Making Room for All

The Benefits of Utilising Appreciative Inquiry and Cultural Values as a Framework for Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives in Academia

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Industry: Education

# of Employees:
857 Staff
819 Faculty

# of Students:
30,000

Country: USA

Consultants:
Cheri Torres (external)
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ABSTRACT

As academic organisations seek to enhance workforce effectiveness, they increasingly emphasise the value of diversity and of fostering a workplace inclusive of all. To achieve this end, we advocate an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework, which asks: What benefits and opportunities are currently made possible within an organisation because of diversity and inclusivity? Imagine the possibilities when all members are invited to bring their diverse talents, passions, strengths, backgrounds and abilities to the table to accomplish a united vision of the future? While the literature indicates that some practitioners have begun to explore AI as a method for furthering this dialogue, there is a dearth of information on specific tools to further this aim. We posit that when utilised with targeted open-ended questions, the Barrett Values Centre's Cultural Values Assessment offers an opportunity for an organisation to gain pivotal information and create a shared platform to open vital dialogue to move toward significant transformation in the areas of diversity and inclusion. Academic leaders who develop competence in using AI to support diversity and inclusion initiatives will be well situated to address a changing 21st century workplace.

INTRODUCTION

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960's and the subsequent Women's Rights Movement of the 1970's gave rise to the emergence of Multicultural Education by pioneer James A. Banks. Banks led a charge for educational institutions, perceived to

be resistant and even hostile to the ideals of equality for all U.S. students, to become more inclusive of women and people of colour in curricular practices. Other marginalised groups – those within the LGBT community, people with disabilities and the elderly –have successfully advocated similarly. Such efforts have not been without resistance.

As curriculum began to become more reflective of students in American classroom, parents, students and activists, called for classroom teachers who were also reflective of the diversity of their students (Gorski, 1999). This pattern of inviting diversity in curriculum, faculty and staffing to reflect student bodies and the surrounding community continues to this day. While for some this is the ideal, several questions linger: is there truly room for all at the proverbial table? And if we are to promote a diverse, equitable and inclusive work environment within our Colleges and Universities, within current legal constraints, what is the academic leader's role in doing so?

Most would agree that few topics can be as polarising as matters of diversity. Within organisational contexts, those charged with promoting a diverse, equitable and inclusive workplace find themselves challenged by the history that workers bring around notions of diversity. Often conversations, activities and efforts to impact diversity and inclusion lead to feelings of blame, shame and increased polarisation with little change in behaviour or organisational practice. Too often, academic leaders seeking to move their environments forward while maintaining sensitivity to all and compliance with legal and moral imperatives look to numbers rather than substantive inclusion and integration into the fabric of the organisation, where diversity efforts have the potential for the most powerful, positive impact.

To move beyond these challenges, the Cultural Values Assessment (CVA) and Appreciative Inquiry (AI) serve as a promising methodology to facilitate forward momentum. The CVA offers members of the organisation the opportunity to start with common ground and shared values and AI supports a generative conversation around key factors that will have a substantive and positive impact on diversity and inclusion in the organisation. Herein, we share the strategy that William Rainey Harper College in Illinois used and the impact of their efforts one year later.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

William Rainey Harper College is a comprehensive community college serving 30,000 students located in suburban Chicago, Illinois, USA. The College serves a district of 750,000, with a third of the residents new in the last decade. Thirty percent of district residents are people of colour and the district is changing rapidly – with the entry of more people of colour, residents from immigrant backgrounds and a lower socio-economic profile.

During FY13, the College's Board of Trustees and President established an institutional priority to involve the entire College in assessing and evaluating the College's performance by means of key indicators, known as Institutional Effectiveness Measures (IEMs). These measures align with the mission and vision of the College as well as the needs and expectations of the College's internal and external stakeholders. The institutional effectiveness activities at the College measure the quality of the institution in several categories, one of which is the diversity of its employees. Board members wanted to convey both to the College's employees as well as to district residents that they valued diversity, were aware of the changing demographics of the district and were committed to having the demographics of the College's employee base represent the diversity in the district. While targets were established for the other IEMs, the College was challenged, for a variety of reasons, in reaching consensus on setting targets for the IEM on diversity and struggled to articulate a clear measure of performance for this metric.

As a result, members of an Employee Resource Group (ERG) for diverse employees brought their concerns to the President – namely the perception that employee diversity was not an institutional priority at the College. There was a great gulf between those on the campus that felt included in the culture of the college and those that did not. These factors led the President to conclude that the time had come to bring renewed attention to matters of diversity and inclusion.

The College's President became determined to engage the campus in a much deeper conversation regarding diversity and inclusion, to reach a consensus on a metric that could be used to chart the College's performance, and to raise awareness of the richness of a diverse community for the learning environment on the campus. To that end, he has asked a team of faculty and staff to serve as a Task Force for one year to determine how to make these considerations an institutional priority so that movement would not remain flat. A timetable and budget was assigned to the effort.

The Task Force realised that the College needed a game changer, a different way to engage people in conversations related to employee diversity and inclusion because past efforts had been stymied. Efforts to improve diversity were not generating the results the institution, or those most affected, truly wanted. In conversation with another college, they learned about the Cultural Values Assessment and the practice of Appreciative Inquiry, and the impact they were having on that college's culture.

The CVA had never before been used specifically to support diversity and inclusion, but it held the promise of starting a new and different conversation based upon a common platform: shared current values and mutually desired cultural values for the college. AI promised radically different conversations; ones that would identify current strengths,

help employees imagine a shared, desired future and allow members of the community to design organisational actions that would have a genuine impact on diversity and inclusion across the campus. Used in combination, the CVA and AI, would elevate the diversity and inclusion conversation at the College to a new level focused on collaborative and innovative solutions for the whole college.

OBSTACLES TO PROMOTING THE VALUES OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

Historically, organisations are challenged by narrow definitions of diversity that fail to recognise that every member of a community brings a range of differences to the table. Such thinking generates a perception of blame that is placed upon majority populations. This is polarising and antithetical to forward momentum. When this is the case, defensiveness sets in even when diversity dialogue conversations are not intended to be alienating. Thus, all voices within a community are not captured because people do not feel safe - regardless of background. The result is that diversity efforts remain stymied. There is too much at stake to simply keep trying the same things over and over again without truly moving the bar. As we are aware, the benefits of diversity accrue not just to diverse students but to *all* students as academic excellence and diversity have been inextricably linked (Clayton-Pedersen, O'Neill, and Musil, 2009).

Traditionally, diversity conversations are deficit-based and problem-oriented, with an emphasis on difference and separation. The problem is discrimination, insufficient representation, lack of inclusion, lack of opportunity, lack of awareness, disrespect, imbalanced privilege, lack of power, an unwelcoming environment, lack of voice, exclusion, alienation, and isolation. The experience is real and existent; defining the focus using this kind of deficit-based language, however, creates conditions that are actually antagonistic to the core intention of diversity and inclusion efforts. When our mind-body feels threatened, we close down, defend, and constrict; our ability to open, embrace, and trust is diminished. Current research across diverse disciplines tell us this is true; this includes the disciplines of

- Human psychology and development
- Neurophysiology
- Medicine and healthcare research
- Sports psychology
- Cross-cultural anthropology
- Physics
- Organisational behaviour
- Learning

At the core of this research lie two apparent facts: (1) positive emotions broaden and build our capacity for inclusion, creativity and critical thinking [Fredrickson and Losada, 2005] and (2) what we focus on, inquire into, and pay attention to persists and even expands. From the Zeno Effect in physics [Sudarshan and Misra, 1977] to the Placebo Effect in medicine [Leuchter, et. Al, 2002], from the Pygmalion Effect in teaching and management [Rosenthal & Jacobson,1968, 1962 and Elliott, J., 1968] to Affirmative Capability in performance and creativity [Israel, 2011; Kirschenbaum, 1984; Sheikh, 1983; Malouff, et. al, 2008; Plessenger;, 2013] and the rise and fall of cultures [Pollack, F., 1973], reality seems to accord with focused time and attention. In fact, part of the human brain makes no distinction between fantasy and reality; it is compelled simply by image and story. The result is that creating stories about the future in present tense language and then acting *as if* literally accelerates our movement towards making those stories our reality.

This research suggests that we co-create our social reality in our conversations. How we attend to our world and one another, the emotions we stimulate and feel, where our questions lead us, and the futures we imagine together all contribute to our world. In academia, this is known as social constructionism [Gergen and Gergen, 2006; Stavros and Torres, 2006.]. To change our social realities, we must change our conversations and the way we make meaning together. In this case, to move away from blame towards unity and connection, away from conversations about what we don't want towards conversations and shared images about what we do want. The logic seems paradoxical and yet it is profound. If our goal is to eliminate racism, discrimination and all the negative impacts of segmented communities and organisations then our efforts must focus on what we want—intentionally diverse communities designed to maximise inclusion and catalyse engagement across that rich varied community. If we are to create a culture of inclusion and diversity we can only do that by acting in ways that exemplify inclusion and diversity.

From the leader's standpoint, moving an organisation forward around matters of diversity and inclusion can be likened to turning an entire ship through hostile waters. When the desire is to foster conversations around diversity that move the whole system forward, new methodologies must be engaged. Appreciative Inquiry offers promise for such engagement.

UTILISING APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AS A FRAMEFORK FOR D&I WORK

To reframe the conversation around diversity and inclusion (D&I) in such a way is at the heart of an organisational design and development practice known as Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is grounded in social constructionism and the research described above. The practices and tools associated with AI make it easy for even large groups of people to generate shared visions of a desired future grounded in their strengths. AI is about asking positive, outcomes-focused questions that generate

valuable information to support what you want more of and what you want to create in the world. To that end, AI first requires a group to clearly identify what it is they want to create; what do they want more of in their system? Once that it is clarified, AI strategies allow people to discover their current positive core of strengths and values associated with their desired outcomes. This is done by gathering stories to deepen understanding about what gives life to the outcomes they are seeking. Interviews, research into best practices and innovative conversations surface new knowledge about what's possible for a group. Fortified with such information, groups can intentionally design workplace structures and practices to support the outcomes they want; they can intentionally choose actions that will, by their very nature, ensure the outcomes they are seeking.

When the desired outcome is a diverse community designed to maximise inclusion and catalyse engagement across the rich varied community, AI begins by seeking stories where that outcome is flourishing with exceptional results. A discovery process surfaces positive deviance within the group or organisation itself and generates data about other organisations and communities where diversity and inclusion are hallmarks of the way things are done. In this way, the group builds its knowledge base around what works, what gives life, what it can do more of that will take members where they want to go *together*.

The College's Diversity and Inclusion Task Force saw the value in adopting an appreciative approach for the College; however, they were sensitive to a couple of important factors. One, to some, AI might be perceived as putting on rose-coloured glasses and ignoring what had transpired in the past. There was a need to make sure that those who have been under-valued truly felt their voices and needs were being heard. Out of sensitivity for this concern, the College made room for people to give voice to their pain, frustration and disappointment without remaining stagnant in those experiences.   At the same time, there was a need to find a way to begin the appreciative conversations on common ground, to discover a shared and desired platform that to some extent created a shared language and understanding from which to talk. The College looked into the Barrett Values Centre's Cultural Transformation Tools and thought this might be the platform because it would allow members of the entire culture to discover their common values.

THE ROLE OF THE CULTURAL VALUES ASSESSMENT FOR PROMOTING D&I

The Cultural Values Assessment (CVA) is a tool for assessing an organisation's culture at a point in time. The assessment provides a set of diagnostics that allow the members of the organisation to discover the top ten personal values of the members of the organisation, the top ten values/norms that members experience in the current culture and the top ten desired cultural values/norms they believe would generate the greatest organisational success. These values are mapped across seven levels of

consciousness correlated with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, helping an organisation discover its strengths and opportunities at each level of consciousness. The assessment does not define the values, which is why it is such a valuable tool for beginning conversations about intentionally creating a future based upon shared desired cultural values.

The CVA helps leaders assess their organisation's readiness for change. Academic leaders may want to move towards diversity and inclusion but if neither of those values show up in the top ten current or desired cultural values and/or if values antithetical to diversity and inclusion are desired, leaders are likely to meet with significant resistance. On the other hand, if diversity and inclusion are among the top ten desired cultural values, leaders are in a very different conversation. Furthermore, the assessment allows leadership to look at various slices of the community for variation and commonality in cultural values.

The juxtaposition of current cultural values with desired cultural values helps academic leaders understand what current college structures are supporting the desired culture and what structures or processes may actually be in the way of their desired outcomes. Conversations in the context of the assessment and using AI as the framing create safe conditions for members of the community to share openly and honestly because (a) the data is theirs and it's clear and simple and (b) their solutions are suggested in the data. With a common platform from which to begin conversation, hearing one another's stories, discovering the positive core, and learning what gives life to diversity and inclusion allows members of the college or university to create shared images of their future. Conversation around the values fostered by the assessment helps leadership spotlight successful actions, programs and behaviours and identify new norms. Positive deviance within the college serves as a model for others.

The CVA provides leaders the flexibility to ask customised questions, allowing colleges and universities to seek specific suggestions related to the issues and concerns related to diversity and inclusion. The College took advantage of this benefit by asking questions that enabled everyone to give voice to their ideas to help shape future action. Within a culture of evidence, new discussions began to emerge.

HARPER COLLEGE CVA DATA

The CVA outcomes for the College supported leadership's emphasis on diversity and inclusion. The chart below shows a summary of the overall personal, current and desired cultural values data from the College's Cultural Values Assessment. This was a culture that appeared to be ready to support diversity and inclusion.

The College's employees' personal values suggest a strong work ethic and the importance of relationship. People want to bring more of themselves to work and they experience aspects of the current culture as limiting their ability to engage and contribute. In the charts to the right, which contain feedback The College outcomes on the Cultural Values Assessment, the (L) stands for 'potentially limiting'. These are values that may or may not limit capacity within the college or university; it depends upon how these values play out. If the experience of these values is negative, it represents lost potential for the college.

Personal	Current	Desired
• **Accountability**	• Brand Image	• Acceptance
• Caring	• Bureaucracy (L)	• **Accountability**
• Compassion	• Community Involvement	• Adaptability
• Family	• Confusion (L)	• Collaboration
• Fairness	• Continuous Improvement	• Coach/mentor
• Honesty	• Controlling (L)	• Diversity
• Humor/Fun	• Cost reduction (L)	• Employee Engagement
• Integrity	• Diversity	• Information Sharing
• Positive attitude	• Goals Orientation	• Open Communication
• **Respect**	• Hierarchy (L)	• **Respect**

Almost by default, people anticipated there would be disparity among different demographic groups (ethnicity, race, disability, sexual orientation and 8 employee classifications). The perceived disparity, however, was unfounded. No matter how we parsed the data across all demographics, there was a powerful match of personal, current cultural values and desired cultural values. In fact, the desired cultural values of the employees at the College showed that members of the organisation were, in general, looking for ways to be more engaged, to work together—valuing diversity—to achieve the College's goals. Across all demographics; most people wanted greater opportunity to be included and they recognised the value of diverse perspectives, including their own. This was the common platform that would enable appreciative conversations to gain traction.

In addition to the remarkable correlation of shared values for the desired culture, the same potentially limiting values in each of the demographic groups showed up. Potentially limiting values, if in fact they are limiting, represents the level of entropy in

Finding time to bring people together for combined social and professional purposes. Improved communication and experiential interactions are needed to get the desired culture. We need more all campus discussions (not lectures but discussions - a round table type of organisation) on major campus issues. Commit 1/2 day each semester when classes are suspended and all campus personnel participate.

the organisation. The higher the entropy, the greater the cost to the organisation. Entropy shows up as wasted resources, wasted time, lower productivity, stress, absenteeism, and high turnover. Delving into the demographic distinctions for limiting values surfaced differences in the level of entropy; in other words, differences in the lost potential within these groups of people. Overall the level of entropy was 37%. For

individual demographics, it was:

- African Americans - 47%
- Asians - 31%
- Latino/Hispanic – 40%
- People with Disabilities – 40%
- LGBT – 56%

Whether 37% or 56%, these figures were significantly high. The data behind the figures offered some insight into why the College has been challenged in achieving its desired diversity outcomes and certainly reflected the stress and overwhelm members of the community were experiencing. The good news: the majority of people completing the assessment wanted the same changes and the antidotes to the causes of entropy were contained in the desired cultural values. The differences in the level of intensity that the potentially limiting values were felt by each group provided a conversational opening into what could be especially important to this group as the college planned for the future. Diving even deeper into the data, we discovered there was no difference when the data was parsed by gender. Employees with disabilities as well as Asians experienced the potentially limiting values to a lesser degree. Non-heterosexual employees (LGTB) experienced the potentially limiting values to a greater degree almost across the board, suggesting a population in serious pain. Those potentially limiting values that stood (at least 10% more of this group experienced these values in comparison with the whole).

The CVA data suggested that actions taken to align organisational structures and workplace practices and policies with diversity and inclusion would support movement towards the desired culture overall; this meant diversity and inclusion efforts would support the desires of the whole. Overall responses to the open-ended questions provided provocative solutions and suggested where efforts could best be focused to gain traction and to be successful in creating a culture that invited and celebrated diversity.

Responses overwhelmingly pointed to the importance of relationships and interpersonal connections as well as leadership's influence on those relationships. They also pointed to organisational structures and practices and how they influenced opportunities for building relationships and ensuring diversity and inclusion. People felt leadership needed to intentionally make the time and the opportunity—at the organisational level—for people to connect with one another; to build real and meaningful relationships that would ultimately lead to greater inclusion and understanding. Cues for leadership were plentiful signalling yet again that AI would be a valuable approach for moving forward.

Appreciative Inquiry proved to be a natural vehicle for the members of the community to begin building those relationships and having important conversations about moving forward with the recommendations from the assessment.

People were invited to come and hear the outcomes of the assessment, to engage in dialogue to create shared visions of living the desired cultural values and to participate in co-creating a culture of diversity and inclusion. They identified the top values that they felt would have the greatest impact on diversity and inclusion, engaged in paired interviews to hear one another's stories of living those values, and then in small groups, they identified actions, projects, and strategies for generating the desired culture as the College charted a course for its future.

OUTCOMES FOR THE COLLEGE USING THE AI APPROACH AND THE CVA

The Diversity and Inclusion Task Force credits the CVA and the AI approach for much of the success experienced. The CVA and AI processes supported the task force in its efforts to model diversity and inclusion in the process of addressing diversity and inclusion; we were no longer talking *about* it, we were engaged in *doing* it. Several transformative recommendations resulted from this work. The results are having a positive and lasting impact:

1. The creation of a new position, Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Inclusion to facilitate advancement on these matters.

2. Broad-based conversations connecting people around shared values and strategies for co-creating the kind of workplace culture/community they want.

3. The construction of new, shared language being created through a regular employee news column about diversity and inclusion by the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Inclusion thus elevating the notion of inclusion.

4. The College has introduced a new bias incident reporting process and a process for capturing positive diversity/inclusion experiences.

5. The College will roll out a new 360 assessment process to elevate employees' ability to capture their work experiences.

6. The College is developing a diversity scorecard through an inclusive process.

7. The College has adopted new Institutional Effectiveness measures for Diversity and Inclusion – to be reported annually by the Special Assistant to the President for Diversity and Inclusion to the President and to the College's Board of Trustees.

8. The College launched a Diverse Faculty Fellows program in the Fall of 2014.

CONCLUSION

For academic leaders interested in increasing diversity and inclusion, the Cultural Values Assessment and Appreciative Inquiry are valuable tools. Utilisation is both viable and indeed recommended. The CVA allows a shared platform to surface, one where all members of the organisation can express their frustration alongside their hopes for the future. In so doing, institutions make room for all voices at the table – an essential component of the inclusion paradigm – creating a forum for forward momentum. Using appreciative framing and crafting AI questions linked to the results of the CVA supports a rich conversation, even for communities where such dialogue has been hampered in times past.

Furthermore, these two tools allow colleges to tap into the richness that all employees bring to the workplace making room for the uniqueness that diversity offers to enter into the conversation about solutions. These tools allow leaders to live the values of diversity and inclusion. Progress is possible because the combination of AI and the CVA foster a safe environment, enabling the college to use its collective intelligence for powerful organisational transformation.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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In the face of chaos and exponential change, new ways of seeing, thinking, and doing are essential if organisations and communities are going to thrive. Cheri Torres brings the practice of Appreciative Inquiry, design thinking, and an ecological worldview to communities and organisations striving for sustainable growth. Her work facilitates learning, innovation and dynamic interpersonal relationships capable of achieving remarkable outcomes.

She partners with communities and organisations to elevate and extend their strengths and broaden and build their capacity for collaboration and collective intelligence. As a result of her work with others, people change the way they work, the way they relate, and the way they design their systems. Cheri has worked with diverse communities: from public schools and community organisations to corporations and government entities, supporting their capacity for innovation, shared leadership, high performance teamwork, and learning.

She has trained thousands of trainers and teachers in the use and practice of Appreciative Inquiry and Experiential Learning with a particular focus on leadership development, teamwork, creativity, and sustainable collaboration. Cheri holds a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with a specialisation in Collaborative Learning from the

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