**Appreciative Inquiry**

*What it is, and why it matters to Community Colleges*

Organizational development is a field of practice centered on assisting organizations diagnose and solve problems for the purpose of increasing overall effectiveness; it uses systematic methodologies to uncover and remove obstacles to organization wide success. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an approach to organizational development that takes on a very different form than its traditional counterparts. AI deviates from the norm in several instances, and this is most notable in the shift from focusing on extant problems and issues to past success and victories—subjecting a different object to scrutiny. As such, AI has shown to lend itself well to community college planning efforts through identifying and emphasizing the significance of the “positive core” (the conditions or factors) that have been identified as determinants of success, and appropriating this for a positive future. This document is intended to introduce the concept of AI and showcase an actual case study of its application and utility for community college strategic planning.

**What processes does Appreciative Inquiry consist of?**

AI primarily consists of four generic processes, known as the 4-D’s: **1) Discovery**- exceptionally positive moments of real and personal experiences of high-point instants in the system under study and identifying the themes that are consistent in these positive moments—thereby identifying the positive core; **2) Dream**- expressing a vision that reflects the ideal future and culminates in a “Provocative Proposition”—a statement that suggests a desired possibility; **3) Design**- innovating and improvising was to create the desired future; and **4) Destiny**- ongoing and simultaneous Discovery, Dream and Design.

* Feedback through the AI process for continued positive growth
* Identify the important topic
* Inquire into the positive moments surrounding this topic
* Identify the positive themes

* Synthesize themes
* Use themes to create a shared and preferred vision for the future
* Innovate and improvise ways to create that desired future

A brief outline will be used to show each generic processes of AI. The information below is taken from a real-life case study of how San Joaquin Delta College leveraged this approach for the development of their strategic plan. This information was gathered entirely from Nancy E. Stetson’s book “*Stories of Positive Change in the Community College: Appreciative Inquiry in Action”.* However, the story was condensed and streamlined into a linear structure of key points so that community college professionals can readily ascertain the core elements and actions that belong to each generic process. This story starts in fall 2003, when Raul Rodriguez was serving as Delta College President.

**September 2003**

**What does Appreciative Inquiry look like for community college planning?**

1. **PRE-PROCESS**

* In this instance, the San Joaquin Delta College president recruited AI consultants to assist his team with identifying how and what to use to identify topics for Inquiry, as well introduced them to a generic Interview Guide
* The San Joaquin Delta College president appointed a group of 15 represented individuals, known as the “Delta Group”

1. **DISCOVERY**
2. **Identify the important topic**
3. The Delta Group agreed to forgo the traditional SWOT analysis and focus on strengths and aspirations.
4. Through these discussions, the Delta Group identified the major topic of Inquiry as “Imagine Delta College at Its Best!”
5. Sub-topics were identified as well, which included: a) trust and communication; b) service; and c) creativity and innovation. In addition, the Delta group developed a modified Interview Guide in relation to these sub-topics and planned an AI Summit for their college.
6. **Inquire into the positive**
7. Members of the Delta Group each interviewed ten people at their college using the Interview Guide prior to the AI Summit.
8. **Identify the positive themes**
9. An analysis of the interview data was used to capture the high-point stories and themes, which would later be brought to the AI Summit.

**March 2004**

1. **DREAM**
2. **Synthesize themes and use them to create a shared vision for the future**
3. The themes were brought to the off-campus Summit. One-hundred and nine people came together and were divided into small groups. The Delta Group had attendees go through processes of AI.
4. Fourteen micro Provocative Propositions were validated, such as “Adjunct/part-time faculty are fully integrated in the College community with equal rights, responsibilities, and compensation.”
5. One person from each small group came together to synthesize the 14 micro propositions into one macro Provocative Proposition that would function as the new Vision Statement for the College: “Delta College is a dynamic community of diverse individuals committed to student success. We embrace open communication, trust, and respect in a creative and collaborative learning environment.”
6. **DESIGN**
7. **Innovate and improvise ways to create that desired future**
8. After posting the propositions on the wall, each small group began to think of strategies for realizing the micro propositions.

**December 2004**

1. After the Summit, the campus community was invited to come to the College’s board room during several open sessions to interact with a number of items that were posted on the wall on flip chart paper, such: the draft Vision Statement, the micro Provocative Propositions, and the multiple strategies that were suggested
2. The Delta Group finalized the College’s input.
3. After the summit, the Strategic Initiatives that were previously generated were organized into four strategic goals: open communication, employee development and training, increased student access and success, and increased financial resources.
4. **DESTINY**
5. **Feedback through the AI process for continued positive growth**
6. Delta College then began integrating its strategic planning process with its budgeting process for the academic year.

**March 2005 and**

**Beyond**

1. Progress was closely tracked on each of the strategic initiatives that were developed. Their impacts were assessed.
2. The dean of planning, research and regional education attributed AI with activating the mechanisms to move the needle on ten of the strategic changes.
3. By the 2005-2006 academic year, the College had integrated its strategic plan with budgeting processes.
4. The College community assessed the progress on each of the four strategic goals and decided to continue forward with the AI process to inquire more about the positive elements that generated their successful strategic plan.

AI is adaptive to the context and issues specific to an organization or college, and doesn’t really adhere to an ultra-strict procedure. However, there are five core principles that serve as the theoretical underpinning. David L. Cooperrider and Diana Whitney identify and delineate these five core principles in great detail in their article, *“A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry”.* But here, these explanations were condensed to one or two clause definitions to merely expose the reader to these principles.

**What are the basic ground rules for Appreciative Inquiry?**

1. **The Constructionist Principle** – used as a basis for knowledge formation, this principle focuses on the relationships between individuals and organizations to shape a reality.
2. **The Simultaneity Principle** – inquiry should be viewed as the intervention; this is starkly unique, as inquiry is usually “of” an intervention, or problem; here, investigation and change should run parallel to one another.
3. **The Poetic Principle** – paradigm shift from viewing organizations as heartless machines to an unfolding story that has vast and rich topics to explore and interpret.
4. **The Anticipatory Principle** – this principle is the most fundamental to the essence of AI; the positive projections (not data predictions) placed upon an organizations future enable it to more readily live out that positive future.
5. **The Positive Principle** – maximizing positive affect to enhance organizational effectiveness; this is helped if we can *“retain the spirit of inquiry of the everlasting beginner.”*

**References**

* Stetson, N. E. (2008). *Stories of positive change in the community college: Appreciative inquiry in action*. Company of Experts. net.
* Cooperrider, D. L., & Whitney, D. (2001). A positive revolution in change: Appreciative inquiry. *Public administration and public policy*, *87*, 611-630.