

Appreciative Inquiry and Student Affairs: A Positive Approach to Change

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organization development (OD) philosophy that utilizes and builds on past successes, using these as positive momentum for future change. AI provides student affairs with an alternative and generative approach to improving their organizations' processes and culture. As student affairs professionals look to the future of their organizations, this paper provides an overview of AI as an important methodology to help with change and chronicles the experiences of a student affairs unit that is engaged in AI activities to alter their workplace culture.

Individuals, including student affairs professionals, often find themselves focusing on what is wrong with their organization rather than what is right. Most are guilty of criticizing their organization and its leadership about what needs to be done differently. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organization development (OD) methodology that “is a collaborative and highly participative, holistic approach to seeking, identifying, and enhancing the ‘life-giving forces’ that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic, and organizational terms” (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 14). AI focuses on the best an organization has to offer and seeks to make it even better. This paper explores AI as a methodology for change and chronicles the experiences of one student affairs unit that engaged in AI activities to alter their workplace culture.

History of AI

David Cooperrider and his mentor, Suresh Srivastva, of Case Western Reserve University, developed AI in the early 1980s (Cooperrider, 2000; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Cooperrider was a doctoral student conducting a traditional organization development (OD) assessment of the Cleveland Clinic. While seeking to learn what was wrong with the organization, he was surprised at how much was “right” and the enthusiasm organization members had in telling their stories. This situation prompted Cooperrider to conceive of a different OD model, Appreciative Inquiry. Seeing the potential of AI, it became the topic of his dissertation (Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Zemke, 1999).

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AI and Traditional OD

Traditional OD is deficit-based thinking (Lord, 2005). It focuses on problems and relies on critical thinking to resolve the problems. Efforts are often countered with resistance, especially if the admonition is that what people are doing is wrong. In contrast with traditional OD methods, AI seeks out what has worked well in the past and guides participants through a process to build on these successes (Hagevik, 2000; Hammond, 1998; Head & Young, 1998; Krattenmaker, 2001; Norum, Wells, Hoadley, & Geary, 2002; Pullen, 2001; Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan & VanBuskirk, 1999; Watkins & Mohr, 2001; Yballe & O'Connor, 2000; Zemke, 1999). AI provides a logical answer to the question: "If you want to inspire, mobilize and sustain human energy, which is the most effective way – by focusing on problems or pursuing *possibilities*?" (Lord, 2005, para.4).

Watkins and Mohr (2001) state AI is

a theory and practice for approaching change from a holistic framework. Based on the belief that human systems are made and imagined by those who live and work within them. Appreciative Inquiry leads systems to move toward generative and creative images that reside in their most positive core – their values, visions, achievements, and best practices. (p. xxxi)

AI is about using the positive aspects of human nature and development as the catalysts for organizational change.

AI and Student Affairs

Student affairs professionals serve as role models and standard bearers for students and student organizations regarding how to best approach organizational change. Student affairs professionals model and teach students the personal and professional skills necessary to work in organizations after they leave their institutions. Student affairs professionals also provide direction on how to make their student organizations stronger, more viable entities, but they often fail to draw on these very lessons when their organizations are in crisis.

Five Key Principles of AI

Appreciative Inquiry revolves around five key principles: (a) the constructionist principle, (b) the simultaneity principle, (c) the poetic principle, (d) the anticipatory principle, and (e) the positive principle. Each of these will be explained in more detail.

Constructionist Principle

The constructionist principle states that individuals construct their own reality and "knowledge about an organization and the destiny of that organization are interwoven" (Watkins & Mohr, 2001, p. 37). Social constructionism is the process "by which humans generate meaning together" (p. 26). Social constructionist theory views knowledge as social agreement gained through discourse. It is

therefore, important to “discover what its people think about it [the organization]” (Krattenmaker, 2001, p. 5). This principle honors human presence in the organization and individuals’ ability to construct a more meaningful reality together. It represents the self-fulfilling prophecy of the beliefs held about the work conducted and the organization in which it occurs.

Simultaneity Principle

This principle states, “the process of inquiry itself influences the directions of change” (Krattenmaker, 2001, p. 5), and inquiry and change occur simultaneously. In this vein, it is the act of inquiring that leads to discovering possibilities for constructing the future. This principle indicates that the very process of beginning to question the nature of the organization sets in motion the change process.

Poetic Principle

Like a poem, the organization is “constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted” (Krattenmaker, 2001, p. 6) by everyone within the organization, as well as those outside of the organization who interact with it. This principle places value in storytelling as a way to gather information about an organization and focuses on the value of co-authorship as an organizational reality. Proponents of AI choose to focus on the moments of creativity and innovation.

Anticipatory Principle

This principle states that the image of the future guides actions. Anticipating the future in a positive light increases the likelihood of it occurring positively. For example, when coaching for Arkansas, Lou Holtz rallied his team before a difficult game in which several good players were benched. He would not let them leave the locker room until each player created a list of why they would beat the opposing team. Arkansas won the game 31-6 (Barrett, 1995).

Positive Principle

As stated earlier, human beings and organizations move in the direction of inquiry. This lends importance to the nature of the questions asked in the discovery process of AI. People are attracted to and energized by positive stimuli. Simply put, there is a synergy and energy that occur when everyone in an organization engages in the process of positive self-examination and change.

Five Phases

The practical (or application) side of AI occurs in four or five phases, depending on who is doing the writing. These are (a) define (which is sometimes not counted as part of the process), (b) discovery, (c) dream, (d) design, and (e) destiny. Zemke (1999), for instance, described a four phase process (beginning with discovery), but it included a three part preparation that parallels the define phase. In both models, the process takes an organization from the phase of deciding that AI is appropriate (define) to inquiry (discovery) through to implementation (destiny). These phases are presented in the next section.

Define

Because AI is a new way to look at organization development (OD) and is a stark departure from traditional OD, it is important that the organization make an informed decision regarding whether or not to proceed using this approach. It is vital that the individuals understand the focus of the inquiry will be on the positive aspects of the organization. Without this agreement, a consultant or facilitator may be in a constant battle with the organization and those who expect problems to be identified and solved, as opposed to the more holistic approach to improving/changing the organization. The participating organization lays the groundwork for the inquiry during this phase of the appreciative inquiry process.

Together with the facilitator, representatives of the organization determine what presenting issues led to the recognition that a change was necessary. While this is often initially framed negatively, it is the role of the facilitator to help the organization reframe the concern in a positive or appreciative manner. For example, if the presenting problem is that individuals are not working well as a team, a reframing of this issue might be this: The purpose of the AI is to create a healthy (or constructive, or positive ...) work culture. Another student affairs example might be that student affairs professionals often lament the lack of diversity in their organizations. This could be reframed as follows: The purpose of this inquiry is to create an organization that values a diverse workforce.

Discovery

The discovery phase is about “appreciating and valuing the best of what is” (Hammond, 1998, p. 24). This phase has two parts. First, interviews provide an opportunity to gather stories of the organization’s life-giving forces. Life-giving forces are those things about an organization that spur it on in a positive direction; without these forces, the organization would cease to succeed. The second part is the identification of themes from the interviews. Watkins and Mohr (2001) indicated there should be a focus on the organization when it has been “most alive and effective” (p. 43), that is, in times of organizational excellence.

Interviews. The construction of the interview protocol is critical. How the questions are framed guides the nature of the stories received. Watkins and Mohr (2001) provided a generic interview protocol that models the “spirit of Appreciative Inquiry... [and is] easily modified to fit whatever topic the organization has chosen to focus on” (p. 83). Student affairs professionals wishing to use or adapt the interview protocol developed by Watkins and Mohr are referred to their 2001 book entitled, *Appreciate Inquiry: Change at the speed of imagination*, cited in this article.

Using the interview protocol, members of the organization can interview each other in pairs or select representatives can conduct the interviews. Data from the interviews should be collected in a manner that can be shared with others in the

organization. One effective way of doing this is to have each interview pair/group combine with other pairs/groups to share what they have learned from each other.

Themes. The second part of discovery involves identifying common themes from the interviews/stories. Themes should reflect the life-giving forces heard in the shared stories. These themes are then used in the Dream phase.

Dream

This phase encompasses the creation of a new shared vision of the future. It “encourages the participants to think about ‘what could be’ by challenging them to think outside the traditional boundaries of what has been done in the past” (Johnson & Leavitt, 2001, p. 131). During the dream phase, participants are asked to write provocative propositions or possibility statements about “what might be” (Hammond, 1998, p. 24). Provocative propositions are metaphorical images of the new organization based on the themes identified. There are two steps in developing provocative propositions. The first step is an opportunity for participants to be outrageously creative in making their point. The second step is to convert these creative representations into statements. For example, a student affairs unit statement might look like this:

Our work culture is dynamic, creative, symbiotic, synergistic, fluid, and ambitious.

We collaboratively and purposefully move forward towards our vision while appreciating differences and each individual’s contributions.

The dream phase is practical because it is grounded in organizational history and generative given that it seeks to improve the organization’s potential (Watkins & Mohr, 2001).

Design

The design phase examines the provocative proposition and identifies organizational support(s) needed to work towards the ideal. Participants “speculate on how their organization will look and act once they have articulated the organizational visions [provocative propositions]” (Hagevik, 2000, p. 39). Hammond (1998) called this “dialoguing what should be” (p. 24).

Destiny

During the destiny phase action plans are made to implement the design. Some authors also refer to it as “delivery,” the sustainability phase, or “innovating what will be” (Hammond, 1998, p. 24). This is the enactment of the Dream. The outcome of the destiny phase will look different for every dream.

AI in Practice

Appreciative Inquiry has found practical application in many areas. The following case study demonstrates how student affairs professionals can put AI to work in

their organizations. This case study is based on an actual AI intervention and has been written with a focus on practical application, not from a theoretical standpoint. Following the case study, additional applications of AI in student affairs are discussed.

Case Study: Office of Residence Life

Deidre serves as the director of the Office of Residence Life at the University of the Southeast. The University of the Southeast is a large public institution with 8,000 students residing in University Housing. Deidre supervises a staff of seven assistant directors who comprise the central leadership team for residence life. The leadership team provides direct supervision of professional hall directors and oversees the residential areas, including student discipline, residential education, and academic initiatives. Deidre has been with the University of the Southeast for 20 years and got her bachelors, masters, and doctorate there. Of her seven staff, two have attended the University, all are at least 10 years younger than she is, and all have less than seven years of professional experience.

Paul, one of the assistant directors for a residential area, approaches Deidre and indicates that members of the leadership team do not feel empowered to communicate changes they would like to see in the department. Everyone is frustrated and withholds information from Deidre; what is communicated is often done in an inappropriate manner. Deidre knows she has a good staff that has been recognized for exceptional contributions to campus life, and she wants to improve the quality of their interactions so they can build on their solid performance. Paul suggests that a consultant trained in Appreciative Inquiry facilitate an OD intervention for the office. Table 1 provides a visual of the AI process at work. Deidre asks Tina, a faculty member in Human Resources and Organizational Development, to guide her department through the AI process.

Focus of the Appreciative Inquiry (Define)

Tina interviews Deidre about the focus of the inquiry. Deidre summarizes the issues they are encountering: work style differences, generational diversity between her and her staff, and a general impatience staff have with her leadership. She feels there is a power block developing between her and the younger members of the staff. She indicates they have talked around these issues in the past and have acknowledged that there are problems, but nothing has been done to resolve them. She and Tina decide to focus on improving the workplace culture in the Office of Residence Life. Having identified the issues indicating a need for change, the areas of improvement must be reframed to fit the positive qualities of AI. Reframed, the purpose of this AI will be this: To create a healthy work culture.

Table 1

An Illustration of Appreciate Inquiry Organizational Development Philosophy

Steps of Inquiry	Appreciative	Questions to ask	From the case study
Define		What is the presenting issue? Framed positively	To create a healthy work culture
Discovery		What are the positive stories that frame who we are? What are the common themes in these stories?	Interviews in pairs to determine what they desire in a work culture (themes)
Dream		What might we be or become? Our provocative proposition	Our work culture is vibrant, innovative, synergistic, flexible, and ambitious. We are a group of professionals who work to create a challenging and supportive climate where all points of view are considered. As we move toward our vision, we will appreciate each individual's differences and contributions.
Design		How would our organization look if we achieved our dream?	Individuals determine what they each can do to support the provocative proposition above
Destiny		What is our action plan for achieving this?	Two yearly retreats Posted copies of provocative proposition Sharing of provocative proposition with new hires

Steps in the Appreciative Inquiry Process

Deidre invites Tina to facilitate a four-hour workshop each day of a two-day residence life leadership retreat. The entire central leadership team will be in attendance at this retreat. During the retreat, Tina provides the group with an overview of AI and the process they will use over the next two days. The group understands that this process will focus on the positive aspects of their organization to propel a change in their work culture.

Discovery. Tina breaks the group up into interview pairs and has them interview one another using a modification of the Watkins and Mohr (2001) interview guide tailored to their situation. She tells them this information will become a database used to develop a work culture vision for the office.

After all the interviews are complete, Tina asks each pair to share their interview experiences with the entire group. As each pair shares, Tina notes key themes on a flipchart. She checks these themes with the group to ensure congruence in what she heard, and what they were intending to communicate.

Dream. Once the group has agreed upon the themes, Tina breaks the group into two smaller groups to work on a visual product that represents these themes and how they relate to the office's work. Following this exercise, the groups share their visual representations. Based on these representations of the themes, Tina asks the group to create a provocative proposition, which serves as a statement to guide them in developing their new culture. The group works on this until they reach the goal of having a statement everyone can support. Finally, the group comes up with the following provocative proposition:

Our work culture is vibrant, innovative, synergistic, flexible, and ambitious. We are a group of professionals who work to create a challenging and supportive climate where all points of view are considered. As we move toward our vision, we will appreciate each individual's differences and contributions.

Design. Agreeing on the provocative proposition, the group now must focus on the organizational supports necessary to move toward their ideal work culture. As part of this process, Tina provides an AI Personal Agreement form on which each individual determines what he or she can do to make the provocative proposition come alive. After the individual agreements are complete, they are shared with the group. This verbal commitment serves as a tool for the group to hold each other accountable to the provocative proposition.

Destiny. The group decides that they will revisit their provocative proposition at their two yearly retreats in order to keep the issue of work culture a top priority. They also decide to distribute copies of the provocative proposition to each member of the leadership group and post a framed copy of it in the central office. Additionally, an appreciative poster was placed in the workroom to encourage them to express their appreciation of one another on an on-going basis.

Agreement was reached that the provocative proposition will also be used to help potential employees understand the work culture they are trying to create. Finally, the staff agrees to hold one another accountable for any behavior that violates the spirit of their provocative proposition.

Evaluation. A month later, Tina sends a follow up questionnaire to each member of the Residence Life staff asking for feedback on the session, and challenging them to think about how they are keeping AI alive in their organization. She also asks them to reflect on and share information about how the work culture has changed, based on their provocative proposition. Tina checks in with Deidre periodically to see what is working and what areas still need improvement. She encourages Deidre to keep the process alive and offers support and assistance.

Deidre shared with Tina that she felt the staff had taken the process seriously because they were able to figure out what they wanted their office to be like together. She believed this had created an investment both in the process and the office. She concluded that this gave them permission to work toward the greater good of the organization in service to students.

Note: The general circumstances of this case and the use of AI as an approach are real. The office and individuals have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the organization participating in this process.

Implications for Practice

AI offers student affairs a new focus and energy when considering change. Student affairs professionals can build on the positive experiences and energy in their organizations. Institutions of higher education and divisions of student affairs encounter multiple opportunities and needs for change, and AI provides a way to discover what is right in the organization and a plan to build a positive future. As educators, student affairs professionals must model the values the profession espouses and must help students experience society and reflect on their role in it (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). Many campuses advocate the value placed on community and contributions made to the community. Likewise, AI values the organization as a community and the individual members' contributions to this community.

As student affairs professionals examine how they approach organizational issues, they must reflect on differences between what they do and what they say (or what they tell students they must do to resolve personal and organizational issues and how they resolve their own issues). Student affairs professionals knowingly and unknowingly serve as role models and teachers to students. Using AI as a tool for positive change affords student affairs professionals the opportunity to model good organization development processes.

Appreciative Inquiry as a Performance Management Tool

Once staff members generate the provocative proposition and action plan through the AI process, they can be used as accountability tools. For example, if an employee is not performing in a manner consistent with the agreed-upon provocative proposition, other staff or a supervisor can redirect the employee's attention back to the provocative proposition in order to explore the employee's performance. The provocative proposition and action plan give the person addressing the performance something concrete to refer to in discussing the issue with the employee. It also sets an agreed-upon performance standard that can be used in discussing how an employee's performance is or is not measuring up.

Appreciative Inquiry in the Selection and Hiring Process

If a staff has taken the time and committed the energy to engage in AI, it is critical that all new members of the team are aware of the provocative proposition and the desired culture. These can be discussed with candidates in the early stages of the interview process. It allows candidates to determine if they are a fit with the organization and its philosophy. Once the new employee is hired, the team members can share how they are impacted by the provocative proposition and what they can do to keep it alive. In other words, it is important that the new team member be "brought up to speed" on how the group arrived at the provocative proposition and how they maintain its energy.

In conclusion, AI is one of many organizational development (OD) tools and techniques. No one OD technique serves as a panacea for all organizational ills. AI becomes another tool in the change toolbox and can serve as an excellent way to refocus an organization that is caught up in negativity, trapped and unable to change. AI allows student affairs professionals to find their way out of the negativity and puts the organization back on the path to success.

AI provides a tool that allows student affairs professionals to focus on the positive aspects of their organizational community and to strive to make the organization even better. Additionally, using AI, student affairs professionals learn how to communicate in a positive and effective manner regarding change and then can model for students how to do the same, when working through similar types of issues. Through AI student affairs professionals create a sound work climate and foster student learning and development, which is not only the aim of our profession, but also a necessity for the future work conducted on campuses.

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