



**“Appreciative Inquiry is an approach...based on strengths rather than weaknesses, on a vision of what is possible rather than an analysis of what is not.” David Cooperrider**

## Discovering and Growing What Gives Life: Appreciative Inquiry in Community Colleges\*

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Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is based on the realization that improvement is more engaging, more fun, and more effective when the focus is on what is already working rather than what is broken. This AI principle is inherent in the best of human relationships, and most of us have experienced appreciative moments that changed our lives in ways both little and large. Take a moment right now to remember someone who really believed in you and saw your strengths. It could have been a teacher, a family member, or friend who recognized your unique gifts and knew you were capable of more than even you knew yourself. How did their faith and expectations affect you and your growth? As you notice how you feel as a result of remembering this important part of your personal story, you access a dynamic state that emboldens change. The process of achieving this state, “locating the energy for change,” is what AI is about.

AI offers an approach and methods that encourage breaking through to new levels of consciousness. By recognizing and amplifying successes and strengths that already exist, we create a new image of the future so compelling that we consciously and unconsciously move toward it; we make decisions and take actions that create it. AI allows us to move beyond those relentless problems that have been the focus of our attention. Swiss psychotherapist Carl Jung said, “All of the greatest and most important problems of life are fundamentally insoluble...They can never be solved, but only outgrown...Some higher or wider interest appeared on the horizon and through this broadening of outlook the insoluble problem lost its urgency. It was not solved logically in its own terms but faded when confronted with a new and stronger life urge.” AI is an important approach that facilitates this process of growing beyond our problems.

The principles of Appreciative Inquiry were first explicated in 1980. David Cooperrider, a doctoral candidate at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, was conducting research into organizational behavior with the Cleveland Clinic. Cooperrider observed that when interviews focused on the problems at the clinic, his subjects’ energy decreased and they felt demoralized. When the interviews focused on what was working, they exhibited increased energy and enthusiasm for their work. Cooperrider also noticed the same impact on those conducting the interviews. When the focus was on problems, the result of the inquiry was a vicious circle, with energy and engagement spiraling downward. When the focus was on what was working and what was valuable, the result was a virtuous circle, with energy and engagement spiraling upward. The essence of this virtuous circle is captured in the aphorism, “When I do good I feel good; when I feel good I do good.”

One way of describing the AI approach is to recognize and acknowledge the best of the past and present, and to build on those

strengths and successes, the “positive core” of the organization, to create the best possible future. One framework for this continuous practice has been described in two complementary ways. David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney call it the *4-D Cycle*: Discover (*valuing*, “What gives life?”); Dream (*envisioning*, “What might be?”); Design (*dialoguing*, “What should be?”); Deliver (*innovating*, “What will be?”). Bernard Mohr and Jane Magruder Watkins refer to this cycle as the *Five Core Processes*: 1) *Choose* the positive as the focus of inquiry, 2) *Inquire* into stories of life-giving forces, 3) *Locate* themes that appear in the stories, 4) *Create* shared images of a preferred future, 5) *Innovate* to create that future. This cycle is a continuous process, multi-layered with cycles within cycles as large initiatives create many contributing projects and projects generate action steps.

Dr. Cooperrider’s seminal work has led to powerful and comprehensive growth in the research, understanding, and practice of AI. It is applicable to every kind of situation. As one example, AI has been instrumental in the complicated task of bridging differences among participants from different faiths in the creation of the United Religions Initiative, whose purpose is to “promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously-motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings.” This initiative, started in 1998, has grown to include thousands of members from 47 countries representing 88 religions (<http://www.uri.org>). In a very different example, the U. S. Navy used AI for a four-day strategic planning summit in December 2001. The summit brought together 260 personnel from across the Navy, seamen to admirals, to consider how to create “Bold and Enlightened Leaders at Every Level: Forging an Empowered Culture of Excellence.” Specific outcomes included 30 pilot projects. Many regional Navy AI summits have followed. Admiral Vern Clark, Chief of Naval Operations, has said, “Appreciative inquiry is a way to rediscover and tap into our core strengths and highest potentials. It also helps us develop our self-talk in a constructive way and encourages us to bring out our best qualities in serving this institution. Appreciative inquiry is a method that helps us develop the goals and dreams that support the future of our Navy.” (<http://appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu/practice/ppNavy.cfm>)

AI is also making inroads into the important work of community colleges. AI’s fundamental approach of seeking to discover, honor, and amplify what works, the life-giving elements, is a “system” process that works at all levels along the continuum from individual to whole organization. Although AI’s fundamental orientation is consistent, there is a wide range of specific methods and techniques for different contexts. Immediately following are two examples from community colleges, one primarily from the individual end of the continuum and one from an organizational context.

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Centralia College is Washington's oldest community college, in continuous operation since 1925 ([www.centralia.edu](http://www.centralia.edu)). Dr. Jim Walton became the president in the fall of 2002. One of Jim's first projects was a highly participatory campus-wide project to create a 10-year vision, resulting in an impressive and ambitious list of over 80 candidate projects. There's a Zen saying, "One learns in order to do better what one already does well." Jim wanted to capitalize on past successes to unleash the energy required to move ahead with their visionary projects. Knowing that AI is a powerful approach for just such a purpose, Centralia launched a year-long effort to learn about and apply AI methods. The project is named "Living Our Vision" and focuses on four large high-priority projects as the vehicles for learning: appreciative hiring, participatory governance, community connection, and employee recognition.

"Living Our Vision" was launched with a two-day training workshop in April 2004, to teach and apply AI to get a significant start on each of the four projects. Appreciative hiring had the most urgent time horizon. Centralia would immediately begin hiring for 13 positions.

Recognizing that clarifying "what you want more of" is the first step, the appreciative hiring workgroup started by inquiring into the characteristics they wanted in members of their college community. They interviewed each other and located the themes, resulting in a list of 37 desired characteristics, including such qualities as "honest," "articulate," "innovative," "life-long learner," "compassionate," etc.

Next, they designed appreciative interview questions to elicit stories that would indicate a candidate's capacity for these qualities. Questions were mapped to the particular qualities that would most likely be revealed. For example, "Tell us about a time when you turned a difficult interaction into a positive experience" would likely reveal qualities of "civility," "creativity," and "embraces diversity." "Describe a time when you experienced significant personal growth" would provide information for "life-long learner," "professionalism," and "open to new ideas." Questions were combined to ensure that all or most of the 37 desired qualities would have the opportunity to emerge. Perhaps the most important difference between these appreciative questions and typical interview questions is that they invite deep, multi-faceted stories, rather than brief, perfunctory answers.

As part of this year-long AI process at Centralia, we conducted an evaluation (using Appreciative Inquiry methods) of results from the appreciative hiring changes. This included interviews of key college personnel and the newly-hired people. Dr. Walton reported that this process was significantly different from any hiring process he'd been part of, that he learned things about the candidates that he could not have learned in a typical interview, and "These are the 13 best hires I've ever made. Every one of them is outstanding." Lee Lambert, VP of Human Resources, identified three categories of assessment in every hire: knowledge, skills, and abilities; "soft" skills like collaboration and communication; and how well the person will "fit" into the college's culture. "Structured interviews provide pretty good assessment of knowledge, skills, and abilities, but don't generally do well for soft skills. Our appreciative process revealed a fuller range of the whole person." John Martens, VP of Instruction, noted, "This appreciative process let us see the real person beyond the resume. Being good at playing the interview game is very different from being good at the job. This process gave us a much better view into who would be best at the job. In almost every case, the committee, the president, and I came to the same conclusion independently. This process left no questions about who would be best for our college."

The new hires also found the experience atypical and very positive. One person said, "Of all the interviews I've been through, this one was the most comprehensive and personalized. And it got to the point where the details of my credentials were less relevant and they were more concerned about me as a person and a potential colleague. And this was utterly unique in any interview process I've been through. When the interview was over, I knew I would absolutely take this position, if offered, despite the fact that I had two other applications out. It was a fundamental shift from anything I'd ever been through before." Another reported, "I had an opportunity to honestly let them know me, my character, my values, my beliefs, more than I've ever had the opportunity to share before. I felt absolutely certain that if they hired me, they were hiring me, and if they didn't hire me, it would be because it wasn't a good fit and that would be okay." A third person stated, "In some application processes it feels like they're trying to ferret out my flaws. This was much more like a conversation with like-minded people who share values—how do I practice my teaching philosophy. It seemed they were trying to ferret out my strengths."

From the perspectives of both the college and the candidates, the key outcome seems to be a much more accurate assessment of "fit." A second, less obvious benefit is that the candidates feel the interview process was actually the beginning of a deep relationship with the college. Their inclusion and integration with the college community began before their first day on the job, making that critical step all the more welcoming and transparent.

The Centralia example demonstrates how individuals are deeply affected by AI. Although all large-scale change is ultimately an aggregation of individual change, here's another example involving the whole organization. Clackamas Community College (CCC), Oregon City, OR, is using AI as part of its 10-year accreditation self-study process ([www.clackamas.edu](http://www.clackamas.edu)).

CCC has identified four goals for the accreditation process: (a) 10-year affirmation of accreditation, (b) 100% participation of the campus community, (c) model the accreditation steering committee as a learning community by learning and using technology and AI techniques, and (d) use the self-study process to tell the Clackamas story and be proud of who we are.

At its worst, an accreditation process can become a "paper chase" that is not sufficiently connected to the daily operation of the college. Of course, the first goal is absolutely necessary, but to Clackamas, by no means sufficient. The other three goals work together to ensure that the accreditation process is "real," i.e., closely connected to daily operations, highly engaging, and highly generative, creating the very energy needed for continuous improvement.

CCC fully embraces the accreditation self-study process as a framework that provides additional focus to what they already do on a continual basis. In the words of Dr. Dian Connett, Dean of Instructional Services, "Accreditation is planning and planning is accreditation." In fact, as part of their last accreditation process, they adapted their division and department annual planning practices and templates so now their collected documentation comprises most of their self-study data collection. Dian points out, "We've change the ways we do our daily and yearly work so that they demonstrate the accreditation standards."

CCC's emphasis on "story," as represented in the expressed goals of "learn and use Appreciative Inquiry" and "tell the Clackamas story," is significant. Our individual and collective stories become

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“containers for meaning,” combining both facts and feelings. Telling and hearing our stories, seeing our individual story as part of, and contributing to, the larger story is how we become connected and personally invested in the good work of the organization. Sharing our stories is also how we connect with individuals in the organization.

One of the fundamental components of AI is the appreciative interview. No matter what the scale of an inquiry, it begins with a one-on-one interview using carefully-crafted questions to discover life-giving moments and forces. The interview not only gathers important information, it also invariably creates a bond between interview partners. Donna Acord, Associate Dean for Extended Studies, says that, for her, the best part of the accreditation self-study so far is the opportunity to meet and work with different people across the campus. These new relationships, deepened by the AI approach, benefit the accreditation process and far beyond. “AI has helped us really know each other, and that creates unforeseen positive results every day.”

Appreciative Inquiry is especially effective at generating and amplifying virtuous circles by specifically focusing attention on times and circumstances when the organization and the people are at their best, and “what we focus on increases.” CCC is leveraging this effect, turning good into great. As Dian Connett says, “We love it here. It’s all about the people.”

At every scale, from individual to college and district, Appreciative Inquiry provides an orientation and methods to build on the best of the past and present to create the best possible future.

### Resources for further learning

The resources available to support AI are substantial and growing. Here are a few recommendations:

- [www.appreciativeinquiry.org](http://www.appreciativeinquiry.org) is the web address for the Appreciative Inquiry Commons, the official home and nexus for the AI community. Hosted by Case Western Reserve University, it comprises many stories, documents, and links.
- A new monograph, *Appreciative Inquiry in the Community College: Early Stories of Success*, by Nancy Stetson and Charles Miller, provides an excellent overview of AI theory and practice, and many case stories. <http://leaguestore.sureshopping.com/display.asp?sku=61&rP=categories,expand@Leadership>
- [www.iisd.org/ai/locating.htm](http://www.iisd.org/ai/locating.htm) is a link to the introduction of a book by Charles Elliott, *An Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry: Locating the Energy for Change*. This introduction tells two powerful stories of teenage boys heading for trouble and contrasts the problem solving and the appreciative approaches. In addition, the entire book is available as a free download from this site.
- [www.cete.org/acve/docgen.asp?tbl=tia&ID=164](http://www.cete.org/acve/docgen.asp?tbl=tia&ID=164) (Educational Resources Information Center) “Appreciative Inquiry - Trends and Issues Alert #41.” This report provides an overview and bibliography for many of the academic journal articles.

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## CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

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NCIA encourages community-college administrators, faculty members, and staff personnel to participate in this publishing opportunity - - one that offers exposure to a national audience. To be considered, an article must focus on some facet of the community college instructional mission. Articles can be submitted to NCIA as an e-mail attachment; they should be double-spaced (12-point font) and not exceed 1,000 words in length. For more information, please contact the NCIA National Office by e-mail ([ncia.educ@ttu.edu](mailto:ncia.educ@ttu.edu)) or by phone (1-800-782-9698).