The Future of the Houston Foresight Program

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About This Project

The Houston Foresight Program is the longest-running academic foresight program globally, bringing experience and continuity to the field, and offering credentials with lasting value. Putting its own advice into practice, UH Foresight is undertaking an effort to build a resilient program well-prepared for the future. As part of this initiative, students were tasked with defining a robust internal and external partnership strategy that would support the program in achieving its goals. The following represents the analysis of these goals and possible futures, as well as recommendations for building out a robust partnership strategy.

Methodology

Our approach is rooted in the Framework Foresight approach, demonstrating how futures work is integral to strategy development.
Executive Summary

Successful strategy requires the understanding of the integral relationships between the mission, the vision, the value, and the goals of an organization. This project focuses on the mission of fortifying the University of Houston’s Foresight Program’s foundation for long-term success. The Foresight Program’s vision emphasizes setting the global standard for futures education, by striving to lead in cultivating professional futurists whose insights drive positive, sustainable change in the world. Through a comprehensive analysis, strategic internal and external partnerships were identified as key strategic goals in accomplishing the mission of the program’s resilience and sustained impact in the dynamic landscape of foresight initiatives.

Our overall approach is rooted in mutually beneficial partnership opportunities in which key partners can make the greatest impact in meeting the needs of the program, and gain value in their own industries as well. In addition to focusing on the unmet needs of the program, we learned the order of priority for meeting these needs. We discovered important success criteria for the program, in addition to tuition and enrollment. These additional success criteria guided us in determining which partnership opportunities will ultimately be most appealing and useful.

Through our strategic process we are confident that our approach focuses on the lasting resiliency of the Foresight Program by enhancing the visibility and credibility within the foresight community and beyond to external industries and departments.

1. What?
The purpose or goal that the organization is here to achieve.
Our mission is to fortify the Foresight Program for the long run.

2. Why?
The incentive or motivation of the desired future.
Our vision for the Foresight Program: “To be the north star of strategic foresight, setting the global standard for futures education. We strive to lead in cultivating professional futurists whose insights drive positive, sustainable change in the world.”

3. Who?
For whom the value will be created and captured.
Our value network includes the greater community: local and global, students and alumni, businesses and organizations.

4. How?
How we expect to achieve the vision is the strategy.
Our strategy leverages external and internal partnerships by building upon the Activation Lab, and by partnering with key professional development groups to create a decentralized sector-based certification program.

5. When?
The milestones we expect to reach according to the timeline 2024-2030.
By 2030, the Lab will define programs and membership criteria, establish content creation and dissemination channels, market to alumni, build industry-specific foresight certification programs, and expand horizontally across UH departments.
Client Background

The world urgently needs improved foresight for effective decision-making. By mastering foresight, practitioners can anticipate and shape the future, avoiding surprises and working towards desired outcomes. The program emphasizes core competencies, offering practical training in principles, methods, and frameworks, guiding students in providing real-world foresight projects, ensuring they deliver tangible results and valuable recommendations. The program’s mission is to introduce foresight training at various levels, promoting lifelong learning through workshops, boot camps, certificates, and advanced degrees. Emphasizing practical application, their approach involves real projects with clients, preparing graduates to lead and make informed decisions about the future.
The business model helps us understand the rationale of how the client creates, delivers, and captures value. The business model encompasses the building blocks we need for strategy. Our business model encourages thinking outside of the box. We considered all key stakeholders, partners, and relationships, and focused on their unmet needs.

By looking at departments and industries external to foresight, we were able to assess mutually beneficial partnership opportunities. Minimal platform development and operational cost increases are outweighed by financial outcome streams such as certification-generated revenue and increases in client research fees, resulting in revenue gains for the Foresight Dept.

### Key Partners
- Project Clients
- Alumni Groups (to consult on and/or refer projects)
- Engineering School (UH)

### Key Activities
- Develop Research Projects
- Run Workshops
- Flag Job Opportunities for Students
- Teach Courses
- Orient Students
- Advice Students
- Grade Students
- Create/Revise Curriculum
- Maintain Curriculum
- Market Program
- Find Clients
- Teach Courses
- Orient Students
- Advice Students
- Grade Students
- Create/Revise Curriculum
- Maintain Curriculum
- Market Program
- Find Clients

### Value Propositions
- Introduce reliable/proven approaches to doing foresight (ie, Framework Foresight)
- Develop foresight practitioners
- Improve thinking processes
- Use foresight for problem-solving
- Positively impact communities
- Positively impact companies
- Give people a sense of agency
- Reduce uncertainties for all
- Provide innovation opportunities
- Introduce new foresight methods and theories (ie, HAT)
- Enable people to form positive visions of the future
- Create a community for like-minded future-thinkers (finding your "tribe" via foresight)

### Relations
- Onboarding
- University Relationship Building
- Student Relationship Building
- Peer-to-Peer Knowledge Building
- Alumni Network Building
- Client Relationship Building
- Inter-College Relations Building
- Professional Network Building

### Channels
- Website
- Blog
- Word of Mouth
- Futures Conference
- Alumni
- Research Sources
- Social Media
- In-Person Events
- Spring Gathering

### Stakeholders
- Grad Students
- Certificate Students
- Research Clients
- Foresight Program Alumni
- Program Faculty (Tenured)
- Program Faculty (Adjunct)
- Support Staff (TA, etc.)
- Professional Associations
- Board of Advisors

### Cost Structure
- Salary of Tenured & Adjunct Faculty
- Salary of Admin Staff
- Course Materials
- Utility Fees
- Platform Usage Fees
- University Fees (taking their cut)

### Outcome Streams
- Tuition
- Certificate Revenue
- Grants/Donations
- Client Research Fees
- Social Impact
- Urban Planning Impact
- IP
- Scan Sharing
- Behavioral Change
- Corp. Planning Impact
- Donation of Time (to program)
- Intellectual Contributions
Research Process

Our research process employed a combination of methodologies to ensure thorough exploration and analysis. Beginning with interviews as a foundational step, we engaged Andy Hines, the Foresight Program Director, to gain valuable insights into the core objectives and challenges of potential partnerships.

Signal scanning played a pivotal role in our research approach, enabling us to systematically identify emerging trends and drivers within the higher education landscape. By analyzing various signals and indicators, we were able to discern potential uncertainties and implications for the program.

Collaboration was integral to our process, as we leveraged the collective expertise and perspectives of our team to navigate complexities and uncover opportunities. Through collaborative efforts facilitated by platforms like Miro, we synthesized our findings and distilled them into actionable insights.

Some of these key components were self-financed revenue, real-world application, greater program prestige, and our favorite—making the program unkillable.

Key Insights

• Overall program strategy- lifelong learning and providing value to the community- to help the world through progress.
• What is working? Certificate and bootcamps make money and we get to keep it.
• How partnerships are envisioned fitting into strategy / Partnerships offer protection.
• Unmet needs of program (that partners could fulfill) longevity and resilience.
• Expansion of program to new markets (accessed via partnership)
• Metrics: number of students enrolled and amount of money bringing in from tuition.

Success Criteria

• Self-financed revenue- with currently limited staffing, money is necessary not for profit, but to be able to achieve the strategic vision. External partners we need some cash from to sustain us. Revenue is important. We think there’s cool stuff to do and we need money to do it.
• Providing value to the community- to help the world through progress. Doing good!
• Real-world application- Students and alumni love working on real projects with real clients and that draws in more people to the program. Student experience and engagement matters.
• Greater program prestige- the more success, the more success
• Making the program “unkillable”
Drivers

Crafting a preferred future and rewriting the UH Foresight vision statement inspired our team to go beyond simply the possible. Our analysis of uncertainties revealed a preferred future that emphasizes lifelong learning, collaboration, and innovation through a multi-dimensional partnership approach.

Vision Criteria

An image about the future that is attractive, appealing, and compelling, bold, and ambitious yet possible, motivating, energizing, unique, and emphasizes that we are the best.

UH Program Vision – Revised “To be the north star of strategic foresight, setting the global standard for futures education. We strive to lead in cultivating professional futurists whose insights drive positive, sustainable change in the world.”

The gap is the aspirational component. This revised vision statement offers a non-abstract vision - to set the global standard - that is both ambitious, yet possible. Taking the step to move from being widely known to setting the standard is a bolder choice that calls on the UH program to truly lead development of the foresight field. Furthermore, the addition of cultivating professionals to drive a positive impact describes the intrinsic value that foresight offers, proving a compelling reason to believe in this vision.

LEARNER’S COST

Education costs are largely subsidized, including a comprehensive government subsidy program for select “strategic” majors and a paid tuition program for students tentatively accepted to in-demand post-grad jobs.

REVENUE SOURCE

Higher education revenues will continue to be internally sourced. However, external sourcing will grow over time through increased corporate partnerships and sponsorships with universities and students respectively.

QUALIFICATION

University degrees continue to serve as legitimate, baseline qualifications, but the market prioritizes experience-based qualifications, driving development of secondary credentials that work in harmony to upskill individuals in the workplace.

CREDENTIALS

Credentials diversify to accommodate emerging careers and increased demand for lifelong reskilling, creating a “choose-your-own-adventure” credentialling ecosystem where learners pick the specific skills they want to acquire.

LEARNING PACE

The pace of learning shifts to accommodate learners’ preferences, leading to more self-paced and on-demand learning. Key synchronous touchpoints are maintained to foster community.

LEARNERS

The student body becomes more non-traditional, as demand for continuing education increases and the size of the traditional undergrad market shrinks.

CURRICULUM FOCUS

Technology enables greater collaboration between entities, shifting business processes to a paradigm of cooperation.

KEY RELATIONSHIPS

In a world of growing complexity and polycrisis, partnerships are more powerful, sustainable, and profitable than going it alone. Universities are inclined to build multi-national academic coalitions and nurture “innovation ecosystems” with corporate partners.
Preferred Future

Higher Education Transformation: Embracing Lifelong Learning, Collaboration, and Innovation

In the future of higher education, revenues are expected to initially maintain some level of internal sourcing, with the anticipation that external funding will steadily increase through heightened corporate partnerships and sponsorships. As complexity escalates, partnerships can offer lucrative and potent strategies. The financial framework is additionally supported by extensive subsidies, increasing opportunity and access for more students. This transformation is partly driven by a dynamic student body, characterized by more non-traditional learners seeking continuing education that can accommodate individual preferences for self-paced and on-demand learning experiences. Technology tools offer deeper integration and collaboration among stakeholders, driving an environment of cooperative business processes. Another shift towards non-traditional learning will be less emphasis on university degrees and more market needs driven credentials emerging to support skill development in the workplace. University diplomas will remain relevant, but more as a baseline point of entry and will become more accessible to more people. To meet the demands of emerging careers and industry specialization, credentials will need to diversify. These outcomes incorporate innovation, collaboration, and lifelong learning for the institutions, students and corporate partners involved in the dynamic landscape of higher education.
Strategic Approach

To achieve this new vision, we adopted a cohesive two-pronged partnership approach, with each prong designed to leverage UH’s capabilities and create advantage for the program over time.

Prong #1: Industry Certifications

The first prong recommends that the UH Foresight Program pursue external partnerships in ways that increase its chance to expand its market, elevate its external status, and grow its revenue. The primary avenue for this is to pursue the joint development of specialized industry-specific certifications.

Prong #2: Integration into the Lab

The second prong recommends that the UH Foresight Program leverage its new Activation Lab initiative as a launching pad upon which to grow internal partnerships, increasing how interconnected it is with the rest of the university. The information and assets developed in Prong 1 are foundational to successful integration of partners into the lab.

Success Criteria

The strategies for each of these initiatives were crafted around our 6 key success criteria that were distilled from the research outputs:

Program Evaluation Metrics:
- Number of students enrolled
- Amount of tuition dollars brought in

Program Purpose:
- Do good

Customer Experience:
- Good customer service / usability
- Good student experience
- Real-world application

These criteria are what the program needs to focus on to be successful today and, must continue to focus on in the future. Any strategic approach needed to take these into consideration to ensure that these critical criteria were met and that any recommendation helped enhance UH Foresight’s ability to fulfill them.

“Unkillability”

Each of these criteria also laddered up to a greater, more comprehensive goal of making the program unkillable. This goal was interpreted not just as what UH Foresight needs to do to succeed as they are today, but as an ambition for a preferred future (and a clear statement against a unpreferred one). This concept became the guiding star of our strategic approach and meant that we would focus our attention on the types of things that contribute to “unkillability”:

Interconnectedness - being woven into other programs and initiatives, whether internally or externally

Status - enhancing the image of the program and visibility of what it is doing

Revenue - being profitable and self-financed
It became clear in the preliminary research that certifications were an important part of the UH business model. We heard repeatedly that they are a “goldmine” compared to tuition. This is because, even though certification fees themselves may be substantially lower than tuition, the program gets to keep a much larger percentage of the profit. The certification programs are also much shorter in duration, making the returns on them much higher.

While finances were not set out explicitly as one of the key areas focus, it is clear, both from this project and every other, that money is an important factor. We understood the challenge to make the foresight program “unkillable” as a challenge to make the program resilient and self-sufficient, and thus determined that a core part of the strategy needed to include a clear way to monetize any new service offerings recommended. Thus, we decided it would be wise to build from the success of the certification program and build upon that - since it is a model that UH Foresight already has in place.

A challenge we quickly identified was that while strategic foresight is applicable widely and broadly across industries and has seen an uptick in adoption, it is still relatively unknown. For those that have heard of it, it can still be difficult for them to connect it to their day-to-day work and understand how it applies to and can enhance what they do. This leaves an untapped market of potential students who could genuinely benefit from foresight.

Simultaneously, we have noted that many professional organizations (such as ASME, IDSA, APA, etc.) have the need to:
1. Continuously educate their members and keep them informed on developments within their industry.
2. Constantly output fresh and interesting content to keep their members engaged.

Furthermore, many professional organizations require continuing education credits, noteworthy for no other reason than to recognize that there is a readily available pool of time and money set aside for professional training each year.

Considering these factors, our recommendation was to partner with select professional development organizations to launch industry-specific foresight certifications. Such a program would leverage the curriculum and training methods already designed for the standard foresight certification, but would substitute some of the materials with industry-specific trends, information, and examples. Instead of having to source this industry-specific information from scratch, the UH Foresight team would be able to work with the professional development organization to solicit inside knowledge and insights, thus making the customization of the certification a lighter lift to implement. With such industry-specific knowledge integrated into the foresight certification, the program will feel more relevant, actionable, and connected to daily work.
Potential Partners

Example #1: AFI
Alliance for Innovation

AFI is a non-profit professional development organization specifically geared towards helping local government officials and public workers build their innovation and anticipation capacities. UH could partner with AFI to launch a certification program, working with the AFI staff to source trends and developments in local government that could be used to develop targeted coursework with real-world local government examples.

Example #2: ASME
Association of Mechanical Engineers

ASME is a professional organization for mechanical engineers to share knowledge and stay up to date on industry trends. UH could partner with ASME to develop a mechanical engineering focused-foresight certification, using examples like generative CAD, digital twins, etc. to make the program feel contextually relevant.

Example #3: IDSA
Industrial Designer Society of America

IDSA is a professional society for industrial designers to share best practices and learn from one another. UH could work with IDSA to provide a foresight certification to their members, integrating trends impacting design and teaching designers how to integrate long-term thinking into their work.
**Advantage**

Obviously, being able to tap into these markets with the certification program would benefit the program through increased revenue. However, more importantly, developing and marketing foresight certifications in this manner creates several strategic advantages for the program:

**Inside Knowledge:** Working with industry experts to develop custom content provides access to very specific industry trends which may otherwise be difficult for foresight researchers to access. This information could be compiled into a trend database that is made accessible to students and alumni (for a fee). For foresight practitioners working in competitive industries, access to such proprietary knowledge or information is an incredible strategic advantage and to those working for the greater good, it is a genuinely helpful tool.

**Industry Resources:** Part of the negotiation for the certification program could include access to industry research, journals, or other resources, creating a library of rich materials.

**Network:** Perhaps most importantly, the strategy creates a network of industry professionals that are familiar with foresight and who could be tapped as “experts” to interview in future projects.

We see the outcomes of such a program to be:

The certification program will, hopefully, become a conduit for new projects, leading to more opportunities for real-world projects for students. We expect, as more professionals get exposure to foresight and see how the methods apply to their work today, that demand will grow and a certain percentage of students can be expected to be converted to clients.

We also suspect that the people drawn into these certification programs will be the type that are already inclined towards futures thinking. While we have no belief that every certification student will become a full-time master’s student, we do believe that exposure to this program and way of thinking is likely to lead some certification students to become master students, thus the certification program becomes an important pipeline of students into the master’s program.

Finally, as UH Foresight builds relationships with the professionals going through the certification program, we believe it would be wise to fold them into the UH Foresight community in order to nurture the relationship and continuously strengthen the bond. The certification students that get plugged into the community are also potential employers, ones that are growing more aware of the potential and value of foresight. This becomes a huge benefit for alumni, especially ones that have entered the program with a career-change in mind.
Secondary Path

The second part of the strategic approach was to enhance internal partnerships. With our understanding that UH would be investing resources in a new “Activation Lab” and that its nature was still in a state of flux, we decided that building from this initiative and using it as an anchor point for internal collaborations made the most sense. Creating another entirely new initiative, with UH Foresight’s limited bandwidth and resources, was not a tenable strategy.

The vision is to build upon the Lab’s collaborative nature, giving it a few years to establish itself within the foresight community and then expanding by eventually inviting other departments in to collaborate on projects and research. Under such a strategy, the Activation Lab becomes a hub for all cross-academic activities and makes it easy for other departments within UH to get plugged in.

As part of our preliminary research, we were informed that interdisciplinary collaboration was a metric which departments and programs would be evaluated on (something the university wants to see more of) but that such collaborations had, thus far, been almost nonexistent. After analyzing this situation, our team determined that the reason there had been little interdisciplinary collaboration was a lack of incentive to do so.

Without a clear incentive, such collaborations were more trouble than they were worth. Thus, our team decided to tackle this head on using the one thing that all departments can benefit from: a greater chance at employing graduates.

We designed this prong of the strategic approach to leverage the professional relationships built through the industry-specific certification program, as a way to incentivize interdisciplinary participation in the Lab. Such relationships would provide:

- Access to emerging job trends and opportunities, which could inform the development of curriculum, keeping it fresh and relevant to employers.
- Access to real-world projects to help students with career preparedness, skill-building, and general hire-ability.
- And access to a network of industry professionals for mentorships or potential employment opportunities down the road.

In exchange for these benefits, partnering departments would contribute the following to the Lab:

- Reviewing and/or contributing to the industry-specific certification.
- Guest lectures on topics of interest or co-teaching of collaborative summer electives (ie, building a foresight video game: jointly taught by foresight and computer engineering instructors).
- And most importantly, contribution to collaborative foresight-informed research projects.
Potential Partners

Example #1: MPA
Masters of Public Administration

The MPA program could be invited into the Lab after launching the local government specific foresight certification with AFI, giving the MPA students access to:
- AFI’s professional network of local government leaders
- Ability to contribute to a real, meaningful research projects
- A chance to potentially find an internship or job thru AFI

Example #2: ME
Mechanical Engineering Program

The ME program could be invited into the Lab after launching a certification with ASME, giving the ME students access to:
- ASME’s professional network of senior engineers and engineering managers
- Ability to contribute to real, meaningful research projects
- Up-to-date industry information and a pool of mentors

Example #3: ID
Industrial Design Program

The ID program could be invited into the Lab after launching a certification with IDSA, giving ID students access to:
- IDSA’s professional network of senior designers and design managers
- Ability to contribute to real, meaningful research projects
- Mentors who can help students establish their careers
Long-Term Outcome

In the long-term, we believe the Activation Lab could become a pillar of research within UH, coordinating leading-edge insights with industry needs to create a collaborative horizon 3 R&D space. It would become a home for working on the big, hairy problems of the day – a space to explore, to conduct curiosity-driven research, and to experiment with ways to turn research into actual change in the world. With this approach, the Lab becomes a pathway for the foresight program to not just study change, but to actively participate in creating visions for a better world and bringing them to life.

Eventually the Lab could grow into a think tank, inviting industry players and governmental organizations into the fold to contribute their expertise and resources to solving systemic issues and building a brighter future.
Strategy Rollout

PHASE 1:
Get the Activation Lab Off the Ground

We look to evangelize the Activation Lab across the Foresight program, drawing in both current students and alumni, bridging Lab activities with course assignments and where applicable, with alumni workplaces.

ACTIONS:
1. INFORM STUDENTS, FORMALIZE MEMBERSHIP: Create Lab materials to educate students and alumni about Lab objectives, benefits and opportunities while also formalizing membership criteria and format
2. CREATE CONTENT: Develop departmental activities and course-linked projects that build foresight content (including industry-specific)
3. ESTABLISH PLATFORM: Harness departmental knowledge and content creation flow from #2 above to feed into a more formalized Foresight platform and repository (leverage platform and repository for enhanced content capture and sharing within the department)
4. RECRUIT ALUMNI: Create outreach pathways targeting Foresight alumni and incentivize participation and membership.
Strategy Rollout

PHASE 2:
Launch Industry Foresight Certifications

Our aim is to develop industry-specific certification programs to bring foresight into business strategies of professional development organizations while incentivizing engagement and partnership with the UH Activation Lab

ACTIONS:
1. ESTABLISH CERTIFICATION FRAMEWORK WITH INDUSTRY FOCUS: Develop a curriculum and detailed requirements behind a new foresight certification program targeting specific industries
2. PRIORITIZE AND RECRUIT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FIRMS: Establish outreach programs to industries and actively market foresight and pitch joining the Activation Lab for access to more in-depth foresight content related to each respective industry
3. SOLIDIFY MODEL CERTIFICATION: Select an industry (ex. design), build a model certification to fail fast, learn, iterate, improve and showcase

EXTERNAL PARTNERSHIP DEVELOPMENT
NEAR-FUTURE TO FUTURE STRATEGY
**Strategy Rollout**

**PHASE 3:**

**Invite UH Departments into the Lab**

We will evangelize the Activation Lab across UH departments, leveraging external industry partners gained through the corporate foresight certification program to motivate relevant UH departments to get actively involved with the Lab.

**ACTIONS:**

1. **INTRODUCE INDUSTRY PARTNERS:** Promote successful industry-specific certifications to relevant university departments (launch foresight workshop series for specific UH departments featuring foresight-certified industry players of related industries).

2. **RECRUIT UH DEPARTMENTS:** Once UH departments understand foresight benefits to companies that typically hire their graduates, bring these departments into the Activation Lab as members for each to initiate foresight knowledge building directly.

3. **EXPAND UH DEPARTMENTAL FORESIGHT OFFERINGS:** Support pathway for foresight course offering expansion into other UH departments with the goal of making foresight a natural, integrated part of a broad range of academic programs (long-term).
By 2030, the Lab will define programs and membership criteria, establish content creation and dissemination channels, market to alumni, build industry-specific foresight certification programs, and expand horizontally across UH departments.

**Timeline**

2024

1. Solidify Foresight Activation Lab as central hub & platform for department-wide activities and information aggregation

2025

2. Pitch Activation Lab to Foresight students and alumni, start building membership foundation

Grow membership

Launch evangelization of Activation Lab offerings to potential industry partners

Select industry for initial foresight certification pilot

Chose initial industry model

2026

3. Pilot initial certification model

Build additional industry-specific models based on success of partner search from prior year

Build foresight offerings catered to UH departments

2027

Register first industry-specific certification program (if pilot successful)

Seek additional industry buy-in

Evangelize across UH departments

2028

Build membership, grow partnerships

Launch foresight collaboratives with industry partners

Pilot foresight offering to select UH departments

2029

Expand Activation Lab into initial UH department partners

Establish research collaboratives between corporate and UH department members

Continue to build membership base and breadth of foresight content as Lab circle widens

2030
Conclusion

Our proposed internal and external partnership strategy will set up the UH Foresight Program for long-term sustainability and success. By identifying and prioritizing unmet needs of the program, we will solidify highly beneficial partnerships that will enhance the program’s visibility and credibility within the foresight community, the UH community, and across many industries beyond the UH campus.

We’ve gotten off to a great start with the founding of the UH Foresight Activation Lab. We look forward to building upon this progress by continuing to add value and broaden foresight learning opportunities for all in the years to come.