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Incorporating Appreciative Inquiry into Academic Advising

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“There comes that mysterious meeting in life when someone acknowledges who we are and what we can be, igniting the circuits of our highest potential.”

~ *Rusty Berkus* ~

Have you ever had a person in your life who really believed in you and your potential, even when that potential wasn't exactly obvious to you? Chances are that we have all been recipients of such a gift from others and that the doors that they opened for us have changed our lives in important ways. It is a powerful moment when you choose to see others as full of potential, with the ability to build upon the skills and talents they already possess. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an organizational development tool that focuses on bringing out the best in people and organizations, instead of viewing them as problems that need to be solved. In this paper, we will explore how academic advisers might incorporate the principles of AI into their advising interactions with students.

In 1986, David Cooperrider was a young doctoral student at Case Western Reserve University working under the tutelage of his adviser, Dr. Suresh Srivastva, when he completed his doctoral dissertation, which laid out the basic framework of the concept he called Appreciative Inquiry: “Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them . . . AI involves the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to heighten positive potential” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999, p. 10). The link to academic advising seems clear. As advisers, we are constantly trying to help our students reach their full potential, and one of the primary tools that we have for empowering students is asking questions. AI challenges us to make sure that we ask positive questions, aimed at helping students discover their strengths, abilities, and skills.

It is important to understand some of the principles behind AI in order to fully grasp its power. In particular, Cooperrider bases his AI theory on the connection between positive images and positive actions. One of the key founding AI principles is that we are by nature “heliotropic,” meaning that, “just as plants of many varieties exhibit a tendency to grow in the direction of sunlight (symbolized by the Greek god Helios),” there is a human tendency to “evolve in the direction of positive anticipatory images of the future” (Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney, & Yager, 2000, p. 30). Indeed, we respond more favorably to people who are optimistic thinkers and who help us create positive images of our futures, rather than to people who are negative and disapproving of our plans. Therefore, as advisers, it is important to remember that students will likely respond more positively to us if they know that they will

be treated as someone with outstanding potential instead of just another problem child. S.N. Parker once said, “People have a way of becoming what you encourage them to be—not what you nag them to be” (Cook, 1993, p. 272).

The Pygmalion phenomenon is another important principle upon which AI is built. Cooperrider et al. (2000) cites the classic Pygmalion study conducted in the classroom setting. In the study, before the class begins, a teacher is told which students in the class are high achievers and which are not. In reality, there is an equal distribution of bright students in each group. Multiple studies have shown that, over time, the weaker students who were previously identified to the teacher as high-achieving end up doing better than the bright students who the teacher had earlier been told were not good students. The teacher's perception of the students has a powerful effect on student outcomes. Of course, there is a valuable lesson in this for academic advisers: we need to treat each student as if he or she might someday be our own future physician, lawyer, next-door neighbor, or other influential person in our lives. Johan von Goethe once said, “Treat people as if they were what they should be, and you can help them become what they are capable of becoming” (Cook, 1993, p. 272). For advisers, one of the challenges we face is to treat the last appointment on a preregistration day with the same amount of enthusiasm generated for the first person through the door. Each student that walks through our doors deserves our full attention and passionate interest.

Cooperrider and Whitney (1999) contend that there isn't an AI “formula” but put forth four phases that are typically used in AI: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny. AI has mainly been used as an organizational development tool, but its potential as an individual development tool has yet to be fully explored. We submit that AI can be a powerful mechanism for academic advisers to intentionally reframe their interactions with students. We will now explore how advisers might be able to adapt the four phases of AI in advising individual students. According to Cooperrider and Whitney (1999), “At AI's heart is the appreciative interview. The uniqueness and power of an AI interview stems from its fundamentally affirmative focus” (p. 11). For example, the Discovery phase involves asking students about their strengths and passions. The key to this phase of AI is listening carefully to responses and asking only positive, affirmative questions. The Dream phase is a continuation of the Discovery phase, in which, based on the answers students provide, the adviser and the students work to build upon their articulated strengths, aspirations, and interests. Together they begin to dream about and formulate a plan for their lives and careers. In the Design phase, the adviser works with students to devise strategies to accomplish short- and longer-term goals and to discuss the skills they need to develop to make their dreams come true. In the Destiny phase, the adviser allows the students room to accomplish these goals. But the adviser is there as a safety net to provide guidance and moral support to the students.

As academic advisers, there is much for us to learn from AI, which, in many ways, is still in its infancy. Researchers are continuing to unlock and document the power of it as a tool for encouraging organizations and individuals to become the best that they can be. We offer specific suggestions on how AI can be used to improve advising:

1. Believe in the goodness of each student who walks through your door. Treat him or her like you would want your son/daughter/best friend to be treated.

2. Utilize positive open-ended questions to draw out what students enjoy doing, their strengths, and their passions. Listen to each answer carefully before asking the next positive question (Discovery phase).
3. Help students formulate a vision of what they might become and then assist them in developing their life and career goals (Dream phase).
4. Give students a clear idea of what they will need to do by devising concrete, incremental, and achievable goals to make these dreams come true (Design Phase).
5. Be there for them when they stumble, believe in them every step of the way, and help them continue to update and refine their dreams as they go (Destiny phase).

We are not naïve enough to think that all of your conversations with students will be about positive topics. We do advocate building an advising relationship grounded in AI principles with each of your students. This approach can assure students that you are there to do whatever you can to empower them to fulfill their goals and dreams. And, when they do occasionally veer off track, they will come back to you for direction and inspiration to reestablish their course.

In conclusion, one of the most powerful quotes we have found on advising came from Nancy Twiss, a former scholarship adviser at Kansas State University, who gave a speech on the value of advising at a national scholarship conference in 1999. She said, “Most of us will not find answers to the causes of cancer, or solve the problems of homelessness, or defuse international conflicts, but we feel that through our advising, we may be able to make a small but pivotal contribution to our students' ultimate work . . . It seems to me that our students represent an unequivocal reply to Margaret Mead, when she famously said: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has'” (“Scholarship advising,” 2001). By using the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, our impact on these students can be far greater and more rewarding than we ever imagined.

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