

Serendipitous Connections and the Future of Futures Studies

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The Serendipitous Past – How I became a Futurist

I actually don't actually remember the first time I met Jim Dator, in part because prior to my arrival at the University of Hawai'i for graduate school, I had never heard of futures studies and thus had no idea how it might influence the next decades of my life. My introduction to Jim and to the Hawai'i Research Center for Futures Studies (HRCFS) was both serendipitous and fortuitous. Like many students attracted to the University of Hawai'i, it was political theory that drew me there, but it turned out that the department was filled with intellectually interesting areas of study that went well beyond theory and the most exciting of all, for me at least, was futures studies.

My arrival in 1992 was uneventful and marked no specific benchmark for the HRCFS. The center had been created by an act of the Hawai'i State legislature in 1970. By the 1990s, HRCFS was well established, had been involved in futures-related work locally, nationally, and internationally for several decades, and had an eclectic and diverse group of affiliated researchers, graduate students, and futures folk working on center-related projects. It was an intellectually vibrant atmosphere because nothing was off limits for discussion. Conversations ranged from the possibilities of nanotechnology (then still more fiction than fact) to political economy to the future of work, education, and the environment. At the center of it all was Jim Dator, whose thoughts, words, and writings were so far-reaching that nothing seemed to have escaped his analysis and commentary. In the 1990s, there was an entire back room on the 7th floor of Saunders (then Porteus) Hall with copies of Dator's publications, past presentations, course materials and the like. I believe much of this has now been migrated into electronic format thus saving an enormous amount of office space.

Given the stimulating atmosphere of HRCFS, it was my pleasure to work as a research assistant for Jim between 1993 and 1996. It was a time when organizations began adapting to new technologies and HRCFS was an eager adopter of computer-mediated communication. The futures listserv, which still operates today, began during this period, as did the first website for HRCFS. That original website was coded in HTML and the rudimentary style is laughable compared to the excellent quality of today's website. I remember the training I had in web design from a fellow graduate student who had studied computers – as he put it, good web design was all about cutting and pasting other people's code. This lesson alone was instrumental in my understanding of the web and, also ultimately, in how I understood the intersection between copyright law and computer

technology.

Aside from a new website that made the center visible to the outside, the *Manoa Journal of Fried and Half-Fried Ideas* was developed and published in quarterly installments. Digital copies of these papers can still be found electronically on the website. Additionally, a series of environmental scanning projects helped fund student researchers. All told, it was a wonderful place to work and I was able to learn about futures methods and research projects through practice.

Upon accepting a job at Otterbein College (now Otterbein University), a small liberal arts college in Ohio, I moved away from the daily connection I had with futures studies, but its method of thinking about the world remained with me. While at Otterbein I created and taught my own futures course as part of the integrative studies curriculum, the core requirements all students at Otterbein had to take. Had I stayed at Otterbein, I would have made a concerted effort to ensure that as many students as possible were exposed to the idea of futures-related work and analysis. Throughout my time away from UH, my scholarship also remained linked to futures ideas and methods, and Dator's work acted as an inspiration that linked my own work to futures studies.

Twelve years after I left Hawai'i without intending to return, yet another unanticipated, serendipitous event occurred – the Political Science department advertised for a position that was part public policy and part futures studies. Obviously I was interested in the position and while on an informal visit to Hawai'i, I stopped by HRCFS and met with Jim and some of the graduate students. While some things had changed – the offices were now located in the political science department instead of on the seventh floor, for example – other things remained the same. Specifically, HRCFS was still directed by Jim and even with his limited resources, he had managed to attract exciting and interesting graduate students doing great work, as usual. In fact, meeting these new graduate students, and seeing their energy and passion for futures studies, was a significant reason that I decided to apply and take the job at UH. Of course, in addition to great graduate students, such a position made it possible to work in an intellectually vibrant atmosphere where anything could be thought, the more cutting-edge the better.

Ironically for a futurist, my connection with the field has always been both serendipitous and at times completely unplanned—a wildcard event if you will. However, my desire to be linked to futures studies and to support its future development here at the University of Hawai'i is strong. Jim has been the center of HRCFS and its core grant-receiver and scholarly voice for over forty years. Jim's passion for futures studies and his ability to attract and train generations of amazingly talented people means that not only is HRCFS a local entity based in Hawai'i, but that it has friends around the globe. Jim, to me, stands for what futures studies can do best—there are times when -- despite denying the predictive nature of the discipline -- he has been able to say “I told you so,” based upon an analysis of emerging events he had made decades or years previously. The real key to futures studies is the ways in which it can provide scenarios for the future that disrupt the business-as-usual present. Thus, futures studies is both politically necessary and what is now called the “Manoa School” of futures is an important contribution to politics, policy, and academia more generally (Jones, date).

Given my own past, present, and hopefully future relationship with HRCFS, it is only logical to think about what a vision for HRCFS might be. As a research center,

HRCFS is caught in the trap of seeking constantly to find funding for its operations, an effort that Jim has managed to do with of course the help and support of past and present students and colleagues. It is time, however, to offer a bigger vision of the future of futures studies at the University of Hawai'i.

The Future of HRCFS

As any good futurist should, I am going to think bravely about what I would like to see emerge in the next five to ten years for HRCFS. I hope that through describing the following plan, others will be inspired to contribute their ideas as well. I dream of a future outside all cost limitations, and assume that it might be possible to raise the millions of dollars such a plan would entail.

First, given that Jim plays all the roles in the center, it is time to create additional positions that will help with the administrative side of HRCFS as well as the academic side. HRCFS needs a full-time director who can be committed to grant writing and developing funding opportunities for the center. This person would manage daily activities and help build the center for the future. While the primary responsibility of the director would be administrative, it makes sense that such a person would be trained as a futurist and be willing to contribute to the scholarly side of the program as well.

Aside from a director, this plan should also create an endowed chair for Futures Studies. Such a position would assure that a dedicated futurist remains affiliated with the University of Hawai'i in perpetuity: a person who would be responsible for teaching and scholarship associated with futures-related issues. Ideally, there would be two full-time futures-related faculty to act as the core of the discipline and these two would be supported by the affiliated faculty already present in the UH system who teach courses that enrich the futures curriculum.

At this point, it is necessary to build HRCFS in two directions. The first is the research center itself and the second is the academic core of futures studies. HRCFS under the leadership of its new director should transition into a much larger think tank for futures issues. Using the already existing affiliations, it should commission work on futures-related issues and hire the necessary expertise to complete these projects. By necessity, this involves creating a global network of people who would work for the center under commission. However, it also requires at least two, if not more, Graduate Assistant positions for students who come to the center to pursue a degree that emphasizes futures studies. Funding graduate students is one of the links between the research center and the academic side, to which I will return shortly.

Aside from developing HRCFS as a key research center for futures-related work, this plan would also find and purchase a retreat center somewhere in Hawai'i. The retreat center would become a place to host workshops, conferences, and planning activities. It could also serve as a true retreat for futures-related academics looking for a place to do work. Such a center could embrace the futures values of one of the preferred futures often discussed during scenario-building sessions over the years. If I were developing this retreat, it would include a completely sustainable and off-the-grid system that combines various alternative energy sources to supply energy. It would have its own garden, plus numerous fruit trees, some chickens and goats, and perhaps even a *loi* (Hawaiian terraced water garden), to provide some of the basic food supplies for the kitchen. The center building would include both small private spaces and also large public spaces where workshops and conferences could

convene. Ideally, this conference center would be located outside of Honolulu but close enough that transportation to and from the airport would be possible – possibly the North Shore of O’ahu.

The further development of HRCFS as a think tank and the creation of a retreat/conference center would position the center as one of the leading players in futures-related work. Aside from enhancing the scope and depth of the work produced by the center, the academic program of futures studies at the University should also be further enhanced.

On that note, while the home of Futures Studies has been the Political Science Department for over three decades, it may be time for the center to consider asserting its independence. There are several reasons for this. First, while much of the work the center does has political implications, and the current curriculum is based around courses offered in the political science department, futures studies goes well beyond the discipline of political science. As a result, many interesting and qualified graduate students must be rejected, not because their futures-work is poor, but because there is not a clear fit with the larger political science program. It is time to consider what a formal degree – whether a BA, MA or PhD -- in futures studies might look like. An effort is already underway to establish a futures studies certificate at both the undergraduate and graduate level so that students leaving the program will have some formal recognition of their work. However, I think it would be good for Futures Studies to become independent, devise its own curriculum and gain autonomy over the students admitted to the program so that it can more fully embrace the many dimensions of futures-related thinking.

The specifics of an independent futures studies major will need to be left to those who are willing to help develop it. However, an independent program would allow a far more wide-ranging view of futures to emerge from education, space, environment, technology, and much more. Already, futures studies attracts people from around the world, but an independent graduate program would be able to develop the educational training of these students much more fully, as well as attract an even more widely diverse group of students.

Conclusion

While these are just a few ideas about the future of Futures Studies at the University of Hawai’i, I think they provide some good goals that obviously need to be supplemented and enhanced by others. It should also be clear that these goals can only be achieved with a concerted fundraising effort, which is of course the first priority. It may be that raising the funds for such a significant endeavor will be beyond the means of an understaffed and overworked organization. However, given the impact Jim Dator has had on the future and the many people who have come through the doors of the center, as well as all the organizations, institutions, and scholarly endeavors with which Jim is associated, it seems we all owe it to the future to try.

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