

The Scholars Creed

Society will draw a circle that shuts me out, but my superior thoughts will draw me in. I was born to win, if I do not spend too much time trying to fail. I will ignore the tags and names given to me by society, since only I know what I have the ability to become.

Failure is just as easy to combat as success is to obtain. Education is painful and not gained by playing games. Yet it is my privilege to destroy myself, if that is what I choose to do. I have the right to fail, but I do not have the right to take other people with me. God made me the captain of only one life - my own.

It is my right to care nothing about myself, but I must be willing to accept the consequences for that failure. And, I must never think that those who have chosen to work, while I played, rested and slept, will share their bounties with me.

My success and my education can be companions that no misfortune can depress, no crime destroy, and no enemy can alienate. Without education, man is a slave, a savage wandering from here to there, believing whatever he is told.

Time and chance come to us all. I can either be hesitant or courageous. I can swiftly stand up and shout: This is my time and my place. I will accept the challenge.

This creed has been an indispensable factor and influence in all of our efforts in the Pratt Center at Cleveland State University. Once in a graduate course, early in my career as an educator, I was instructed that the true intention of education was to turn mirrors into windows, from that I have always identified school leaders as instructional construction workers, breaking down and building up where necessary.

A more recent trend in higher education is institutions becoming student-ready, recognizing the need to improve the entire experience of students from diverse backgrounds in and out of the classroom and to create and sustain inclusive engaged learning communities where values and inter-group differences within learning styles can be acknowledged and leveraged in a way that works for all those served.

In my experience, such learning communities are rare, but not non-existent. Such communities do exist, ones that recognize, accept and honor the diversity of all of their members but they are harder to create than I can express completely here. What I have learned is somehow the stickiness of collaborating and cooperating across cultural boundaries is hard work. The daily pressing and pulling towards the goal of institutional excellence is hard and managing the competing best interests of various groups and populations with their interpretations of the concept of “student readiness” and “student success” only compounds the challenge.

At the core of these issues rest the question facing many student success professionals like myself. How do we inspire innovation and institutional? Improvement processes that result from collaboration and cooperation across cultural boundaries, to achieve higher levels of student proficiency and satisfaction while at the same time honor the values of everyone represented in the room?

My answer has been and will remain the strategic use of Appreciative Inquiry methodology.

Appreciative Inquiry is a strategic planning framework with an approach that focuses on discovering, understanding and fostering innovation over traditional strength-weakness analysis of external and internal factors, followed by visioning, then planning. The appreciative inquiry process seeks out the “best of what is” to help ignite the collective imagination of “what might be”. Appreciative Inquiry is used to achieve and sustain organizational change, with a focus on the positive features of an organization, rather than its problems. Appreciative methodology moves through four stages.

- Discovery – Insight into what’s working well.
- Vision building – What would make it ideal?
- Design – Creating an action strategy for positive change.
- Destiny – the point of our co-created future of inclusion - for all.

In my role as Director of Student Success for the Pratt Center at Cleveland State University, my focus is to provide resources to any Cleveland State student that has experienced the foster care system. Our Fostering Success and Leadership Programs aim to enhance and improve students’ academic outcomes, encourage an enriching and engaging campus life, and support completion of a short-term work credential or undergraduate degree from CSU.

Currently, our programs support over 30 youth who have experienced foster care and 15 students are participating in the Sullivan-Deckard Scholarship Opportunity Program. The Sullivan-Deckard Scholarship Opportunity Program offers students who have aged out of care, an opportunity to earn a bachelor's degree at Cleveland State University and graduate debt-free. We approach meeting our students' needs through the appreciative inquiry lens with comprehensive support including financial, academic, and emotional resources. Further, we look to assist our Scholars in overcoming the non-academic barriers to student success and inclusivity not typically addressed in traditional scholarship models.

These non-academic barriers include professional development, transitional housing, job assistance and training, advanced degree coaching, physical and psychological well-being, and other life readiness skills necessary to successfully transition through and after college.

To create a sense of belonging, and ensure a welcoming environment for our youth aging out of care, we begin in the summer before their Fall term. The Summer Series of Workshops builds scholars' understanding of the significance of personal choices, academic empathy, and increases their capacity for success. All summer transition workshops are characterized by shared experiences and interactions, collective efforts, and mutual commitments to an educational goal. Using three pedagogical strategies: Service-learning, Reflective learning, and Journaling to address the primary barriers to student persistence, summer concepts include choosing a major, what classes to take next, how to use non-academic time constructively. These strategies help our participants to identify therapeutic personal wellness and academic learning goals for their upcoming year.

Further, these sessions explore affordable housing options after graduation, professional and personal mentorship opportunities, and how to seek out graduate school assistance. Workshop sessions ensure a welcoming environment for diverse students with instructional activities and reflections on Social Emotional Experience, Conducting Undergraduate Research, and end with a Professional Presentation.

As we as educators continue to seek out best practices to support our students enjoying a welcoming environment for all and we must also protect our shift in approach from damage control to damage prevention Appreciative Inquiry gives us the mechanism to do so.

As educators, our focus moving forward should be sensitive to supporting students from all backgrounds from access to success while also improving student persistence and

completion. It is my observation that the height of our challenges will not be technical issues, however, they will be our willingness or unwillingness to engage in meaningful reflective processes and to adaptive problems in an environment of constantly changing resources.

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