



COURSE 1

# READY SET FUTURE

## **READING MATERIAL**

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**Prospectus for an  
Institute for the Future, 1966**



INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

**FUTURES THINKING**

taught by Institute for the Future with **Jane McGonigal**



## COURSE 1

# READY SET FUTURE

Do you want to think about the future with more creativity and optimism? Do you want to see what's coming, faster, so you can be better prepared for disruptions and more in control of your future? Do you want to get better at changing what's possible—in your company, your industry, your community, and in your own life?

This course will introduce you to the practice of futures thinking, as developed and applied for the past 50 years by the [Institute from the Future](https://www.iftf.org), a Silicon-Valley-based research and learning group founded in 1968. In this course, you'll build your baseline understanding of what futures thinking is and what you can do with it. You'll master introductory techniques for growing your foresight. You'll meet a range of professional futurists and learn more about how they think and research what's coming. And you'll choose one or more future topics or personal interest to investigate with your new foresight skills.

This course is for anyone who wants to spot opportunities for innovation and invention faster, and gain the skills and confidence to help lead the course of events that are changing the world, instead of being led by them.

### About this Specialization

The Institute for the Future is declaring 2020 “The Year of the Future,” because we believe that foresight is a human right. Every human should have the chance to develop the creative skills needed to imagine how the future can be different, and to participate in deciding what the future will be. We believe futures thinking shouldn't be something that only happens in Silicon Valley. With our specialization in Futures Thinking on Coursera, we are the first organization ever to offer massively open, free training in futures thinking. We aim to upskill the entire planet in future thinking and future making, by teaching one million online learners via the Coursera platform. This text is one of 100 free readings distributed as part of our “Year of the Future” training.

### Institute for the Future

Institute for the Future is the world's leading futures thinking organization. For over 50 years, businesses, governments, and social impact organizations have depended upon IFTF global forecasts, custom research, and foresight training to navigate complex change and develop world-ready strategies. IFTF methodologies and toolsets yield coherent views of transformative possibilities across all sectors that together support a more sustainable future. Institute for the Future is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Palo Alto, California.  
[www.iftf.org](https://www.iftf.org)



### FUTURES THINKING

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Prospectus  
for an  
INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

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Organizing Committee for an

INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

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INSTITUTE FOR THE FUTURE

INTRODUCTION

This prospectus proposes an Institute for the Future, devoted entirely to furthering the public interest.

The future is becoming more important to the present than it has ever been. We have now entered an era in which the pace of change is accelerating rapidly. At the same time, the scale of impending change is increasing. Therefore, the risks and opportunities that confront us justify expanded efforts to lead, rather than be led by, the course of events.

There are numerous evidences, some alarming, of the growing disparity between society's propensity to generate forces of change and its ability to control those forces. Conventional public and private institutions may not be able to prevent this disparity or to contain its social consequences, without first acquiring a better understanding of its complex causes.

To be sure, policy makers at all levels of society are beginning to appreciate the costs and limitations of piecemeal response to events and to recognize the need for more integrated planning procedures. But because of the current institutional framework within which they have to operate they do not seem to be in a position to do full justice to this desideratum.

The Institute proposed in this prospectus has the purpose of providing leadership in creating a more thoroughgoing future-orientation in organizations of all kinds in our pluralistic society, and of supplying some of the knowledge, conceptual tools, and services required for improved planning and policy

development by public and private agencies. Such an Institute is important not because existing organizations are not paying adequate attention to planning and programming activities, but precisely because they are, and because they realize that this attention must be augmented by a set of activities and services that are presently unavailable.

Specifically, there is a need for a systematic effort

1. to explore important future alternatives for our society and for the international community;
2. to ascertain which among these possible futures appear to be more desirable than others, and why; and
3. to seek means by which the probability of their occurrence could be enhanced through appropriate policies and actions.

The Institute's effort, in helping to pursue these objectives, will attempt to clarify the implications for present policies and choices of possible future developments, or else to suggest some of the long-term impacts that present or contemplated policies and choices could have. Clearly, this kind of endeavor will require the utmost in original research and study, and careful attention will have to be given to arrangements for promoting and facilitating this kind of work by coupling it effectively with the policy development and planning efforts of client organizations. Thus many products of the Institute may be in other forms than paper reports of studies. They might include, among others, computer programs that represent complex relations among relevant factors, simulation facilities to allow participation in forward-looking activities by groups of interested officials, and data-base access services to client organizations.

In pursuing its objectives, the Institute could be expected to have a strongly catalytic effect by stimulating planning agencies, or other organizations conducting research in support of planning agencies, to give consideration to a wider range of possible future developments. More generally, the findings of the Institute would enhance public consciousness of socially significant available alternatives, and thus fulfill an important obligation as a politically nonpartisan agent in a democracy. Indeed its very existence might provide focus and encouragement to scholarly activities within and outside of government that are directed toward the systematic examination of the possibilities of the future. The Institute might thus help generate a new breed of practical thinkers, prepared to apply their orientation toward the future more purposefully in all sectors of the society.

#### THE CONCEPT OF A NEW INSTITUTE

The concept of an Institute for the Future derives from the convergence of two recent intellectual developments. One of these is European, its most prominent exponents being Dennis Gabor and Bertrand de Jouvenel. Gabor, in Inventing the Future, has stated with great persuasiveness the need for "social engineering" to avert potential social disaster. De Jouvenel, the guiding spirit of the Futuribles group, in l'Art de la Conjecture and elsewhere, has advocated strongly the need to institutionalize the search for possible futures ("futuribles") and to encourage the democratic process of choosing among them.

The second development is American. A new attitude toward longer-range planning has been emerging in both the public and

private sectors in this country. The successful application of multidisciplinary analysis by the Department of Defense has led to a Presidential directive that a similar approach be applied in the nonmilitary domain. The planning and programming procedures of the other departments of the federal government are accordingly undergoing substantial modification. Similar trends are developing among state and municipal governments. In private industry, too, a hard look is beginning to be taken at some of the possible long-term futures of our society, in order to derive from such forecasts appropriate guidance for investments and operations.

In addition to these two developments, there is growing recognition among professional planners within many international organizations that the enormous worldwide problems of the developing countries, of population control, and of the eradication of poverty, necessitate the replacement of short-term stop-gap measures by farsighted and comprehensive approaches which presuppose considerable planning and development. There is, however, an acute awareness in all quarters that organizational resources for the analysis of the future are deplorably inadequate.

#### LIMITATIONS OF EXISTING INSTITUTIONS

While excellent work on component subject areas is presently being performed in many places in the country,\* a sufficiently concentrated and interdisciplinarily integrated activity with the necessary skills, scope, and freedom does not appear to exist today.

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\* A list of organizations currently devoting some explicit effort to future-oriented work is given in Appendix C.



It would, of course, be possible for government agencies to build up the needed capabilities within their own organizations. Indeed, most government staff analysts already appreciate the value of integrated future-oriented analysis; yet their focus is usually centered too much on current decisions to permit systematic exploration of the future without outside assistance or to lend continuity to the gradual development of improved methods for the analysis of the future. Moreover, since the results of the activity under discussion may include suggestions of new directions for government policies and practices, this function is more properly based outside of government.

The nonprofit organizations presently existing which were created to aid the Department of Defense probably come closest to meeting the specifications for the suggested need. However, in practice, their potential propensity to move in this direction is limited for several reasons: their continuing obligations to the Department of Defense; derivatively, their military orientation, which is not conducive to a balanced commitment to this new role; and the officially expressed disinclination of their sponsors to permit their further rapid growth or diversification.

As for profit-making enterprises, only a few have the required multidisciplinary breadth. Moreover, no matter how unbiased their research findings, they find it difficult to overcome public doubt that analyses by a profit-making organization are totally free of ulterior considerations.

The universities, likewise, cannot be expected to take over primary responsibility in this area, for they are fundamentally dedicated (and properly so) to the functions

of teaching, development of new knowledge, and promotion of scholarship. Their current prevalent incentive structure, rewarding individual excellence in disciplinary scholarship, does not encourage long-term commitment to interdisciplinary public service. The individual academic expert, alone or in combination with graduate students and a small research staff, cannot supply the comprehensive services which government agencies, and possibly others, will need if they are to acquit themselves well of their major planning and programming responsibilities. Indeed, the size of the required effort is likely to be so great that a university could find itself distorted beyond tolerable limits. (However, the proposed Institute and the universities would have many joint interests. Mutually advantageous relationships should be developed to allow the needed flow of persons and other resources between it and the academic world.)

It appears, then, that no organization exists that is, or could easily become, entirely suited to the stated purposes. Consequently, serious consideration should be given to the establishment of one or more new organizations, such as the Institute for the Future proposed herein.

#### THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTE

The Institute's principal role will be to institutionalize orientation toward the future as a deliberate activity. Its existence will be justified to the extent that it generates thoughtful, stimulating, and realistic pictures of possible futures, and demonstrates how their realization depends upon available policies or courses of action.

The Institute thus will help support the formation of long-range policies by making clearer what future alternatives are open to us and how they may be approached or avoided. Its efforts will be devoted to providing a reasonably detailed understanding of what social, technological, and other conditions are attainable at various points in the future, at what costs, with what degree of probability, and through what means of implementation. Such efforts should reveal potential difficulties and unintended consequences that might attach to contemplated policies and actions, and thus contribute to the analysis of the relative desirability of alternative courses.

For the Institute properly to serve this role, namely of providing effective support to planning efforts, it is essential to recognize that, in a pluralistic society such as ours, planning is a distributed function. There is no centralized determination of the course of social development. Yet the policies and programs of a given organization, whether public or private, form part of the context within which other organizations must do their planning. This is true not only among federal agencies, such as, say, the Department of Labor, the Office of Education, and the Office of Economic Opportunity, but also between federal agencies and state, regional, and local levels of government, and correspondingly between the public and private sectors, between industrial firms and unions, and so on. The total pattern of all these policies and programs is highly complex and dynamic. Nevertheless, it should be possible to articulate their interrelations in ways which would be practically useful and would enable each of the agencies involved to do its own job better.

The Institute, in this regard, can perform a unique service by helping individual planning agencies to pay proper attention not only to interdisciplinary aspects of planning but also to interagency feedback. The Institute might strive to do this in a variety of ways; for example,

substantively, by providing comprehensive cross-disciplinary surveys of potential future contingencies, and by carrying out research in depth in areas that transcend the traditional disciplines (for example, in organization theory, which among other disciplines involves sociology, economics, and psychology; and the study of interaction between social and technological change, which--besides sociology and technology--touches upon questions of moral values and political institutions);

methodologically, by developing or extending new operations-analytical techniques (mathematical models, systems analysis, simulation, systematized use of expert judgment, etc.) into the relevant areas of the applied social sciences;

operationally, by helping to set guidelines for the establishment, use, and safeguarding of data banks, and by providing laboratory facilities for planning work involving simulation.

Quite generally, the Institute should serve the following functions:

- o as a focus for integrated, large-scale, substantive work in critical selected areas, especially those in which needed organized expertise is not available elsewhere;
- o as a catalyst for the very many organizations working in areas related to future developments or to the application of systems technology to emerging social problems;

- o as a concentration of resources, such as data bases and collections of relevant models, that would be of broad use to those, both within and outside of the Institute, who are working on problems of the future;
- o as a center for development of methodology;
- o as a repository for partial and component products, and as an instrumentality for collating existing knowledge or insights acquired elsewhere;
- o as a symbol of national interest in meaningful solutions to interactive problems that have long-term implications;
- o as a source for provocative formulations of emerging issues that merit public attention;
- o as a training institution for those who have or will have planning and programming responsibilities in other organizations;
- o as a training institution for managers and officials whose responsibilities demand a reasonable familiarity with broad long-range trends and their implications;
- o as a service organization, to provide at least partial answers to questions of the form "What if ...?";
- o as a means for encouraging public dialogue on public issues and of making it more meaningful by bringing to bear the best facts and techniques available;
- o as a sophisticated vehicle for the simulated interaction of various kinds of organizations with related interests;
- o as a constant reminder to resist the almost universal tendency to foreshorten horizons and to revert to consideration of immediate crises.

#### PROGRAM ORIENTATION

In view of the role which has been formulated for the Institute, it will have to comply with the following guidelines:

- o It will be long-range future-directed, examining possible futures in terms of the plausibility of steps leading to them from the present. The time horizon will vary, as appropriate for the subject matter; rarely will it be less than 5 years, nor more than 50 years.
- o It will be primarily national in focus, extending however to urban, regional, and international problems. It will concentrate on nonmilitary concerns, but not to the exclusion of military-related matters, such as the prevention or containment of military conflict through nonmilitary means.
- o It will be operationally oriented, by staying within the boundaries of expected feasibility. Whenever appropriate, it will express, explain, and communicate its findings in operational terms, that is, with reference to decisions among available options.
- o It will be comprehensive in scope, by relying on the interdisciplinary efforts of a professionally diversified staff. The findings of its studies will be conscientiously cross-validated and interpreted in terms of their economic, psychological, political, and other consequences.
- o It will be imaginative by design, encouraging social and physical engineers, educators, scientists, writers, and political and moral philosophers to contribute their creative vision to the construction or synthesis of conditions attainable in the future. Subsequent analysis

will examine such proposals for feasibility, social desirability, and implied policy recommendations.

- o It will be subject to scrupulous regard for the demands of intellectual integrity, rejecting improper influence from any source: by discouraging the development of ulterior vested interests among its own administrative and professional staff; by choice of funding arrangements with minimal intellectual constraints; by being politically nonpartisan; and by striving to ascertain which values would be fostered or neglected as a consequence of alternative policy decisions.

To implement its role, the Institute will conduct five types of programs: (a) research on methods, (b) integrative studies, (c) component studies, (d) support services, and (e) educational services.

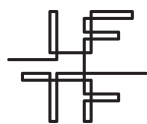
a. Research on methods will focus among other things on: principles of construction of socio-politico-economic development models; refinement of long-range forecasting methods; advancement of simulation techniques as aids in interdisciplinary and inter-group cooperation and in the acquisition of laboratory experience through dynamic simulation of social and political processes; improvement in methods for the systematic use of expert judgment; development of substantially enhanced methods of program-budgeting based on cost-benefit analyses in which both costs and benefits include considerations not measurable in monetary terms; and a continuous program of research concerned with the advancement of methods of information dissemination.

For the most part, this methodological research will be conducted at the discretion of the Institute staff; however, certain contracted studies in this area may be accepted when these parallel the needs of the Institute.

b. Integrative studies will be systematic, comprehensive, and cohesive explorations of possible futures of society at all levels, from urban to international, expected as a rule to be originated by Institute staff members in accordance with their personal research interests. Primarily through the "systems" framework provided by integrative studies, which above all will differentiate the Institute from other research organizations, the insights arising from component studies will be related to each other and set in perspective. Typically, integrative studies will cut across two or more of the following dimensions of analysis: values and social goals; institutions and social structures; technology and society; population and natural resources; physical environment.

Examples of integrative studies are: investigations of the ecology of change, such as the long-range effects of technological change on the economy, on international relations, on social institutions, and on values; an examination, through construction of models and simulation studies, of the societal needs for and possibilities of novel forms of organization; a comprehensive analysis of positive disincentives to world conflict; a study of the relationship between information technology and the professions of the future; a study of the problems of the city--its structure, economy, transportation and communications systems, its poor and unequal citizens, and the interdependence of actions on any and all of these fronts; an effort to relate manpower development, education, and employment; an examination of the possible relations between developed and developing regions of the world, economically, culturally, and politically; an analysis of the interlocking problems of youth, race, ghettoization, and poverty that appear to lead to alienation and violence; a study





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