

## **Appreciative Inquiry Facilitator Certification**

### **Contact Information:**

Dawna M. Perez, Ph.D.  
Dean, Student Success  
[dperez@necc.mass.edu](mailto:dperez@necc.mass.edu)

(978) 738-7605  
Northern Essex Community College

### **AIFT Training Dates: June 22 – June 25, 2015 in Haverhill, MA**

#### **Description of the organization, group or community I worked with:**

I completed my Practicum at Northern Essex Community College (NECC), where I have worked for the past ten years. NECC is a public, two-year college in Northeastern Massachusetts, serving 22 communities throughout the Merrimack Valley and Southern New Hampshire. We offer more than 70 programs/certificates and serve typically between 6,500 and 7,500 credit students, though recently our enrollment is down. Our student population has an average age of 25 and is 38.8% Hispanic. NECC students come from all walks of life: some fresh out of high school, others who have been out of school for a long time, and still others, who come to NECC as they transition from one career to another. NECC's diversity (of age, ethnicity, race and experiences) makes it a rich and rewarding place to study and work. NECC as an institution has utilized Appreciative Inquiry for its last two strategic planning processes, both of which I was involved in. I came to NECC familiar with AI from my doctoral work at Saybrook University, where Meg Wheatley taught some courses. AI felt natural to me, and so I was thrilled when NECC adopted its use for strategic planning. I truly believe that greater things happen when one starts from a place of strength and passion as opposed to focusing on what is broken.

As if it were meant to be, just as our class was finishing up the AIFT training, NECC was embarking upon its newest strategic planning effort. I was happy to take a role as an AI facilitator in this process. NECC has always made an explicit effort to involve all levels of stakeholders in the strategic planning process, and this time would be no different. Happily, I joined the Core Group who would launch the process of developing the new Strategic Plan – NECC 2020.

## **Names and Titles of the Core Group Who Directed the Identification and Modification of the Interview Guide:**

**Melba Acevedo**, Director of Instructional Technology and Online Learning  
**Niurka Aybar**, Coordinator, Student Success Center  
**Noemi Custodia-Lora**, Executive Director of Lawrence Campus and Community Relations  
**Tina Favara**, Dean, Enrollment Services and Student Life  
**Lane Glenn**, President  
**Cheryl Goodwin**, Executive Assistant to the President  
**Rick Haskell**, Director of Fiscal Services  
**William Heineman**, Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs  
**Laurie Hillson**, Director of Nursing  
**Scott Lancaster**, Faculty and Clinical Coordinator, EMT Paramedic Program  
**Cathy Lavery**, Staff Assistant, Development Office and Institutional Advancement  
**Sharon McManus**, Staff Assistant, Center for Professional Development  
**Linda Meccouri**, Dean, Center for Professional Development  
**Ashley Moore**, Manager of Career Connections & Internship Program  
**Theresa Mullin**, Project Manager, MIS  
**Dawna Perez**, Dean, Student Success  
**Margaret Pothier**, Coordinator, Writing Center  
**Mark Reinhold**, Assistant Professor, Natural Sciences  
**Stephen Russell**, Professor, and Dept. Chair, History and Government  
**Wendy Shaffer**, Dean, Development and Institutional Advancement  
**Marcy Yeager**, Executive Director, Quarrybrook

## **Positive Topic Chosen for Inquiry and the Method for Identifying It**

In order to ensure the most organic process, the Core Group decided to do mini-inquiries first, interviewing each other utilizing the generic interview guide to find out what excited group members most about NECC in relation to their core values and those core values we embrace as a College. We asked about what excited them from the current strategic plan, what they identified as the life-giving force, and what were their wishes in terms of maintaining any of the current efforts, or wishing for new ones. We wanted to test the questions, the language, and the guide's ability to draw out the kinds of stories we would need to arrive at themes. Once we were assured the guide would provide for the work we wanted to see develop, we set our sights on the larger college community, and the opportunities we could create for genuine, thoughtful participation and sharing of stories so that as a whole community we could begin to identify life-giving forces and wishes for our future. These thoughts and dreams would be captured on flip charts and in guides so that the Core Group could begin to synthesize the information in order to arrive at potential 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?

## Method of Interviews to Inquire into Exceptionally Positive Moments

We began at our Fall Convocation, a special day just before classes start when the majority of faculty and staff gather together for fellowship, inspiration, and to dialogue about an important topic. In this case, the topic was the new, forthcoming Strategic Plan. As always, we celebrated the accomplishments of the current plan first, before having attendees do paired interviews utilizing our modified interview guide. The data was collected from Convocation in its raw form, to maintain the integrity of all voices. The Core Group divided up all of the interview sheets and easel papers and created lists of all the themes that arose at Convocation. In many cases, the same ideas came up repeatedly, and others were easy to merge. With a list of synthesized themes, we went on to hold SOAR (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results) Forums on both campuses at various times to accommodate the largest number of people. At each SOAR Forum, each of the initial themes were represented on separate tables so people could gravitate toward the theme that elicited the most energy for them. They sat in groups or sometimes individually and talked about the College's strengths in that area, opportunities to do more or differently, the aspirations, and finally how we would know if we had achieved the vision to which we had aspired. There was also an online anonymous SOAR form that stakeholders across the college could fill out if they could not make any SOAR Forums or if they wanted to reflect more before submitting their thoughts. The SOAR form follows:

**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.

<b>STRENGTHS</b> 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:
<b>OPPORTUNITIES</b> What are the best opportunities for NECC to achieve your vision of this theme? How could we partner internally and externally to achieve this?

<b>Opportunity Notes:</b>
<b>ASPIRATIONS</b> To what do we aspire? Please describe your vision of a preferred future for NECC with this theme successfully implemented.
<b>Aspiration Notes:</b>
<b>RESULTS</b> 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?
<b>Results Notes:</b>

## Life-Giving Forces, or What People Wanted to See MORE of

From the initial data that was collected at Convocation, close to 180 interview guides, we found within them what participants most cherished about their work at NECC, what they wanted to see grow and flourish, and their hopes for the future. As I stated before, many items came up several times, and the Core Group was tasked with refining all the raw data into the most prominent life-giving forces, to be presented as themes for the SOAR Forums. The themes that came up most prominently were:

**Integrated Student Experience:** This life-giving force was one of the strongest, and has continued to be the loudest and most focused-upon themes even as we develop our new Academic Master Plan. Stakeholders recognized all the wonderful supports, services and programs we have for students but they acknowledged that they are disconnected and many times students, as well as faculty and staff, are unsure of where these services sit on campus and how to connect to them, and they wished that these supports and services could be better

connected to the academic programs. Everyone agreed that our two campuses needed to be more unified, and that the student journey at NECC needed to be more clear and integrated.

**Student Success:** For many years (since 2007), NECC has been an Achieving the Dream college, and a Leader College for the past five years. We have made some wonderful gains around student success, and even created a dean's position to focus on the work, yet still many of our interventions have been small-scale or disconnected from overall campus operations. Participants wanted to see how Achieving the Dream, the Department of Higher Education's Vision Project and our many grants all converged around student success---and what that really means from the students' perspective.

**Career Exploration and Development:** This life-giving force reverberated from the last strategic plan as one where some solid gains were made, but the opportunities to expand were boundless. Whereas five years ago there was some palpable tension between those who advocated for student career exploration and development and those staunchly supported the liberal arts separated from career development, the topic this time around gathered momentum at all levels. Stakeholders saw the interdependency between the two: career and academic, and it energized them to talk about expanded internship opportunities, early exploration to help students choose the best major for themselves, and finding ways to bring faculty into the execution of these endeavors.

**Curriculum Innovation:** We have found that the most successful academic strategies over the past ten years have been faculty-driven, not top-down. Nowhere more than during this strategic planning process did we hear voices in support of increasing the ability to innovate inside the classroom and in modes of teaching or in blending student engagement with academics. Talk of Competency-Based Education surged, as have our models of "fusion" classes where students in developmental-level courses pair with a college-level course to boost their motivation, success and ability to get into the more interesting content courses of their major. "One Geographic Region" a la model of "One Book" has taken hold as well, with cross discipline discussions of the Middle East in areas of mathematics, history, economics and literature.

**External Partnerships:** By virtue of being a community college, we are an anchor institution in the communities we serve, and strive to build partnerships across sectors in mutually-beneficial relationships. This life-giving force was expressed by many who were energized with our growing Early College and Dual Enrollment programs with multiple local high schools, with our partnerships with not-for-profit organizations for service learning, civic engagement and community service initiatives, and on a larger scale with agreements with our four year partner institutions, both local and across the ocean to the Dominican Republic.

**Professional Development:** This life-giving force always finds its way into the strategic plan, as most educators thrive on learning and growing themselves as well! They want to bring the best of themselves into the classroom, into institutional planning, and so look for enrichment through content-specific conferences, leadership trainings, cross-departmental collaboration, and other means.

These were the main themes that arose but there were other high points that stakeholders thought were ripe with opportunity and had wishes for expanding them, and those fell under

the areas of Technology, Safety, and Enrollment. Although not necessarily strategic by nature, the college community felt high energy around these areas and wanted to see movement. We understood that there could potentially be some very creative and helpful ways that stakeholders might contribute to these areas, so each of them will have their own “plan”.

## Provocative Propositions Created from the Life Giving Forces and the Strategic Intentions Developed to Realize Them

As a culmination of all of the data and input via the SOAR forums and from Convocation that brought forward the life giving forces, the provocative propositions arose in the form of strategic goals to be refined and further defined in the honing of our Strategic Plan 2020. The provocative propositions were developed from the college-wide input, and put back out to the college community during January’s Convocation, where everyone had another opportunity to confirm or add/change their formulation so that they were truly reflective of the life giving forces at work among community members. In April, at an All College Assembly, which is our participatory governance body, faculty and staff were asked to sign on to one or more of the goals that resonated with them the strongest. It would be the team members who would take each goal, each provocative proposition, and create the mission and targeted outcomes and means to achieve them. The Provocative Propositions are included below in **boldface** with the related Strategic Intentions in *italics* after each one:

- ❖ **Integrated Student Experience – Design and deliver an integrated, structured, and inclusive student experience across campuses that maximized student success.**
  - *Colleges flourish when the student experience empowers students to take ownership of their success. Every stop on the student pathway – from recruitment and early college, to financial aid and support services, to academic achievements, retention, and completion – is guided and seamlessly connected through personal relationships with faculty and staff, buttressed by an efficient infrastructure that links organization, technology, facilities, and services across campuses. Ensuring access for students and preparing them to meet their educational goals, enter the world of work, and be informed, active citizens in our global society is paramount.*
  
- ❖ **Student Career Opportunities – Provide students with comprehensive career development services including access to internships, career exploration, experiential learning, and job placement.**
  - *The student learning experience is not limited to the classroom. Internship placements, service learning, and other experiential learning opportunities in the field provide hands-on experiences, enhancing the student’s value to prospective employers and for transfer to higher levels of education. Mentorship, job shadowing, industry/worksite tours, and informational interview opportunities also enable students to learn about the workplace. Providing students with*

*comprehensive tools for career exploration and development throughout their academic experience contributes to long-term success of students.*

❖ **Professional Growth – Increase opportunities for faculty and staff that encourage professional growth, foster experimentation, and advance curriculum innovation.**

- *Our faculty and staff prosper when they can continue to strengthen their practice throughout their careers. Whether that be through facilitated learning, conference attendance, cross-functional teams, or other collaborative endeavors, opportunities for professional growth for both full and part-time employees are essential. Further, the college must be flexible and support these efforts by enabling innovation and promoting the development of new models for curriculum such as those that provide transformative learning, guided pathways, global experiences, distance learning, integrative and accelerated learning, and competency-based education.*

❖ **External Partnerships – Expand and strengthen partnerships with the external community.**

- *Northern Essex is a community college in which the concept of community is as vital as the term college. This is demonstrated when the college reaches out to forge partnerships and deepen its academic, cultural, social and economic impact within the region and around the world. Partnerships with other institutions of higher education, PK-12, and with businesses, community groups, donors and others, all add value to the student experience and to the college as a whole.*

Impact or Results: What organizational, group or community 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 I share?

We are only at the beginning of this journey of transformation, so the results to date include only the formation of the goal teams that will work on each of the four strategic goals mentioned earlier: Integrated Student Experience, Student Career Opportunities, Professional Growth, and External Partnerships. These teams will come together in the fall and establish their goals/outcomes, strategies to reach them, and timelines. We await the final approval from the Department of Higher Education in June, 2016 before embarking on this transformational work. In the meantime, we also concurrently have developed an Academic Master Plan (AMP) that is very much aligned with the draft Strategic Plan, inclusive of one of the same goals of “an integrated student experience”. The process of developing the AMP was also very participatory and appreciative, and



consisted of fourteen forums open to staff, faculty and students to talk about what works at NECC, what wishes we had for improvement and innovative approaches to change. Since one of the provocative propositions that arose repeatedly in those forums was around student support services and more integration, it was natural to begin there.

Through a grant the college recently got, there was an opportunity to train a couple dozen staff and faculty on Kotter International's Change Management model. The vice president of academic and student affairs took this opportunity to bring key players together to begin to build rapport across areas of student support services while learning how to maximize positive momentum for change. These are hard times for the college, with enrollment dropping steeply, cuts to the budget and proposed organizational change. My AI training and that of others at NECC will be crucial in helping the change to happen in the most positive fashion possible.

**What will I do to ensure that people continue to move toward realizing the Provocative Propositions? How will I help them gather stories of success? How will I help them celebrate? How will I, as an AI Facilitator, support their ongoing success?**

As I mentioned above, these are tough times. Change is always difficult for people, but for many in student support services, in the past change has meant loss of jobs. There is reticence and even resistance, as well as fear. My role as a leader in the college will be to put my AI skills to work to do my best to ameliorate the threat response among staff by employing SCARF (status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness). We will be holding a Student Support Services Summit in mid-June to bring together as many staff as possible. In order to prevent it deteriorating into a negative situation, the planning group, of which I am a part, will need to structure the summit in such a way that we acknowledge the good work of those in the room, the value of what they bring to students, and encourage thinking about how to make it even better. I'm sure everyone in student services has a success story, a high point of serving students, so the idea will be to build off of those experiences, while understanding that the way we've always done things isn't the only way they can get done.

I have used AI with my own department of Student Success, and the practice has been adopted by the Student Success Center's Coordinator. Because of our positive approach to each task, building trust among our team members, and focusing on the strengths of our staff and the students we serve, we garnered three national recognitions this past year around our work with Latino students in the Student Success Center and with our early alert work, which we call Starfish Early Success. Our recognition as a national

semi-finalist in the associate's category for Excelencia in Education, as well as inclusion among the 12 top Hispanic Serving Institutions in advancing postsecondary success for Latinos by the Alliance of HSI Educators, and our "Rising Star" award from Hobsons/Starfish, demonstrate how appreciative inquiry can continuously encourage positive, forward momentum.

In the case of reorganizing student support services across the college, there is no assurance that jobs won't be lost given our budget situation, but if everyone understands that there are no targets for layoffs, and that we will build student support services based clearly on the needs of students and to serve them in optimal ways, then everyone can participate in that vision, and think creatively about how to personify it. Transparency will be key, as will clear communication and I will commit to doing my part to maintain them through the process.

Going forward, remembering to celebrate successes and acknowledging contributions will help to keep morale high and better service to students. This recognition can take the more formal route of Employee Recognition nominations (which happen quarterly at NECC) or via department newsletters, or college-wide newsroom articles, or even as informal as making sure folks are sought out personally to let them know they are making a positive difference. I believe AI starts from within, and becomes a part of how one interacts with others on a daily basis, just as much as it is a process to bring a group's vision to fruition.

**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?**

My wish for the inquiry was that it reached all corners of the institution, and especially those staff members for whom Convocation is unrealistic because they cannot shut down their offices for the morning, as they need to serve students. I was pleased that we held a couple of SOAR forums specifically for those groups at times that were more convenient, as well as providing an online form for people to add their thoughts and input virtually when unable to be present in person.

I have served as a facilitator frequently in my professional life, and have participated in Appreciative Inquiry processes for the last two strategic plans at NECC, so there were no big surprises for me there, except that this time I played a more prominent role in development of the questions, and synthesis of the data. I was familiar with Appreciate Inquiry from my graduate program at Saybrook University, where Meg Wheatley has

taught classes. I was pleased to know that NECC had embraced this approach, and was even happier to be a facilitator.

My “personal best” or high point of facilitating the inquiry was to co-facilitate a SOAR forum for front-line staff, the group I referenced above, whose voice frequently is not heard in larger venues as they cannot leave their posts to attend Convocation. They were genuinely thrilled to have the opportunity to contribute their thoughts and wishes to the plan, and their input proved to be valuable data for the Core Group processing and synthesizing it. That was a very rewarding experience.

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

Yes, it is fine to share.