Appreciative education is presented as a framework for leading higher education institutions, delivering truly student-centered services, and guiding higher education professionals’ interactions with students.

Appreciative Education

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Higher education professionals play a pivotal role in efforts to retain students, but should retention be the primary focus? After all, the definition of the word retain (Dictionary.com, 2012) is: “to keep possession of . . . to continue to hold or have . . . to hold in place or position.” Such deficit-based thinking has led to the massive growth of programming for students that emphasizes topics such as “surviving” college, “recovering” from probation, or academic “remediation.”

Rather than holding students in place, higher education is positioned to help students become their best selves and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials. This growth requires a culture where employees and institutions are unified in their approach to empowering students. It also requires identifying and capitalizing on the strengths of students and higher education professionals to foster the development of the best qualities of individuals and the organization.

Indeed, education should be a learning experience through which students, faculty, and staff learn together and support and challenge each other. This chapter will highlight appreciative education (AE), an organizational and individual framework for creating a culture with high standards that simultaneously embraces ongoing learning, change, and improvement. The purpose of this chapter is to describe AE, including its theoretical infrastructure, as well as provide strategies for implementing it to guide innovative individual and organizational practices.

What Is Appreciative Education?

Appreciative education is a framework for delivering high-quality education on both an individual and organizational level. It provides an intentional and positive approach to bettering educational enterprises by
focusing on the strengths and potential of individuals and organizations to accomplish co-created goals. This interactive and transformative process functions by permeating educational organizations. In this section, we provide an overview of the theoretical grounding of AE as a theory, practice, and mindset, as well as highlight the six phases of AE.

**Theoretical Grounding and Appreciative Mindset.** The AE framework has deep theoretical roots, including social constructivism, positive psychology, and appreciative inquiry. *Social constructivism* is the foundational theoretical perspective that guides AE and echoes Dewey’s (1916, p. 46) observation that “education is not an affair of ‘telling’ and being told, but an active and constructive process.” In other words, AE is built on the notion that knowledge is constructed through collaboration. By creating an interactive teaching and learning process both inside and outside the classroom, learners can actively link new ideas and concepts that they encounter to existing ones, forming connections between the past, present, and future. Appreciative education builds on the affirmative aspects of prior understanding to trigger positive connections between new concepts and past experiences, and to project positive images of future potential development as a source of motivation for learning new material.

While social constructivism guides our understanding of the nature of the learning process, positive psychology and appreciative inquiry have led us to challenge the deficit-based, problem-solving-oriented mentality at both individual and organizational levels. Discontent with the psychology profession’s concentration on “repairing damage within a disease model of human functioning” (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5), Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi proposed the notion of positive psychology as a way “to begin to catalyze a change in the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities” (p. 5).

Focusing on individuals’ “authentic happiness,” Seligman (2002) detailed three measurable elements of happiness, including positive emotion, engagement, and meaning. *Positive emotion* entails how we feel; *engagement* describes the “flow” we experience when we are able to leverage our top strengths to the degree that we overlook the passage of time when focused on an activity; and *meaning* refers to individuals’ desire to pursue a greater purpose in life. All three elements compose life satisfaction and can be measured using various self-report inventories (http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/Default.aspx).

Building on his own theory, Seligman (2011) more recently argued that it is well-being, rather than happiness, that should be the primary focus of positive psychology. The well-being theory involves five pillars: positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment. Instead of viewing happiness as a singular dimension focusing on individuals’ self-perception, the well-being theory posits that socially constructed and shared norms, values, and beliefs are also important. The
ultimate goal for individuals, therefore, is no longer maximizing happiness. Rather, it is to flourish through the development of the five pillars in one's well-being, including both self-perception and social recognition.

Seligman and his colleagues (2009) have been leaders in applying positive psychology in educational settings, and have coined the term positive education as a means to help students develop skills that will increase their sense of well-being. His research team designed and implemented the Penn Resiliency Program and Positive Psychology Program in experimental control studies, finding that the Penn Resiliency Program reduced symptoms of depression, hopelessness, and anxiety (Brunwasser and Gillham, 2008), and the Positive Psychology Program enhanced students' engagement in learning and improved their social skills (Seligman and others, 2009).

Proving that well-being programs can be taught and their impact can be measured, Seligman and his team have continued their research to identify measurable growth in students' well-being and their engagement in learning. While their research at the Geelong Grammar School in Australia—where positive education is implemented at the school level—has demonstrated the potential of applying positive psychology for school change, positive education research in general tends to focus more on individual development rather than organizational change (Kristjansson, 2012; Mather, 2010; Oades, Robinson, Green, and Spence, 2011). AE provides a framework for delivering on the principles of positive education on both the individual and organizational levels.

Different from the focus on individual well-being emphasized through positive education, appreciative inquiry was developed by Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987) as an organizational development theory that “provides a positive rather than a problem-based lens on the organization, focusing members’ attention on what is possible rather than what is wrong” (van Buskirk, 2002, p. 67). Viewing educational settings as living organizations, appreciative inquiry has been applied widely in education to guide pedagogy (Conklin, 2009; Neville, 2008), collaborations (Calabrese, 2006; Calabrese and others, 2008), professional development (Giles and Kung, 2010), student affairs (Elleven, 2007), and action research methods (Giles and Alderson, 2008; San Martin and Calabrese, 2011).

Building on Cooperrider and Srivasta’s (1987) work, Bloom, Hutson, and He (2008) adapted appreciative inquiry from an organizational development model to a model for guiding individual interactions with college students called appreciative advising. Appreciative advising gives academic advisors and other student affairs professionals a set of concrete tools and strategies for developing positive relationships with students.

A key component undergirding both appreciative inquiry and appreciative advising is the appreciative mindset. The appreciative mindset plays heavily into creating positive interactions with others. It posits that if people are looking for the worst in others, they will find the worst. Many of us
have been conditioned to identify quickly the faults in others; the appreciative mindset reminds us to instead actively seek out the best in other people.

AE is a powerful synthesis of the social constructivist, positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, and appreciative advising approaches. AE provides both a theoretical infrastructure and a flexible framework for educational practice. Instead of focusing on either individual or organizational development, AE celebrates the development of a framework that is interactive, transformational, adaptable, and can be used to guide both individual interactions and organizational efforts.

The Six Phases of Appreciative Education. Guiding both individual and organizational practices, AE also follows some practical guidelines. Built on the 6-D model of appreciative advising, which has its origins in the 4-D model of appreciative inquiry, the six phases of AE are: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don’t Settle. These phases do not represent a step-by-step methodology, but rather serve as general principles that guide the AE approach.

The Disarm phase recognizes that power differentials do exist on both individual and organizational levels, so this phase emphasizes reminding participants to be especially cognizant of the importance of creating safe environments where all members feel that their voice is valued and respected. On both individual and organizational levels, power differentials do exist, so the Disarm phase reminds participants to be especially cognizant of the importance of creating safe environments where all members feel that their voice will be heard. Engaging and coaching others about the importance of using positive verbal and nonverbal immediacy behaviors, especially early in interactions where people tend to be the most suspicious of each other, can establish a respectful culture to maximize teaching and learning relationships.

The Discover phase emphasizes the importance of using positive, open-ended questions focused on learning other people’s perceptions of their own personal strengths and the strengths of the organization of which they are a member. This enhances the development of interdependence within people and their organization. Internally, individuals can identify personal strengths and assets at cognitive, metacognitive, and affective levels through self-reflective instruments or strengths-based self-reflection questions.

On the institutional level, it is important for individuals to situate themselves within the best of the larger organizational context and identify why they are proud of their connection to the organization. One could argue that some individual strengths are context specific and may be uncovered only through social interactions with others in the larger organizational context. In educational settings, the Discover component is especially important to keep in mind as we model and encourage the recognition of both individual and organizational strengths.
The Dream phase highlights the importance of uncovering personal and organizational visions. While goals tend to be more concrete and objective, dreams can include visions that are much bigger, and sometimes may even be perceived as nebulous or unrealistic. We each have unique visions for our lives and the organizations where we work. Working together in differing roles and settings within our institutions, it is important that we draw from similarities across our dreams and create shared visions for the organization that can guide positive changes.

The Design phase is typically described as an action plan where individual strengths are aligned to achieve both individual and shared dreams; the process is socially constructed and self-evolving. The designed plan may provide concrete guidance for the daily actions we take, but more important, it serves as a means for us to further uncover our strengths and dreams, rather than serve as a means to an end.

The Deliver phase entails thoughtful actions taken not only to carry out the individual and organizational plans created during the Design phase; it emphasizes the importance of personal and organizational resilience as obstacles and challenges arise. Positively constructed social interactions encourage and motivate us to redefine roadblocks as signals for activating alternative thinking and reconceiving challenges as opportunities.

The heart of the Don't Settle phase is “positive restlessness” (Kuh and others, 2005) within and among individuals and organizations. Discovery of the past and dreaming of the future are impacted by one's perception of the present. As individuals and organizations grow, they are challenged to revisit the process of Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver so that they may revisit their assumptions, rediscover strengths and passions, create bigger dreams and shared visions, chart future steps, and keep seeking creative ways to accomplish goals.

Appreciative Education: Ideas for Innovative Practices

One of the most exciting aspects of AE is that it provides a flexible framework for delivering innovative practices that develop individuals and organizations and optimize performance. Six innovative practice ideas relevant to higher education are covered in this section: positive interactions, reciprocal learning, holistic engagement, strategic design, appreciative leadership, and intentional change. Note that the application of the AE framework is not limited to these six innovative practice ideas; we hope that they will be a launching point for readers to reflect on how the model can be used in other creative ways.

Positive Interactions. Innovative practices at both the individual and organizational levels begin with, and are completely dependent on, people’s establishing positive communication patterns with each other (Kratzer, Leenders, and van Engelen, 2004). Thus, the first innovative practice is
rightly titled positive interactions. Specific ways in which positive interactions at the individual level can be implemented in higher education institutions include utilizing an appreciative performance evaluation process, offering tools and time for self-reflection and self-assessment, and creating common spaces that encourage individuals to interact and collaborate.

At the organizational level, positive interactions foster a culture that is built on respect and appreciation for every member of the team (Cameron, Dutton, and Quinn, 2003). Conflict occurs within any group, but in appreciative organizations it is openly and honestly discussed with the focus on moving through the conflict and into resolution. Meeting agendas reflect the needs of all team members and are built around the mission, vision, and values of the unit to ensure focus and efficiency.

Perhaps not surprisingly, positive interactions have been found to help students, staff, and institutions thrive. In the *Appreciative Advising Revolution* Bloom, Hutson, and He, 2008, explored and evaluated the centrality of positive interactions to promoting student academic achievement and organizational development. Similarly, Saunders and Hutson (2012) found that these positive interactions between professional advisors and at-risk students were germane to helping students enhance relationships with faculty, staff, and peers and ultimately improve their academic standing.

Meetings, especially those with potentially contentious issues on the agenda, should start with the facilitator's reminding attendees: “Let’s all proceed with the presumption of goodwill” (Autry, 1991, p. 157). Autry (1991) points out that if we assume that people come to the table with goodness in their hearts, intentionally establishing a positive tone for the meeting will lift the level of dialogue, even if there are difficult issues that need to be addressed. Another organizational strategy involves creating an appreciative employee recognition program where all members of the community are responsible for recognizing the good efforts of their co-workers both publicly and personally.

**Reciprocal Learning.** At their best, teaching and learning is a shared responsibility between the instructor and the student. This necessitates embedding reflective questions within conversations between professionals and students. Appreciative college instruction used the six-phase framework format of appreciative advising as a model for taking a positive approach to teaching college-level student success courses (Bloom, Hutson, He, and Robinson, 2011). We posit that the positive, open-ended questions that are the infrastructure for appreciative advising and appreciative college instruction represent a powerful tool for engaging parties in both teaching and learning (Bloom, Hutson, and He, 2008; Bloom, Hutson, He, and Robinson, 2011). This is largely due to the fact that these open-ended questions invite others to share their stories, which have been the most frequently used form of communication for human beings since the dawn of time: “There have been great societies that did not use the wheel, but there have been no societies that did not tell stories” (LeGuin, n.d., para.
Thus, stories are an important part of our fiber as human beings and they help us learn about ourselves and others.

On an individual level, those that teach and mentor students inside and outside the classroom need to view these duties as opportunities to learn and grow. This can be accomplished by regularly reflecting on what we are learning from our students and by asking questions that will elicit their stories. Critical reflection empowers higher education professionals to not only commit to a life of continuous learning themselves, but also to cultivate the reflective habits of college students (Hutson, Bloom, and He, 2009). These reflective opportunities can be provided through the discussion of current news, blogs, and trends that influence higher education (D. Pruitt, personal communication, July 1, 2012); the reflection on personal practical theories that guide our interactions and practices; and in community-engaged action research projects that utilize strength-based inquiry methods (He, 2013). Not only is committing to staying current imperative to do our jobs well, we also must realize that we are powerful role models for our students.

The key to thriving organizations is a commitment to provide multiple opportunities for all members of the group to teach and learn. Tichy (2002, p. 3) proposes the concept of the teaching organization rather than the learning organization. To be an effective teacher, one needs to be a world-class learner, but that is not sufficient. One also has to share what is being learned and inspire others to be teachers, too.

Departments within the institution can embody this commitment to continuous learning by setting up a book club with a rotating facilitator; actively encouraging employees to present their work, not only at conferences, but to each other, and/or write about their successes for publications; or visiting other offices that are potential collaborators. Another technique involves taking time to identify each team member’s unique strengths and talents, and then sharing this information with others so that team members can call on each other to share their knowledge and expertise.

Holistic Engagement. Holistic engagement involves helping professionals and students make the most of their experiences. For students, this involves encouraging them to connect and integrate their in- and out-of-class experiences with their values and their career and life goals. Likewise, for professionals, the emphasis is on helping them connect their on- and off-the-job experiences with their values and goals.

On an individual level, we know that higher education professionals who adopt the appreciative mindset and engage in appreciative practices reported that they were able to better utilize their strengths and talents and formed more positive relationships with co-workers, families, friends, and others (Howell, 2010). Mimicking Google’s policy that allows employees to spend 20 percent of their working hours on their own innovative ideas and projects (Berkun, 2008), higher education institutions can encourage staff to spend one to four hour(s) per week pursuing new ideas or volunteering...
in their community. This will not only increase individual productivity, it can also serve as a way to increase organizational productivity.

Students can serve as peer engagement coaches for their colleagues, giving them the opportunity to share their expertise and knowledge of campus resources with fellow students. Staff and students can put together their own e-portfolios that document their learning, achievements, and progress toward meeting personal and professional goals. Another option is to have students fill out a student engagement plan (O’Keefe, 2009) that helps them identify possible involvement opportunities that are congruent with their strengths, passions, and interests. Service learning opportunities are a meaningful way to bring together faculty, staff, and students to meet the needs of community-based organizations as well as to give opportunities for all parties to build connections with each other (Bringle and Hatcher, 2000).

At the organizational level, institutions can offer shadowing opportunities for staff interested in learning about unfamiliar areas. Divisions may also implement a process wherein staff members are encouraged to write a portion of their own job description to include projects and programs that they find most stimulating and beneficial. Further, traditional committees can be replaced with dynamic work groups that focus on output and outcomes. These work groups can promote an appreciative culture by keeping meetings to a minimum and ensuring that those that are held are focused on a clear agenda that includes input from all team members. Appreciative education practices can also be applied to training orientation leaders (Propst Cuevas and others, 2011) and engaging families and communities (Buyarski, Bloom, Murray, and Hutson, 2011).

**Strategic Design.** In *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll wrote, “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.” Intentionality is woven throughout AE, but is especially important in strategic design. Drawing from the field of Human Resource Development, we define strategic design as intentionally created, future-driven plans to achieve goals and maximize organizational potential through individual development (Peterson, 2008). After all, an organization is merely a collective of the individuals that comprise it. Strategic design plans must be aligned to the organization’s mission, vision, and values, and be student centered. Although the literature describes positive approaches to strategic planning initiatives in higher education settings (Atkins, 2010; Ellis, 2010), we are using the term *strategic design* because a plan indicates a specific path to be followed, while design suggests a specific purpose to be achieved—in this case, optimal student development.

Strategic design should be inclusive and allow for all team members to participate in strategy development and execution, from the president to the support staff. Individuals that interact with students on a daily basis are often more in tune with their needs and areas of oversight than a management team. In terms of strategy and motivation, it makes the most sense to
have individual team members play a key role in establishing goals, setting a path to achieve them, and executing the plan. As Bandura (1997) says, “When people select their own goals, they are likely to have greater self-involvement in achieving them. If goals are prescribed by others, however, individuals do not necessarily accept them or feel obligated to meet them” (p. 28).

Individuals should bear great responsibility in the strategic design of their specific area, but it would be shortsighted to stop there. Allowing team members to offer input in the creation of the larger organizational design can foster congruence, engagement, and a shared vision. In practice, these unit designs and overarching organizational designs should dovetail one another. Using a collective approach to the design process will also encourage cooperation and reduce replication. This can be achieved by hosting a large brainstorming session or online discussion board.

Organizations can adopt strategic design initiatives including a SOAR (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results) analysis in lieu of the traditional SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis (Stavros and Hinrichs, 2009). Planning an appreciative inquiry summit is another way for an organization to collectively engage in the strategic design process (Ludema, Whitney, Mohr, and Griffin, 2003). Strategic designs should be flexible enough to allow for innovation, yet structured enough to avoid chaos. Designs should include assessment tools and appropriate budgetary support. Evaluation is a critical component of strategic design in AE. The integration of ongoing appreciative assessment and evaluation not only captures the success of programs and units, but also offers immediate feedback for program improvement and development (Hutson and He, 2011; Saunders and Hutson, 2012).

**Appreciative Leadership.** Leadership, whether at the individual or organizational level, is most powerful when we recognize our connectedness to others. Thus, we view all leadership as collective. According to the Kellogg Foundation (2007), “collective leadership becomes possible when the members of a group, motivated by a common purpose, begin to build relationships with each other that are genuinely respectful enough to allow them to co-construct their shared purpose and work” (p. 3). Each member brings a unique set of ideas and experiences to the group, and thus it takes a village to make higher education institutions run smoothly.

Appreciative leadership promotes a student-centered approach to educational leadership. There is one question that should be used to make decisions: “Is this in the best interest of the students we serve?” If the answer is no, that is a clear indicator that the right answer has not yet emerged. Appreciative leadership offers a philosophy that is both intentional and inclusive (Schiller, Holland, and Riley, 2002; Whitney, Trosten-Bloom, and Rader, 2010). All perspectives are valued and considered when
choosing the path forward, whether for an individual or an organization. Recognizing that every person is able to create and transfer knowledge generates an environment of equity and encourages organizational citizenship (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, and Bachrach, 2000).

At the individual level, appreciative leadership can be fostered by spending the necessary time and resources to develop individual employees. Institutions can encourage mentoring relationships that provide professional staff members with a role model and sounding board. Institutions can also offer trainings—including professional and personal development exercises—to facilitate individual growth. Individuals who are developing in this way and are confident in themselves and their abilities are best positioned to actively participate in the organization and contribute to the whole. In Good to Great, Jim Collins (2001) identifies the need to not only have the right people on the team, but to have them in the right places where they are able to use their strengths. Organizations that foster individual leadership development are able to be more effective in implementing a collective leadership model.

There are many ways for organizations to transition to a collective, appreciative leadership style. One easy way to begin the transition is to rotate the leader of each staff meeting, allowing all team members the opportunity to serve in an important leadership role, including collecting agenda items, printing the agenda, and running the meeting. Another strategy is to allow staff members to lead projects outside of their specific job tasks that are of particular interest to them and report back to the entire staff. Promoting collaborations across units and even institutions would further strengthen the collective leadership in enhancing appreciative education in all higher education settings. The implementation of appreciative advising in multiple institutions (Bloom and others, 2009) and the collaborative development of the Appreciative Advising Inventory across campuses (He, Hutson, and Bloom, 2010) are good examples of how institutions could work together in promoting positive change utilizing collective resources.

**Intentional Change.** AE is steeped in theories of constant and intentional positive organizational change (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, 2010). Once educational institutions have adopted an AE approach, a virtuous cycle of change can develop where each success builds on other successes, and failures provide excellent opportunities to learn and propel new change (Cameron, Bright, and Caza, 2004).

To encourage employees to come up with innovative ideas for change and improvement, time should be provided for them to dream about an idealized future on both a personal and an organizational level. Organized dreaming retreats allow individuals to reinvent themselves and to see new opportunities in their work, keeping them fresh and energized. During a retreat, previous successes should be celebrated and used to identify and launch new ideas and goals.
On an individual level, employees can be primed to be more accepting of change through educational initiatives about the phases of change and the emotions that accompany them. Change is typically not easy for people, but by teaching individuals the emotions involved in the stages of change and offering breakthrough strategies, organizations can help employees deal with personal and organizational transitions.

Conclusion

Appreciative education presents a powerful new framework for enhancing individual and organizational effectiveness. Steeped in the theories of social constructivism, positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, and appreciative advising, this approach can be used to lead administrative and academic units as well as enhance interactions of institutional members with students and other constituents. However, it is the theory-to-practice nature of the framework that facilitates its implementation to optimize the effectiveness of the organization as well as the individuals that comprise the organization. Fueled by a shared commitment to student success and approaching obstacles as opportunities for growth, AE is destined to transform the ways in which higher education will be delivered in the future.

References

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