive to support students with this need. Other IHEs are wary of meeting the needs of the moment, preferring instead to focus on the timeless aspects of education, which are also very important and do contribute to preparing students for the future. It is also impossible to predict the future, so many IHEs may be wary of investing resources into offerings that may not have any demand in a few years. It is this last problem—the hesitancy to invest resources for an uncertain future—that I will address in this chapter by explaining how strategic foresight can help IHEs develop strategies to meet learner and societal needs now and in the future and how IHEs can develop strategic foresight capability across their campuses. This chapter will employ the Association of Professional Futurists' Foresight Technical Competencies framework as its strategic foresight approach.

STRATEGIC FORESIGHT

While it is true that it is not possible to predict the future, IHEs should not view themselves as victims of an uncertain future. Strategic foresight can help IHEs gain insights about the future that they can use to make decisions and take action in the present. "Strategic Foresight tools enable you to discover which potential futures are possible (for instance, by extrapolating from emerging trends and pockets of the future which are already happening today). And then to decide which one(s) you would prefer" (Lustig, 2015, Location No. 244). Another description of strategic foresight highlights its "ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view and to use the insights arising

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