

Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Certification

Personal Information:

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AIFT Training Dates:

June 22nd – June 25th 2015 in Haverhill, MA

Description of organization, group, or community I worked with:

I work at Northern Essex Community College (NECC), one of Massachusetts' 15 community colleges with campuses in Lawrence and Haverhill, MA. With full-time enrollments around 7,000, NECC caters to both traditional and non-traditional populations of college students. NECC offers a wide variety of Associate Degrees, Certificates, and non-credit courses. We also have strong articulation agreements and transfer arrangements with four-year institutions, such as UMass Lowell, Suffolk, Regis, Lyndon State, and Southern New Hampshire University. We collaborate with a community consisting of college administrators, staff, faculty, and students, all possessing passion for student success and the desire to help others achieve greatness through education.

This past year, NECC finished our strategic plan "Voices," which consisted of 5 Strategic Directions and 5 Strategic Goals. As we embarked on our next strategic plan, the college pulled together a group of people who were both involved in the past strategic plan and those who were invested in engaging in the next process. Although we had a core group of people who were identified by the President and Vice Presidents, we recognized the importance of engaging all members of the college community. Therefore, this process involved students, faculty, front line admissions and financial aid staff, facilities, public safety, administrators, the Board of Trustees, alumni, and community members. This enabled our group to capture the visions of all the stakeholders in order to proceed into our next strategic plan titled – NECC 2020.

Names and titles of the Core Group who identified and modified the Interview Guide:

Our "Plan the Plan Core Group" consisted of the following members throughout the college community. This group includes representation from all areas of the college and members at various levels of the organization. We began to meet as a group in the summer, after our AIFT Training to plan our interview guide that was to be used for our September Convocation.

Lane Glenn, President

William Heineman, Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs

Noemi Custodia-Lora, Executive Director of Lawrence Campus and Community Relations

Wendy Shaffer, Dean of Development
Dawna Perez, Dean of Student Success
Tina Favara, Dean of Enrollment Services and Student Affairs
Linda Meccouri, Dean of Professional Development
Marcy Yeager, Executive Director of Quarrybrook
Rick Haskell, Director of Fiscal Services
Laurie Hillson, Director of Nursing Education
Melba Acevedo, Director of Instructional Technology and Online Learning
Stephen Russell, Professor, History & Government; Department Chair
Mark Reinhold, Assistant Professor, Natural Sciences
Ashley Moore, Manager of Career Connections & Internship Programs
Margaret Pothier, Writing Center Coordinator
Niurka Aybar, Coordinator of the Student Success Center
Theresa Mullin, Project Manager
Cheryl Goodwin, Executive Assistant to the Office of the President
Cathy Lavery, Staff Assistant Development Office and Institutional Advancement
Sharon McManus, Staff Assistant, Center for Professional Development
Scott Lancaster, Faculty and Clinical Coordinator

Positive topic the core group identified for inquiry and the method used to identify the topic:

Our positive topic of inquiry was looking into the work that makes people feel most involved or excited at NECC. We also wanted to understand the core values of our community. With this information, we were looking to see how we could combine the two in order to maximize the student experience.

To identify this topic, our group conducted a mini inquiry. We went through the generic interview guide and from there shared stories and life-giving forces. As a group, we used these life-giving forces to narrow and refine the positive topic of inquiry and the interview guide. We tested the wording on each other by conducting mini-interviews. This test ensured that the questions were positive and that they would help people share their stories. We wanted to leave this part as open as possible so that the larger college community could interview each other. We also wanted to use the data from the larger community to identify life-giving forces, record them on flip charts, start to map the community's positive core, and from there develop our themes.

Modified Interview Guide:

NECC 2020

Strategic Planning Inquiry Guide

1. Think about Our Current Strategic Plan

Recall a time when you felt most involved or excited about some aspect of the work of the college. What made it an exciting experience? Who was involved? What factors contributed to the effectiveness of the work?

2. Things you value deeply

When you are at your best, what do you value most about your contributions to NECC?

3. What we want more of at NECC

Is there a Strategic Goal you want to see continued? And/or, if you could create a new Strategic Goal, what would it be?

4. Wishes for the future

What three wishes do you have for NECC in 2020?

The Method of interviews people used to inquire into exceptionally positive moments:

We initially used face-to-face paired interviews with the larger college community at our fall Convocation. After we collected the data from Convocation, we held SOAR Forums to identify our **S**trengths, **O**pportunities, **A**spirations, and **R**esults, of each of the themes that came up in the initial interviews (see the themes below in the section for Life-Giving Forces). These forums were conducted in group settings, one-on-one, or anonymously online. In the group settings, there was a mixture of personal writing and reflection and group discussion.

List of Life-Giving Forces, what the group MOST wanted to create MORE of, that was identified in the stories they shared:

When we conducted the interviews at Convocation in September of 2015, we gathered around 180 interview guides of information on what people valued about their work, what they wanted to create more of at NECC, and what they wished for the future. Our core team read through each interview guide and analyzed the content to come up with the larger group's life-giving forces, which we titled "SOAR Forum Themes." There themes were as follows:

1. **Integrated Student Experience:** This life-giving force came up multiple times throughout the data. At NECC, we have many different supports for students on campus to help them enroll, integrate, persist, and then graduate. However, these functions do not always do a great job at integrating their services and creating a clear pathway for the students' time in college. Furthermore, NECC has two campuses, both with differing services that do not always make sense to the student users and are not always equal on both campuses. Constituents at the college would like to streamline the services, create clear and organized pathways for students, and make the services equitable and accessible on at both campuses.
2. **Student Success:** The college community wanted to continue to advance the efforts of Achieving the Dream and the Department of Higher Education's Vision Project to better prepare students, particularly those who have been historically underserved. For NECC, this life-giving force would particularly seek to increase college participation and completion, and to close achievement gaps.
3. **Career Exploration and Development:** This life-giving force was very important to the college community, who felt that we made significant strides on this goal in our last strategic plan, but also felt there was much more work to be done. They wanted to increase experiential learning opportunities, especially through internships, in order to provide students with real-world work experience, making them more valuable to employers post-graduation. They also wanted to see more comprehensive and creative solutions for students to explore their careers and develop themselves as professionals.
4. **Curriculum Innovation:** The NECC community called for us to be more innovative and flexible when looking at how our course curriculum is developed and offered. With this, they focused on competency-based education, guided pathways, and global experiences. The college also wants to make sure the academic programs are continuously assessed for their effectiveness and their alignment with employer and industry needs.

5. **External Partnerships:** The college also recognized the importance of the partnerships within our community, specifically with high schools, 4-year schools, businesses, non-profits, community groups, and alumni. As a community college, we want to make sure that we are meeting the needs of the community in which we operate. By creating partnerships with the external community, we can ultimately create a more rich academic, social, cultural, and economic experience for our students and impact on the Merrimack Valley.
6. **Professional Development:** This was another important life-giving force that came up in the data. Knowing that faculty and staff also need to be continuously enriched, in order to provide superb learning experiences for the students. There were many things that were mentioned as professional development opportunities, including conference attendance, mentorship, continued education, and enhanced collaboration throughout the college.

In addition to these themes, there were other areas of opportunity that came up continuously in the data. These ideas were deemed highly important and were set aside as projects that will work in conjunction with the next strategic plan. It was decided that these ideas were very important, but should not be strategic goals alone. Instead, we would develop plans around them to support the strategic plan as a whole. These three areas of opportunity were:

1. **Technology Plan:** The college community was concerned about the need to integrate our systems, to update the technology across campus, to improve knowledge of the systems available, to increase usage and system utilization, to plan for disaster recovery, and to more meaningfully collect, report, and analyze data to assess program effectiveness.
2. **Safety and Security Plan:** As campus violence and mental health concerns continue to increase across the country, NECC seeks to provide its faculty, staff, and students a safe learning environment and a comprehensive plan to address emergency situations.
3. **Enrollment Plan:** As a college, many constituents are concerned with dwindling enrollment numbers. As a community college, our population tends to decrease as the economy improves and people go back to work. Additionally, the amount of students graduating high school is projected to continue to decline over the next 10 years. Using this information, the stakeholders at NECC seek to define our ideal enrollment and our vision for growth over the long term. With that, we will strategize a plan to meet that goal through creative recruitment methods.

Using this information, we then held multiple SOAR Forums for an hour each at various times and on both campuses. Some were specifically scheduled, while others were on a drop-in basis. Members of the college were encouraged to attend at least one forum, but were not limited to the number they could attend. They were also invited to attend anonymously online, if they wished.

At the forums, members from across the college had the opportunity to reflect, discuss, and write about each of the 6 themes, or life-giving forces, listed about. They were expected to turn in their SOAR Forum sheets with the data at the end of each session. During the forums, they had the opportunity to discuss and to analyze as many themes as they wished. Facilitators were in the room to answer questions and to keep the topic of conversation positive.

(See next page for SOAR Forum Questionnaire used)

THEME: _____

Please talk with participants at the table, or reflect personally, and record your thoughts, ideas, and visions about an opportunity that supports our strengths at NECC around this theme. Please feel free to use multiple sheets.

STRENGTHS

What is NECC doing really well presently to achieve this goal?

What areas of the college are our greatest assets in creating and meeting this theme's goal?

Strengths Notes:

OPPORTUNITIES

What are the best opportunities for NECC to achieve your vision of this theme?

How could we partner internally and externally to achieve this?

Opportunity Notes:

ASPIRATIONS

To what do we aspire? Please describe your vision of a preferred future for NECC with this theme successfully implemented.

Aspiration Notes:

RESULTS

What will we measure to determine if we have met your vision and implemented opportunities?

What will the change be that we are known for?

Results Notes:

List of Provocative Proposition(s) that the group created from the Life-Giving Forces:

Our list of Provocative Propositions is what will ultimately become our strategic goals for the next strategic plan, titled NECC 2020. The team developed these goals from that data that was collected from the SOAR Forums, showing where people had the most life-giving forces, while also aligning them with the state-wide Vision project. The Vision Project has seven Key Outcomes, including college participation, college completion, student learning, workforce alignment, preparing citizens, elimination of disparities, and research.

At our January Convocation, these strategic goals will be in “near completed draft” form and the college community will have the opportunity to refine and edit the goals before they go before the Department of Higher Education for approval. Once the remaining details are fine-tuned, the group will call to action members of the college community to take more of a leadership role by becoming members of individual teams that interest them. These working teams will be highly collaborative and cross-functional. Together they will create the individual metrics for how the goals will be achieved. They will also devise a plan of action to carry out the work required.

With that, our group first stated that as a college, we have four Strategic Priorities: Students, Faculty and Staff, Campus, and Community. Based on the data from the SOAR forum, four Provocative Propositions (Strategic Goals) were formed and names for the Goal Teams were created.

Provocative Propositions (Strategic Goals) that the Core Group developed:

Goal Team Name: Integrated Student Experience

- Design and deliver an integrated, structured, and inclusive student experience across campuses that maximize student success.

Goal Team Name: Student Career Opportunities

- Provide students with comprehensive career development services including access to internships, career exploration, experiential learning, and job placement.

Goal Team Name: Professional Growth

- Increase opportunities for faculty and staff that encourage professional growth, foster experimentation, and advance curriculum innovation.

Goal Team Name: External Partnerships

- Expand and strengthen partnerships with the external community.

Include the Strategic Intentions the group developed to realize the Provocative Propositions they created:

This strategic plan is a college-wide initiative. In an effort to engage all parties, including faculty, staff, administration, students, and the community, the Core Team used a collaborative approach to developing the Strategic Intentions that will help us realize the Provocative Propositions. This part of the plan will mostly likely not be finalized until after the one-year mark of the AIFT in June.

However, I can share the details of our proposal. Our Core Team proposes the following:

1. Present the Provocative Propositions (Strategic Goals) at our January Convocation to the entire college community. People will have time to comment, suggest any edits, and fine tune the plan.
2. The Core Team will call upon the college community, asking for volunteers to either lead or participate on a team to achieve these propositions over the next four years. These are fluid teams that invite participants to join or leave at any point. People are welcomed to visit any meeting or to read minute notes posted on the strategic planning website for transparency.
3. These teams will develop the Strategic Intentions. In other words, they will develop a group charter detailing how they plan to achieve these goals and the measurable outcomes that they will use to ensure the goals have been met.
4. The measurable outcomes will be added to each goal in our strategic plan and will then be brought to the Department of Higher Education (DHE) for approval in June.
5. Upon approval from DHE, each goal team can begin their work on achieving these goals.
6. The college will designate a Steering Committee to oversee all of the goal teams. Goal teams will be expected to meet at least once every month. Leaders of the goal teams will then be expected to meet with the Steering Committee, probably quarterly, to report on work and to receive additional guidance on moving forward.
7. Team budgets will be requested and managed by team leaders in order to carry out the goals.
8. Lastly, time will be given at each semester's Convocation for the teams to update the college community on their progress.

Given my role here at the college and my experience with the prior strategic plan, I anticipate that I will play a large role in both advising the individual Goal Teams and also leading the team on Career Exploration and Development. I look forward to working collaboratively with a cross-functional team at the college to develop these Strategic Intentions and to carry out the strategic plan, NECC 2020.

Impact or Results: What organizational attitude, process or structure changes have people made as they move toward realizing the Provocative Propositions? What progress have people made toward their Strategic Intentions or Initiatives or Pilot Projects? What stories of success can be shared?

As I mentioned, this process will take more than the one year given to complete this certification. However, I will speak from personal experience with the prior strategic plan, which was also devised through Appreciative Inquiry. When I started at the college, we were actually at the beginning of the work phase of the strategic plan. Therefore, I missed all of the initial AI work that develop the Strategic Intentions. I was assigned to work with our Goal Team 4 to Improve Career Preparation of our Students. I was heavily involved and have been for the past three years. It was because of this work that I was so passionate about stepping up and becoming trained in AI and taking on a larger role in this next strategic plan.

Because I have now seen the complete power of the AI planning process, I can easily speak to the impact and results this work can have on an organization.

In terms of organizational attitude, by focusing on the positive, it allows our community to be much more innovative and to try new things. People genuinely get excited about the work and actively live our strategic plan; it does not just sit on a shelf and collect dust. I can recall talking about NECC's strategic planning process in my graduate program. My instructor was shocked that people at NECC actually knew the Strategic Goals of the college so well and that they actively participated to achieve these goals. She had never witnessed this in an organization. Our strategic planning process with Appreciative Inquiry increases the college community's engagement because the process enables everyone to have a voice, if they wish. I have seen people in Marketing and members of the faculty engage in activities that improve student career preparation, something their role would not normally allow. Additionally, because of the way the work is structured, you can easily see the progress that is being made, which is exciting.

When you look at structural and process changes, one of the best results of this process is improved communication and transparency. Although we won't always reach everyone, most people have at least heard of the positive work being done in our past strategic plan. Because of this initial groundwork, we have begun to look at the way the college is structured and how we ensure that students are successful. With that, we are now focusing most of our next strategic plan on streamlining the student services and academic affairs processes to ensure a smooth pathway from recruitment to graduation and beyond. We are also looking at how we can maximize technology to enhance these processes. Our focus on Appreciative Inquiry creates a positive culture that enables us to notice what we do really well and to replicate that in other areas. With this outlook, our strategic plans continue to build upon one another, highlighting the good work that needs to continue to be strengthened and optimized.

In our past plan, so much progress was made towards our Strategic Intentions. For example, our Goal Team 1 designed to build a comprehensive downtown urban campus in Lawrence, MA. This team secured funding, achieved major renovations, acquired new property, built a state-of-the-art health building, increased parking, brought retail, restaurants, and banks on premises, and so much more.

Goal Team 4, which I worked on, also made significant accomplishments. Not only did the team advocate for me to be hired full-time upon my graduation from my graduate program, but we also

began the process of building the office of Career Connections from the ground up. This included, implementing a Career Services Management software system, starting an internship program, reinvigorating the college's career workshop series, implementing a Networking Night in lieu of traditional career fairs, revamping the college's career services website and policies on student recruitment, and researching career exploration assessment tools to be used with students. Based on these stories of success, I am excited to see what the next strategic plan will accomplish!

What can I do to make sure that the college continues to move towards realizing the Provocative Propositions? How can I help them gather stories of success? How can I help them celebrate? How can I, as an AI Facilitator, support the college's ongoing success?

I can continue to take an active leadership role in the on-going strategic planning process. I plan to especially take an active role in the Provocative Proposition about Career Preparation. My role at the college makes me professionally responsible and personally invested in achieving the measureable outcomes that will be put in place. Therefore, I commit to actively participating in at least one goal team. I also promise to participate at the Steering Committee level to ensure that the other goals are focusing on the positive core of our plan and implementing work that is far-reaching and impactful.

As a member of a team, I am responsible for keeping accurate meeting notes that provide transparent communication to the college. This includes highlighting stories of success to use in marketing materials, to generate interest in participation, and to promote the work that we are trying to achieve. I believe my team did this very successfully during the last strategic plan, putting career preparation at the forefront with stories of success. This heightened awareness and the stories of success are powerful reasons why this is a goal that will be continuing in the next strategic plan. I commit to continuing this work, highlighting its importance and its significant impact on our students.

To help the teams celebrate, I will encourage the college to celebrate the successes of the individual goal teams at least on a yearly basis. This celebration should not only acknowledge the work that is being done, but will also engage the college community to get them excited. As an AI Facilitator who is heavily involved in the strategic plan, I can work to keep the tone of the college positive by helping to promote the amazing work of the plan. I will also be knowledgeable about the work of the different teams at any given time. With this knowledge, I will ensure that information is shared correctly with others, whether that is in meetings or in one-on-one conversations. This is important with such a large community that very rarely comes together in one room. By keeping the work of the teams at the forefront of peoples' minds, we will continue to celebrate and generate positive work in the future.

Additionally, as an AI Facilitator I am committed to supporting the college's ongoing success. I was fortunate to have such a large implementation of AI for my first project. What could be better than helping to write a strategic plan through AI? However, I have already begun to practice AI in other areas of my work and plan on continuing to do so. AI works fantastic for large-scale projects, but it works equally well in a one-on-one conversation with a student who needs some career coaching. Therefore, I commit to using AI to support the college's ongoing success in the following ways:

1. Begin each meeting (as much as possible) by sharing good news. I have seen this done in other meetings I have attended. At first it can be difficult to think of some good news to share. However, you can see people light up when they share their news with others. For many, this might be the first time someone asked them about something good that day. This creates a

friendly, happy environment that encourages relationship building and trust, ultimately leading to work efficiency and collaboration.

2. Reframing complaints, concerns, or problems to enable others to see things and to think differently. This will help our community move past road blocks and to envision our shared future, mapping out how to get there. It will create innovation, collaboration, and positivity that will invigorate the community.
3. Revise my evaluation process for my programs to incorporate AI and to gather helpful information to enhance these programs. By focusing on what we are doing really well, we can let go of things that might not be working and focus our energy on programs that have heightened success, replicating that in other areas.
4. Host AI trainings on campus to introduce AI to others and to increase awareness of the practice. This will help continue the college's success by causing a ripple effect. If more people start implementing this practice, we can shift our culture.
5. Participate, when asked, to go off-site to host AI trainings for other institutions. This will help to strengthen the college's partnerships within the community and to share the AI culture.

What did I wish for in the inquiry? What did I learn from the inquiry about myself and my facilitation? What was my personal best experience related to facilitating the inquiry?

In the inquiry I wished for NECC to become the leader in career preparation for community colleges in the state of Massachusetts. Along that same idea, I wished that NECC would create equal services on both campuses, particularly with my office, Career Connections. Students should be able to receive assistance equally on the Lawrence and Haverhill campus. I also wished that NECC would be considered as a premiere educational option for people in the Merrimack Valley, ultimately diminishing stereotypes surrounding community colleges, and showing the region what a high-quality, affordable education looks like. I am confident that we are on our way to becoming a model for other community colleges in the state. I think we are committed to standardizing services across campuses in our next strategic plan. As for the third wish, as more and more people come to understand the value of community college education, I believe we will get there.

I learned so much from this experience. I have always considered myself a great facilitator when I am comfortable and knowledgeable about the materials. However, AI was so new to me. Although I felt like I had a solid foundational knowledge from the training in June, putting it to practice was a little uncomfortable at first. I was glad that I pushed myself out of my comfort zone, particularly while facilitating my peers and such large groups at Convocation. As time went on and I became involved with facilitating the SOAR Forums, the facilitation became easier and easier. I learned that no matter how comfortable you are with scheduled and impromptu facilitation, there are always situations that will continue to make you feel uncomfortable,

I had two high-point experience related to facilitating the inquiry. The first was when I had the opportunity to facilitate a SOAR Forum inquiry with the Student Senate. It was amazing to engage the students in this process and to incorporate their important voices. I was hesitant at first, not knowing what they would think about the process, but they were so excited to be a part of it. With limited time,

some asked for additional sheets of paper to reflect more and send in their thoughts later. I was truly happy with the outcome.

My second high-point experience was facilitating an inquiry for NECC's front-line workers. Throughout this process, there have been many concerns about incorporating the voices of individuals who are not able to attend Convocation or the SOAR Forums because their work schedules would not allow. The managers of these areas covered the time so that these individuals could have their own private forum. Having their voices heard meant so much to them. For the entire hour, they were engaged in discussion and were able to generate some excellent data for the Core Team. Without these voices our job would not have been complete. I was honored to be invited to facilitate this forum.

Have I received permission to tell this story and share it with others?

Yes.