

Winter 2018

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Sheila and Morehead, Elizabeth, "Engineering PSU's Future: An Interview with Dr. Rahmat Shoureshi" (2018). *Metroscope*. 131.

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LET KNOWLEDGE SERVE THE CITY

Engineering PSU's Future:

An interview with Dr. Rahmat Shoureshi

by Sheila Martin and Elizabeth Morehead



PSU's ninth president, Dr. Rahmat Shoureshi (pronounced Shoe-re-she) is an experienced administrator and innovative academic who considers his work with students his greatest accomplishment. Shoureshi is a mechanical engineer who earned a master's degree and a doctorate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Shoureshi says PSU's commitment to diversity, civic engagement and innovation persuaded him to join the university.

Dr. Morehead: Your career has taken you from Iran to Boston to Colorado, Michigan, and New York. What were your motivations for coming to Portland and PSU at this point in your career?

President Shoureshi: That PSU and Portland are so intertwined is really attractive, because when you're an urban university that means this city becomes a live lab for your faculty and the students. It provides the opportunity so that the students not only understand the education

in the classroom, they also have the ability to experiment locally on some of the issues and topics that they are learning.

The other reason is that, when you talk to people, everybody says this is a great place to move to. When I would ask why, there were basically three words: it's innovative, creative, and entrepreneurial. I looked at PSU and I looked at what the place has, and it's a university that has all of the ingredients to be really a model global urban university. And having those ingredients

enables you to actually reach that goal. And that's why, when I looked at those elements, I realized this is a place that I can make a difference and that's why I decided to come. There are a number of other factors. You know that for three years in a row now it has been selected by *US News & World Report* as among the top ten most innovative universities.

The other is I have interacted with a number of the board of trustees. And I have seen the commitment and devotion that every member of the board has for this university. So they were another factor.

Research is very important. And everywhere I have gone I try to make sure that faculty get more engaged in research and scholarship and creative work, because I truly believe that, in order to enhance the quality of education in the classroom, in the studio, in the lab, and in the exhibits, you've got to be up to date with what's going on in your field. And so, when I see, for example, the Institute for Sustainable Solutions or the transportation centers and see how many faculty are engaged, that is exciting to me. I also believe in cross-disciplinary studies, both in terms of research as well as the educational, and I see a good number of examples of those here at PSU. So, again, I see the alignment between my interest and some of the key elements at PSU.

Dr. Morehead: You talked a little bit about PSU as an urban school. What is your view of PSU's role in the metropolitan region?

President Shoureshi: I can divide it up into three categories. The first is providing transformational education for the citizens of that urban setting. And I talked in my convocation speech about how transformative is college education in everybody's life. The demographics you typically see in an urban environment are not typical of what you may see in a small college town. This is where you see the most diverse group, the people who come from the two extremes of financial status. This is where you see the number of minorities. So what that does is provide an opportunity for that

urban institution to impact a very diverse group of constituents. So that's one element: providing education for a diverse group of students, some of whom are nontraditional. I look at this as part of the pride and opportunity for PSU.

The second category is the opportunity that an urban university has to really become partners and collaborate with local government. And we have a good number of examples of how successful this partnership has been. It helps that many of our graduates end up in those government positions. I call it a positive feedback loop that keeps strengthening itself very well.

The third and really very crucial element is the opportunity to build relationships with the business community, because, for those businesses to thrive, they need to have this constant flow of ideas and opportunity or what I call an intellectual pool that the university provides. It's that urban institution that has the almost fiduciary responsibility to educate the type of students and graduates that have the right skills, and therefore the university will have a huge impact on the socioeconomics of the urban region. And many of the businesses will be dependent on that partnership. So these are the three key elements that I truly believe PSU has demonstrated and will continue playing a leading role in.

Dr. Morehead: PSU's motto is "let knowledge serve the city." And certainly that can mean the education of the population. What does that mean to you beyond that?

President Shoureshi: It means serving the city in terms of education and also bringing economic opportunity to the region.

Let me give you some examples. When I was at Wayne State back in 1981, the automotive industry was just at the beginning of bringing electronics and micro-control systems into vehicles. Ford Motor Company came to us and said that our engineers graduated when there were hardly any computers and we needed to reeducate them. We don't want to lose them, at the same time we want to make sure they are more productive for the future of

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Ford. And so we put together what was truly a tailor-made master's degree program for them. That was my first experience in putting together a cross-disciplinary degree program combining mechanical, electrical, and software engineering. And that was the beginning. After Ford, there was General Motors, there was Chrysler, and you can see how a university could impact the growth and productivity of the businesses in the region.

In Colorado, I had a similar experience when I started with Lockheed Martin. I asked them what type of engineers they would like to have five years and ten years from now. Listening to them and responding to their needs, to their future needs, made a huge difference. We had a master's and PhD program for Lockheed Martin on mechatronics systems engineering and it was the first of such programs in the country. And so, that relationship blossomed. The next one was Northrup that came and said we'd like to see a similar arrangement. The university, besides having an educational component, can have a direct impact on the growth of industry and businesses.

And that's what I see PSU really doing with both the local government as well as the state: growing future sectors of the economy for Portland and for Oregon.

Dr. Morehead: Despite our success in attracting a skilled workforce and the companies that want to employ them, our region faces many critical issues, including housing affordability, homelessness, racial achievement gap, and state and local government funding crisis. Which of the region's important challenges are you looking forward to personally engaging in, and how will you approach that issue?

President Shoureshi: I truly believe, as an urban university, we need to address all of those. Homelessness is important to PSU, because number one, this is the population that, for whatever reason, may not have had opportunities. If there is anything we can do to help them, the least that as a university we can do is provide them the opportunity for education. So homelessness is important to us partly because we are so intertwined. I see on the streets of the PSU campus the same issues that the rest of the city is seeing—and the whole area of housing. Portland has not yet become as bad as New York, Boston, LA, San Diego, Austin or Boulder. So what it would take is to develop, especially through our certificate program in urban design, a long range plan that addresses urbanization not just in the central city—because, if you only focus it there, all you do is make real estate even more expensive—but also beyond. So that, on



a larger scale, people would be interested in living there, not because it's cheaper, but because you have designed it so that all of the amenities extend beyond the central city, including workforce development for the businesses and industry and other key elements.

Dr. Morehead: *US News and World Report*, as you mentioned, has ranked PSU among the top ten most innovative national universities in its Best Colleges 2017 rankings. How important do you think innovation is to a university?

President Shoureshi: Huge. Universities have two major roles. One is education and educating the next generation. The other role is creativity and innovation.

Let me give you some examples. When you think about how the Silicon Valley started, when you look at the North Carolina Triangle Park, when you look at the whole of businesses in Austin and La Jolla, Del Mar, San Diego, all those, they didn't just come off because somebody thought, okay, let me go and I'll start a business there. It was the universities that provided the base of these new and innovative ideas. It's another key element of a university to continue innovations and creativity. That would set the tone for the faculty and for our students. Besides educating the next generation, the university can provide opportunities for, especially, businesses and industry, because they are all looking for innovative ideas. Now, if you are a major corporation, you can afford to do some of it internally. But many others, especially small businesses, depend on what the universities are doing, because universities are really centers of creativity for these small businesses. So that's why innovation is a key element of a university. It is part of its mission.

Dr. Morehead: What do you think currently is the most innovative part of Portland State?

President Shoureshi: The integration of what we provide for our undergraduates between classroom education and community education. So, for me to know that some of our students actually go even to

the prisons and try to provide all types of support systems for prisoners, I think about that. This is such an experience, an especially transforming experience for them to see that happening. I want to go back to what I said earlier, that one of the attractive features of PSU is its integration with the city and the community. It's not just saying it, PSU is actually doing it by all of these projects.

A team of our students has designed housing for women. It isn't just a part of a great education for them, but it's also something that really has a positive benefit for the community.

So, I can see that this has been, and why it has been, selected as a key element of PSU's success. This integration with the community brings education and experiential learning together.

Dr. Morehead: How can we continue to be innovative?

President Shoureshi: You've got to do two things. One is to really encourage and incentivize those innovators so that they see that we recognize their effort, and we want to make sure that they are successful. The other one is to really create an environment that nurtures innovation and creativity. Both of those go hand-in-hand and are important. One of the first things that I asked when I came is, I want to have a meeting with the top fifty most active faculty researchers of PSU, and this meeting is coming up. And it's not just those who have brought in the highest dollar amounts of external grants, but also those who have really been active and effective. It could be artists or it could be those who are looking at water quality and air pollution. It's a wide variety. The reason is for me, of course, to get to know them, but more importantly I want them to know that I care. It's part of our future to make sure that they continue this whole area of creativity and innovation.

It's important to me. I have seen the benefits of it myself and have been a researcher all through my academic life. I'm just trying to see if I could still continue it as a presi-

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dent or not. I was sending an email to my last graduate student, who is still in New York finishing at the end of this semester his thesis, to make sure that he's having progress in that regard.

So I truly believe in the importance of being an active scholar. What I call the teacher/scholar model is the right model for faculty.

Dr. Morehead: Thank you very much for answering our questions.

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