



Year-End Recommendations to President Percy

July 2020

Introduction and overview

This past year members of the PSU Futures Collaboratory had an unprecedented opportunity to gather faculty, staff and students for a year-long exploration, learning and work group to consider how futures thinking could enhance and strengthen our university community in general, and specifically, how it could help us think about specific challenges that we have at PSU right now. [Our website](#) provides an overview of the range of work that we completed.

Futures thought and practice is best thought of as an emerging applied social science that includes both theoretical orientations and practice tools. The goal of applied futures work is to assist individuals, organizations and communities to simultaneously prepare for what is commonly understood to be exponential change in the world around us, and to participate in directing change in ways that underscore equity, sustainability, human rights and community thriving.

Futures thinking owes a deep acknowledgement to Indigenous worldviews for whom commitment to future generations has been a longstanding element. It is practiced internationally across a deep expanse of disciplines and settings in both the private and public sectors. It explores both the future of professions (such as the future of medicine, law, journalism and others) as well as the future of issues (such as the future of cities, technology, social justice, work, health and others).

The future of higher education is an increasingly active topic in futures circles, and provides a rich array of topics that are relevant to our immediate experiences and concerns at Portland State University. For example, what is the future of teaching and learning, the future of science, the future of equity and social mobility? How will the future of work intersect with the way universities are organized? How will other social changes and conditions influence preferences and scope of what is expected from higher education as part of a changing social contract?

We have learned a great deal about all of these items, along with a range of other futures topics this year. We have taken on projects, forged relationships, studied other universities, and consulted not only with PSU peers but were invited into spaces in other organizations to share our growing expertise on futures issues as well. We have had fun and we have worked hard together. We believe that building a shared capacity with futures thinking is one of the most central and important things PSU can do to be ready for the future. We have amassed a shared list of other folks who would like to get involved next year, which is a good sign!

Our other accomplishments included:

- [10 futures learning and working sessions.](#)
- [3 end of year webinars summarizing our work and underscoring the importance of an equity lens in futures work via the work of Dr. Ruha Benjamin.](#)
- Delivery of these end of year recommendations.
- Completion of 15 consults on futures ideas/matters and 10 presentations/trainings (beyond the collaboratory) on futures thinking by Laura Nissen throughout the university and in the community this academic year, as well as 2 presentations by Melissa Appleyard.

Our final activity of the year was to produce a list of “future facing” recommendations to President Percy for ongoing consideration and focus based on what we have learned and discussed. The question we centrally focused on was “what does PSU need to do or be to be ‘ready’ for the future?”

Our recommendations

Our PSU Futures recommendations fall into five categories: 1) Mission, 2) Structures, 3) Equity lens, 4) Our pedagogy (teaching, learning and advising) practices and 5) Community. An overarching idea that influences each of these recommendations has to do with the interconnected ideas of **purpose** and **process**. In many respects, the need for PSU to continue to revise and expand its idea of “who we are” (purpose) and “how we will accomplish our work” (process) becomes central to all other recommendations.

Often we take the ideas of who we are and how we work for granted or think of them as a static “truth.” In fact, as the world continues to change —and this will likely accelerate — the answers to “what is an urban university?” and “how will urban universities fulfill their evolving missions?” will continue to morph and change.

Will universities of the future look like or behave as they do now? Often, we have observed that disagreements or inconsistencies in peoples’ ideas about these things lead to breakdowns of community, productive conflict, and/or trust. Being future ready means to decrease these breakdowns of communication and trust, and boost active co-construction of the futures we want together via inclusion, creation of vibrant and open spaces of dialogue and equitable

processes. We have spent a lot of time this year considering these questions and how PSU might best position itself to succeed in the coming years.

Higher education, as a sector, is in a profound state of change, and more so now than in the fall when we began our work. PSU will have many opportunities to respond to the challenges of our times, but will likely need to do so in new, experimental and creative ways.

Continuing to invest in spaces where we acknowledge that the changing ecosystem around us will influence us and give us multiple opportunities to co-create new futures is a key element of our work. We believe the PSU Futures Collaboratory has been such a space this year, and that the need for that kind of space will continue as we move ahead.

1 — Our mission

- Cultivate our identity in changing times and reconcile the many things we try to be and the roles we try to play in our region, particularly emphasizing our role as the urban university in the state.
- Plan and strategize for agility. There is a need for PSU to plan, but only if done so with a high degree of input and a high degree of agility and mission alignment to be ready for the unexpected, as recent history has demonstrated. We believe continued disruptions will continue.
- Claim more explicitly our role as a regional engine of social mobility.
- Dedicate ourselves to a consistent exploration of the future of knowledge, science, inquiry, and related work, equity and well-being in a changing world. Assess how transitions in meaning and method equate to the need for PSU to evolve to meet or co-create responses to these aspects of modern life. Make these elements an explicit, authentic and well-coordinated part of our identity at PSU. Explicitly utilize futures curriculum to prepare students for success as a core element of our educational mission. We believe that irrespective of the type of degree program, future readiness will continue to be a guiding and increasing measure of relevance for higher education in the years to come.
- Develop a deeper, campus-wide understanding of what makes PSU uniquely capable of meeting and co-creating the future in our region.

2 — Our structures

- Identify and eliminate logjams to innovation. Value experiments, celebrate and amplify new things that are being tried and that are working. Embrace rapid-prototyping of new ideas even if at first it seems our systems cannot accommodate them. Highlight and replicate areas that are working well, especially those that serve marginalized communities.
- Streamline processes and eliminate bureaucracy in both administrative and educational spaces.

- Commit to technological upgrades that permit the university to be as efficient and effective as possible.
- Create new pathways for collaboration across disciplines, sectors and even with other institutions of higher learning, both within and outside of PSU.
- Offer more spaces for rapid-cycle testing of new ideas and learning from them more quickly.
- Explore and experiment with new degree types and structures.
- Create more spaces where we are “learning together,” not just working and producing. It is clear we are doing and learning many things throughout PSU, but we need to update, revise and revision our methods of sharing and disseminating this learning across our structures and systems.
- Think beyond traditional policing regarding what safety and well-being mean on our campus. Invest in new and emerging forms of community-building and responsiveness to the needs of our urban campus community. (This explicitly relates to the current call to disarm PSU, but also speaks to the need to redeploy resources to issues of student mental health, housing, and other ‘student success’ ingredients). Involve larger campus community in defining and creating a safe and peaceful community.
- Experiment with ways to reduce education costs to students.

3 — Our equity lens

- Identify, reconcile, and address inequity and equity issues at PSU through creative, expansive, and potentially disruptive approaches that move beyond compliance. (Use [HECC Racial Justice in Higher Education Framework](#) & [Issue Brief](#) as guideposts.)
- Acknowledge that Oregon’s racist history reverberates throughout institutions in ways that impede equity at PSU. Be more explicitly anti-racist in our responses to be fully ready for a pluralistic future. Link futures thinking to our equity work.
- Incorporate more attention to disability literacy and full implementation of Universal Design as a key component of equity work.
- Explore and adopt new tools and methods for building success among underserved identity groups at PSU using futures thinking to create more inclusive spaces. Use new tools and frameworks emerging from design justice thinking to accomplish more in this space.
- Reckon courageously with the losses that we have experienced of both students, faculty and staff of color at PSU in the last 20 years, and recognize patterns that threaten current and future equity if not interrupted and redesigned.
- Recruit faculty and staff of color and provide ongoing support to retain and support them. Invite them squarely into spaces to co-create the future of Portland State University.
- Resource and deploy a mentorship and coaching program for faculty, staff and students of color to support retention.
- Expand services for students of color, specifically in those units that provide direct service provision and advocacy for Black identified students.

- Explore “the future of equity work” in a central way. Dedicate space to monitoring both new approaches, opportunities and threats to an equitable university community.

4 — Our pedagogy (teaching, learning and advising) practices

- Create spaces to re-imagine fundamentally what it means to “learn” in the future. Include ongoing shared explorations and sensemaking of recent experiences with COVID-19 that adjusted our work as educators. Unbundle and reconfigure the educational methods that have been traditional and familiar.
- Deeply commit to listening to and learning from student experiences, preferences, and success metrics as a fundamental part of what it means to be an effective educator. Include institutional commitments to shift creatively based on this input.
- Experiment with new forms of advising and mentoring — including but not limited to an increased use of technology, social media, and community partner linkages —to increase student success.

5 — Our community

- Participate in future-building with our community partners. Bring community partners to campus in structured ways to share what they are doing. Venture out to share our discoveries and work with them.
- Explore “the future of community” in an increasingly electronically linked world. Determine how evolutions in this space may enhance or threaten to assist PSU in contributing meaningfully to the world around us.
- Build more explicit community understanding and investment in PSU as a central and valuable community resource for positive futures in the urban environment and our region at large.

Next steps

As a working collaborative here on campus with an initial one year charge, we plan to proceed in five specific ways:

- 1) We’d like to continue to meet as the futures collaboratory next year, evolve our structures and goals and increase our “organizational foresightfulness” by welcoming more members to our collaborative membership. We currently have a waiting list of people who have indicated a desire to be involved next year. We would like to continue to invite guest futurists to speak with us as an interdisciplinary and multi-sector group across campus, and engage in/complete a variety of “futures projects” that relate to campus needs. The experience of welcoming and interacting with futurists from a variety of disciplines is powerful, fertile and inspiring. It disrupts and expands our thinking and helps us do the necessary work of considering things outside of our Portland and academic “bubbles.” We’d like to invite more of this into our campus community and

believe it strengthens us and enhances our mental agility, and our creativity in considering new ideas together.

- 2) We'd like to contribute to and provide "futures-related" connective tissue between numerous PSU projects and initiatives that seek to "improve" or "evolve" aspects of the issues we've mentioned in our recommendations above. We believe that participating in an intentional way with a widening circle of "foresight trained" PSU community members will strengthen and deepen our capacity to meet the emerging challenges of the future. (For example, we'd like to be involved in projects related to the future of teaching/learning, the future of equity on our campus, or overall projects like how the university engages in goal setting in turbulent times.)
- 3) PSU is one of very few higher education institutions to engage in Foresight training of staff/faculty. We'd like to grow our capacity as a university to be "known for" excellence and commitment to futures topics and practice. This past year we have been consulted and engaged in purposeful networking to share our learning and we believe much more is possible in this vein.
- 4) We'd like to grow our capacity to deliver curriculum to students on futures practice at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. This is an increasingly important and relevant course of study and has strong potential to grow interdisciplinary student and faculty engagement. There is increasing discourse that "futures thinking" is an "essential" component of the idea of being well-educated in the 21st century.

In closing

Our shared goal had been to build a working, shared-learning futures collaborative and to create spaces where collective imagination, intelligence and agility could flourish across Portland State University. How could we have imagined the times we live in would so dramatically change, bringing "the future" alive in some unsettling and complicated ways? The PSU Futures Collaboratory became not only a place to explore, experiment and discover but also a place where our connections and relationships allowed us to ponder, imagine and support each other through a lot of social and institutional uncertainty. We have built true capacity within our institution — capacity as futures ambassadors and change agents. From equity challenges, to future funding models, to conceptualizing new futures of teaching and learning, higher education is an epicenter of futures complexities. We believe PSU is a stronger and more agile university for the work we've done, and we're looking forward to continuing to share as we welcome additional members of our community into our important future work.

We are grateful for the opportunity to have piloted a useful and constructive "futures space" within PSU. We appreciate the resources that have been invested in our effort and we look forward to continue to increase our capacity and positive impact in the years ahead.

For additional information [visit our website](#) or contact [Laura Nissen](#) at nissen@pdx.edu or any of the [Futures Fellows](#).