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## Surviving the Future: The Seven Revolutions Initiative as a Strategic Model for Curricular and Institutional Innovation

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SURVIVING THE FUTURE: THE SEVEN REVOLUTIONS  
INITIATIVE AS A STRATEGIC MODEL FOR CURRICULAR AND  
INSTITUTIONAL INNOVATION

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To maintain viability in the 21st century, state comprehensive institutions of higher education must act with strategic purpose now to be able to accomplish future curricular, operational and financial objectives—for the students they serve, for the communities where they operate, and for the states that appropriate their budgets. Survival is at stake for such institutions as they compete for enrollment in a forbidding economic context, while seeking funds from legislatures struggling to cope with revenue shortfalls. The state comprehensive university must innovate to adapt to emerging and unforeseen realities. One model for adaptive design is The Seven Revolutions Initiative (7 Revs), an American Democracy Project collaborative project of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the *New York Times*, and an initial cohort of scholars from eight AASCU institutions to adapt content for the university classroom. Close examination of this collaborative project reveals a strategic roadmap that is valuable to state comprehensive universities on both the curricular and institutional levels.

From a curricular perspective, the project has established course and program initiatives that are relevant to students both personally and professionally; that utilize technical, substantive, financial and professional resources available from outside the university; that enable students to connect the focus of their choices now to the quality of their lives and potential success in the future; that alert students to emerging global realities and the implications for their lives. From an institutional perspective, just as students must learn to adapt to the future so also must state comprehensives adapt to the future in higher education. More specifically, state comprehensive institutions must be preparing now for revolutions in five key areas that will affect their capacity to survive: civic education initiatives, sustainability themes, virtual learning, trans-disciplinary approaches and structural realignment, and cross-sector collaboration. To survive the challenging economic conditions of today yet remain viable for the next century, state comprehensive universities must adapt to new realities just as their students must adapt to a challenging future. The Seven Revolutions Initiative provides one model for how state comprehensive universities can strategize around curricular content and toward institutional mission.

## History

In order to help business and public policy leaders think more strategically about their long-term decision-making, Erik Peterson, formerly the Director of the Global Strategy Institute at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D.C., developed the 7 Revs framework (Peterson, 2010). Designed to aid these leaders in considering the trends and challenges they would face in the next quarter century, he called his presentation The Seven Revolutions. In exploring the world of 2025, he identified the following seven areas of revolutionary change:

Population Resource management and environmental stewardship Technological innovation and diffusion The development and dissemination of information and knowledge Economic integration The nature and mode of conflict The challenge of governance
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Many of the key players at the entities traditionally served by CSIS recognized the limitations that were placed on them on a daily basis to focus solely on operational management; constrained by the bottom line, they too often ignored the long view. In an effort to encourage such analysis in boardrooms and government agencies, Peterson began offering the 7 Revolutions as a call to long-term strategy.

The genesis of the Seven Revolutions as an academic program began in 2006, when AASCU Vice President for academic leadership and change George Mehaffy invited Peterson and CSIS to partner with AASCU to think about offering the 7 Revs content to a college student audience. AASCU was already affiliated with the *New York Times* through their American Democracy Project, begun in 2003, and the *Times* became the third partner in this new and unique collaborative enterprise (Mehaffey, 2010). CSIS provided in-depth policy and trend analysis, as well as the 7 Revs framework. The *Times* provided access to unprecedented resources from its archives dating back to 1851, in addition to hyper-current streaming news from around the world. AASCU provided the structure and support from their more than 430 campuses across the country representing over three million students. Out of this three-way partnership, the 7 Revolutions project, as it has become today, was born.

## Member Institutions

The following AASCU institutions were the original participants in the Seven Revolutions Project:

California State University at Fresno  
 Fort Hays State University (Kansas)  
 Fort Lewis College (Colorado)  
 Northern Arizona University  
 Southeast Missouri State University  
 Western Kentucky University  
 University of Minnesota Duluth  
 University System of Georgia

The partner institutions that have piloted the 7 Revolutions Project on their campuses represent a wide diversity of educational settings. Because the directive from the initial origins of the project was to discover and develop successful methods for incorporating this material into college curriculum, the 7 Revs materials have been utilized in diverse ways on the various campuses. Each of the 7 Revs scholars took the source materials and resources back to their host institutions and began to create ways to offer the materials to students. The 7 Revs framework resources have been used in a freshmen-level introductory course, senior-level capstone courses, honors colleges, breakout courses that utilize parts of the materials, as well as integrative courses that bring elements of the 7 Revs materials into existing courses across the curriculum. Each of these methods represents a different way of incorporating the materials, but each also represents a different framework that institutions can use to adopt and incorporate these powerful materials into their efforts to educate globally competent citizens.

Following the initial meetings and creation of the 7 Revolutions Scholars Group, representatives from AASCU, CSIS, and the *Times* have gathered at regular meetings several times a year with the scholars. “During these meetings and in the time between meetings, the 7 Revs Scholars have clarified the goals and objectives of the project, refined the assumptions about students and the context in which education will occur, created content and teaching/learning activities in the curriculum, and developed plans for implementing and evaluating the project. They have also tested materials and strategies in their own courses, and worked with other faculty on the participating campuses to field-test the materials as they are designed” (Falk & Orphan, 2010). Moving beyond the basic stages of simply creating a course for the 7 Revs materials, several of the participating institutions have also begun to develop true institutionalization of the materials. Plans are being developed at several campuses that would permanently incorporate the 7 Revs into the curriculum through either a first-year experience, a program in the honors college, or other institution-wide developments. The hope is that this material will develop beyond single courses and truly become incorporated in the institutional mission of the various campuses.

### Adaptive Curricular Purposes

In the context of alarming global trends, the most salient feature of the 7 Revs framework is its future-oriented, strategic, and adaptive focus. From a curricular perspective, consider four “teachable moments” 7 Revs offers the institution as it prepares students for their lives after college.

First, 7 Revs enables the institution to orient students to a strategic perspective that will be necessary for success in their professional and personal lives. The world of 2025 and beyond is the world that students will inhabit. It is the world in which they will pursue professional achievement and raise their families. In this world the students will care for their aging parents and grow old themselves. The content and framework of 7 Revolutions is an encounter with the future. As a “teachable moment,” the material can effectively press upon students the connection between the choices they make today and the quality of their lives later. Indeed, the original purpose of the content was to confront leaders in the public and private sectors with the necessity of thinking strategically, to see ten or twenty years beyond the next election or quarterly report. In the classroom, the material allows a natural conversation about individual values and purpose to underpin the substance of technical knowledge in its many applied forms. Students learn that their future is not merely the next test. The future is the test, and if they are not learning to think strategically now, the prospects for success and achievement later are immeasurably complicated.

Second, 7 Revolutions orients students to what the institution offers them as preparation for the emerging realities that will shape their lives. For this reason, institutions may be drawn to offering the material at the beginning of a student’s college career. At Fort Hays State University, for example, the 7 Revs course was piloted in Leadership Studies and subsequently developed over several semesters in both face-to-face and virtual environments at the first-year level. Although offered with one instructor of record, the FHSU course has always been structured as a team-taught encounter with the material. Guest lectures have been offered from across disciplines: philosophy, physics, computer science, finance, sociology, political science, and geosciences are among the variety of scholarly perspectives students have encountered. Thus, students receive technical instruction on each of the revolutions from faculty on their own campus who are actively engaged in the production of research and applied problem-solving efforts in those areas. Such early engagement with the passion and expertise of a variety of faculty encourages students to choose a major driven by their own interests in the context of where their interests are likely to take them in the future. The opportunity to introduce students to the strengths of the institution is also why workshop participants report an interest in adapting the material into freshman seminars or other required first-year experiences.

A third “teachable moment” occurs in a 7 Revs classroom as the material awakens students to the adaptive nature of the complex problems the world will face in their lifetimes. An adaptive challenge is by definition a problem that can only be addressed with information and expertise that we may not have at our disposal today. We have to learn what we need to understand the next step; we have to invent the technical skills and tools to implement our new understanding. The adaptive nature of a challenge is also related to the urgency of the crisis. In order to survive, we must adapt. The 7 Revs are global trends that are driving interrelated crises on a scale barely imaginable, yet crises that can only be averted in the future with action now. Only the most willfully ignorant student will question the relevance of the course material. The importance of thinking critically about sources of information and ideological implications, however, pushes students toward knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will be necessary for globally competent citizens to address the potentially catastrophic problems. The stakes are high, so the attention level in the classroom creates a productive zone of work.

Finally, 7 Revs alerts students to the technical aspects of the emerging realities. As noted above, the scale of the problems associated with each of the 7 Revs captures the attention of the students, even to the point of seeming to be bad news entirely. But the course also presents the flip side: where the future holds peril it also offers the promise of opportunity for those who are forward-thinking enough to adapt into problem-solvers. We do not have to be victims of forces beyond our individual control. We can acquire knowledge and technical training; we can develop a world view that connects global trends to local reality. There will be jobs for those who prepare themselves for the work of the future, and there are entrepreneurial opportunities for those who can accept the risk that comes with pursuing the reward. Adaptive challenges require technical expertise, and teaching students to make that connection enables them to become the innovators who will pioneer the industries of tomorrow.

The power of these “teachable moments” becomes apparent in the high levels of student satisfaction from a course delivering 7 Revs content. Other scholars from the 7 Revs project are currently preparing quantitative analyses of student evaluation data. From students at Fort Hays State University, we offer here qualitative insight in the evaluative voices of the students themselves:

*How I see my future plans in reference to the seven revolutions are simple. I want to educate people on their importance in the future of the planet. My career goal at this time is to become a high school agriculture teacher. This field ties directly to every single revolution. I want to make sure that someone out there is taking initiative to teach the future leaders of our country something other than pop culture*

or Facebook. The seven revolutions class has taught me that there are a lot of issues out there that today's youth need to become aware of. As stated in the article by Thomas Friedman in order to better our financial crisis in America we need to improve our public education. I had some great influences in my high school but I always wanted a teacher that was truly passionate about what they were teaching. I could tell that my teachers liked what they were teaching but not to the point that they really wanted the entire world to care about their subject. That's what I want to do for my future students.

Female, Freshman

This class has taught me more than I ever could've imagined about the world in which we live but especially about myself and who I want to see myself become and the dreams I want to accomplish in my lifetime. I wish I could take the class every year so that I would constantly be reminded of the lessons I learned this fall. However, even though I can't do that the lessons I have learned will not soon be forgotten.

Male, Freshman

The revolution of conflict kind of paints a scary view of how my future is going to look. The rapid development of technology is making warfare more common and more dangerous. It is true that thanks to computers less people are at risk of dying, however it also means that there are more weapons that we won't be able to defend ourselves against. In P.W. Singer's Ted Talk he believes that the advancement of warfare takes away from the humanity and reality of war, which I totally agree with. I am not sure how I feel about living in a world where war can be compared to a video game and where warfare that goes bad is just considered a malfunction, not a risk to lives.

Female, Freshman

My service project was about children living in conflict. This project was meaningful to me for a few reasons. I think that children are entitled to a safe loving family home, and when they do not have these things it is very sad. I hate that children in some countries are forced or expected to become soldiers when they are so young. Some children even join because it ensures medical care, food and clothing. All children should be given these things, and we need to step up and provide more programs to help them. Another thing that really affects me is the way many children are treated in conflict situations. Girls are abused and often children's parents die and they become orphans and have no way to support themselves. Minefields also

are a problem. Many children step on these and die or are seriously injured. If we could prevent minefields we would save many lives. In the future I see myself engaging in this issue by making others aware of the condition children live in many countries, and the many hardships they endure.

Female, Freshman

Seven Revolutions is a class that is unlike any other that I've ever taken. It's a class that made me actually think about my own personal life, and how the world can affect it. It's a class that makes me realize that I need to make plans for my future. I don't think this class is about learning and memorizing crazy statistics or watching Ted Talks without actually listening. It's a class to help me in my personal life and in my future. It helps students realize what is important and what we need to be aware of before 2025. I definitely wouldn't object to it being a required course for upcoming freshman at Fort Hays. I came to Fort Hays pretty unsure of what I wanted to do and I didn't have many goals besides doing well in classes. And to be honest, I still don't know what to do with my life, but Seven Revolutions definitely made me ask important questions.

Male, Freshman

### Adaptive Institutional Purposes

Students are not the only ones who need to change in order to survive and thrive in the future. Considering the 7 Revs framework through a strategic institutional lens provides insight into how the curricular elements of 7 Revs can contribute to an adaptive process that is critical for institutional viability. We identify at least five key drivers of change where state comprehensive institutions must prepare themselves for the road ahead.

The first key trend to which institutions must adapt is in the area of education for civic agency. Dependent as they are on state resources for support, comprehensive institutions are increasingly expected to demonstrate value added to traditional classroom instruction and research efforts. Legislators will be looking for institutions to provide more in return for state funding. The institutions that position themselves as truly public spirited will strengthen their argument for a greater share of resources, if only because they demonstrate that both instruction and research are calibrated to address public need. The 7 Revs content is a natural fit for launching or supplementing civic engagement efforts at state comprehensive institutions. Observed above are the substantive benefits for students. Yet where institutions such as Fort Hays State University are expanding research guidelines for tenure to include the scholarship

of engagement, publication records are strengthened toward the public mission of the institution when faculty contribute applied research related to global, national, state and local challenges. From the beginning of its involvement in the project, the FHSU 7 Revs courses have stressed the connection between global trends and local challenges. Identifying such challenges for students is also a way for scholars to identify research topics with direct impact at the local level. Data obtained from such research can raise questions about ineffective use of state funding and point to more productive possibilities for organizing community players to address public problems. The expertise of scholars developed by such research also serves to connect the institution to the community in direct and constructive ways, allowing the institution to become a more engaged resource aimed at local challenges. Service-learning courses have become more deeply embedded across the curriculum in both public and private institutions since the early 1990s, and 7 Revs courses are ideal conduits for bringing the students as a resource to the community. Students learn the utility of their professional and technical training, gain a sense of empowered engagement, and become oriented toward problem-solving as citizens. The basis of education for civic agency is the belief that students who connect their college educations to civic purpose are more fully prepared in the competencies of citizenship itself. Thus, state institutions that demonstrate their impact on students, on state and local problems, and on the direction and efficacy of applied research can better justify their request for state resources to enable the institution to continue its work for the public good.

The work of the 7 Revs initiative informs a second emerging trend in higher education: the theme of sustainability. In a fundamental sense, sustainability relates to the capacity of individuals, organizations, and societies to maintain current patterns of production and consumption in relation to resources. The 7 Revs content explicitly frames the sustainability conversation on this obvious level with its focus on population, scarce resources, changing climate patterns, technical and economic implications of globalization, the management of resulting violent conflict, and the complexities of governance in the context of profound change. The concept branches across academic disciplines in a university, providing opportunities for instruction and scholarship infused with the urgencies of sustainability as both content and purpose. Other relevant issues of sustainability emerge, however, from multiple interpretations of sustainability in higher education. Through a curricular lens, questions of sustainability relate to whether we can continue to maintain disciplinary silos for instruction and scholarship and still offer students a connective, relevant, and valuable education that prepares them for looming realities. Can we keep them interested in the same old ways? Is the research product

that faculty are expected to deliver likely to achieve relevance and impact without a change of expectations? From the perspective of operational sustainability, the questions are more complex than “greening” the facilities or diversifying to renewable energy sources. The long-term conversation about operational sustainability includes whether or not to even have a traditional campus, marketing for enrollment from other countries, and the redesigned delivery of classroom content as institutional costs rocket beyond what tuition increases or state appropriations can cover. And these are just the questions we face right now. What of the unforeseen and inevitable adaptive challenges over the horizon? The 7 Revolutions model of curricular content and organizational framework is one point of departure for the strategic task state comprehensive institutions must engage in order to survive emergent and looming economic realities. As Thomas Friedman has argued, in the context of tremendous financial upheaval the American public education system is going to have to adapt, just like other industries: “Otherwise, the jobless recovery won’t be just a passing phase, but our future” (Friedman, 2009).

A third driving trend in higher education relates to how unlikely it will be for any state comprehensive institution to remain viable throughout the 21st century without virtual initiatives. Virtual delivery increasingly aligns with student needs and demands for flexibility, economic realities, and low barriers to entry. From a competitive standpoint, there are many institutions already offering or preparing to launch entire degree programs on-line. Traditional life-long learning and university colleges will only survive to the extent that they offer the non-traditional student the same enrollment advantages as other institutions. Higher education is well beyond the question of how fast and fully institutions can make provisions for access to an on-line education. To remain viable, institutions will need to recruit and sustain student enrollment nationally and internationally. In the transition space before the institution can develop the infrastructure and fully offer an entire program on-line, it must build and maintain strategic partnerships with other institutions that already have content and a willingness to contract for shared resources. The long-term issue is quite simply about who will offer the best online opportunity for the most competitive price.

In Fall 2007, FHSU offered the first undergraduate 7 Revs course to on-campus students. Since then, the course has been expanded to include offerings in the virtual college. To administer both the on-campus and virtual sections of the course, FHSU has utilized the Epsilen course management system with access to the *New York Times* content repository. Because virtual platforms augment the traditional face-to-face model, and FHSU now offers both, our current delivery structure smoothly allows for the course redesign necessary to accommodate hundreds of students

per semester if the university eventually implements a requirement for a common learning experience based on the 7 Revs. One element of the 7 Revs framework that makes teaching the content challenging is the diversity of academic disciplines that are represented. A faculty member that is teaching the course will be discussing a broad range of topics, and will most likely find him or herself outside of the traditional academic area that he or she is used to teaching within. To combat this challenge, FHSU and other partner institutions have leveraged the power of virtual learning to offer a more robust engagement of the various topics than any single educator might be expected to master. Through the use of electronic resources, such as TED Talks, the *New York Times* Knowledge Network, the Epsilon platform, and whatever sources are legally available on the internet, the educator expands upon his or her own content expertise, facilitating exchange of information across disciplines through the use of local as well as distant experts. Thus, instructors are not expected to possess intimate knowledge of all the areas, but rather to provide a forum for students to access the information from reputable sources. This format has proven to be quite effective, and it allows institutions to move beyond the limiting nature of the traditional classrooms to expand how they utilize the power of online resources.

The fourth important higher education trend for which the 7 Revs initiative provides a model is the boiling conversation surrounding trans-disciplinary approaches and structural realignment. Extending the observations previously noted in discussion of civic education, sustainability and distance learning initiatives, the momentum of those trends likely leads to a vibrant although contested push for reimagining the very structure of departments and disciplines as the organizing principle of higher education (Taylor, 2010). The 7 Revs model is particularly insightful here because it has already been successful at engaging the underlying issues of disciplinary restructure. 7 Revs embodies the synergy for cross-disciplinary research as well as teaching; it facilitates the connections that make inter-institution collaboration possible; it provides a transitional path from departmental silo thinking to what comes next. With the trend toward course redesign considered, we can see benefits for the faculty in more efficient teaching loads, and cost benefits for the institution as it innovates, possibly even altering current administrative and substantive boundaries.

Given the forbidding economic realities that higher education institutions currently face, and the likelihood that tuition and public resources will only become more constrained and competitive, the fifth area around which state comprehensives must strategize relates to collaboration across sectors for the resources necessary to survive and innovate. Institutions will need to seek out and manage long-term

partnerships with the non-profit community, think tanks and foundations, associational membership ties, other individual institutions and state systems, media enterprises and traditional for-profit entities for financial and substantive resources. Increasingly, state comprehensives will need exceptionally gifted and fulltime players developing collaboration in the U.S. and academic diplomats forging partnerships abroad in order to accomplish curricular objectives and make operational ends meet. The 7 Revs initiative represents exactly such a cross-sector partnership. Drawing from proprietary content provided by CSIS and the *New York Times*, utilizing the Epsilon course management shell (operating under the ownership of the *Times*), as an AASCU American Democracy Project initiative, with the guiding energies of the 7 Revs working group of scholars to plan, produce and deliver a growing range of academic resources, the 7 Revs initiative is a roadmap for successful cross-sector collaboration.

### Conclusion

In 2009 Fort Hays State University adopted the institutional tagline of *Forward Thinking, World Ready*, which emerged from a revised brand platform developed in 2008. As one expression of this public identity, 7 Revs is a framework enabling the state comprehensive university to adapt to challenges and emerging realities, offering its students a provocative and relevant lens through which they view their futures. It also provides legislators a truly public-oriented university for investment, an institution that is shaping its curricular and research identity in directions that promote cross-sector partnerships with common purpose driven by sustainable values and goals. Institutions can and should seek a variety of models with coherent strategic purpose. The 7 Revs initiative has provided a glimpse of how to act now for the future, with a published toolkit to assist faculty and administrators in shaping their own implementation strategies. The project also offers national, regional, and institutional workshops by its members to the same end, with the support of AASCU's American Democracy Project.

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