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Tapping the Soul of Higher Education

There are moments in a higher education institution’s life that have a powerful impact on the organisation and the people who learn and work there. A higher education AI summit is one such moment. This article explores the elements, purposes and examples of AI summits in colleges and universities that bring students, faculty, staff, administrators, external stakeholders and communities together to collectively tap the soul of higher education.

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Imagine standing in a room filled with educators, learners, community and business, all gathered together to examine a single compelling topic. You can imagine the excitement and the energy in the room and the anticipation of what is to come. It is a rare occurrence that an entire higher education institution can alter the academic schedule and come together as a whole or with its community.

There is nothing more compelling than learners telling their stories, listening to a faculty member’s innovation, sharing a staff person’s dream, or listening to external stakeholders describe how the institution might be. To gather in community and tell the powerful stories of what is and imagine the possibilities of the future is a transformational experience: it is tapping the soul of higher education, and through that experience possibilities for the future of higher education are co-created.

In this article, we explore some elements and purposes of higher education Appreciative Inquiry (AI) summits. The elements include:

- The diversity of higher education institutions
- The nature of the academic schedule
- The focus on learners

- The multi-stakeholder climate within which higher education institutions function

In the purpose section, we explore and provide examples for two types of summits: data-gathering and creating institutional momentum.

An all-institution AI summit: learners from all levels – staff, faculty and administration – gathered in the same room



In an all-institution AI summit, learners from all levels, staff, faculty and administration are gathered in the same room.

What are the elements of higher education AI summits?

The first element is the diversity of voices within a higher education institution. In an all-institution AI summit, learners from all levels – staff, faculty and administration – are gathered in the same room. Each of these stakeholders brings their unique perspective to the conversation. Learners, for example, are transient within the higher education system, but they bring to the conversation ideas that can influence the next generation of learners. Faculty, administrators and staff bring to the conversation multiple views on the purposes of the institution and how it should be serving higher education needs. Faculty bring all the diversity of their content areas of researching and teaching.

In a room, one will have medical professionals, engineers, arts professors, computer scientists and many more areas of interest mixed together to examine the future of the institution. Higher education administrators bring with them their leadership roles and their dreams for the entire institution. Staff members bring their unique views of work in making the entire organisation function well. Higher education is in constant flux, with change driven by innovation in research, as well as in teaching and learning. This diversity creates great wealth and wisdom within a summit.

All stakeholders can be invited to the table, heard, and their needs and hopes designed into the future of their educational institution.

The nature of the academic schedule

The second element is the influence of the uniqueness of the academic schedule. Given the nature of colleges and universities, it is rarely possible to stop the work of the institution for any length of time. Consequently summits are scheduled within the timeframes allowed within the academic schedule – from a few hours to – rarely – a couple of days. Given the power of the AI summit process, it is possible to generate great futures even in very short two-hour sessions.

The learners and their goals

The third element is the focus on learners and their goals. All higher education institutions have at their core the learner and the goals of that learner, and every outcome from a summit must consider this primary and transitory stakeholder. The learner is at the core of what education is about. No matter how research-focused a university or college becomes, the world of education revolves around having something to offer learners that foster their chosen future. They come to higher education with dreams and hopes as varied as the number of enrollments and with those variations come very diverse views of the purposes of education.

Stakeholders and their agendas

The last element is the dynamic multi-stakeholder climate that higher education functions within. Stakeholders such as government, community, business, learners, boards, interest groups, internal groups and industry each influence higher education from their own agendas. Higher education is often at the whim of government funding; under pressure from external stakeholders for change; engaged with business and industry on innovation, accountably and outcomes, and constantly in the arena of debate about quality and the focus on teaching versus research.

The questions that always seem to come to the forefront in these contexts are: “Education for what purpose?” and “Education for whom?” One of the powers of using AI in these settings is the democratisation of the voices at the table. All stakeholders can be invited to the table, heard, and their needs and hopes designed into the future of their educational institution.

These elements bring to higher education summits a particular culture that can be tapped to generate pride in what is, and a hope for what might be, in higher education.

The purposes of higher education AI summits

There are many purposes of higher education AI summits – from planning to inspirational. Whatever the purpose, however, the summit creates a way for

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people to learn together and share conversations across diverse perspectives and roles both within and beyond the institution. The purposes are only limited by imagination. Here we illustrate two particular purposes that we have engaged with. One is data-gathering within strategic and academic planning. The other is creating institutional momentum around a specific topic or strategic direction.

The data-gathering summit

At an AI summit for data-gathering within a strategic or academic planning process, the participants begin by sharing stories of the best experiences in or with the institution, and from these create visual and word images of the desired future. The words and images may become vision statements, guiding principles or strategic goals. These form the ground-work for the development of the strategic plan and engage people in being part of the plan, because it is their plan. They generated it, and they own it.

For example, one college used multiple summits to create their strategic plan over several months. One of these summits included 1,200 participants from across the internal community of students, staff, faculty and administrators. As well, smaller summits were held with external community stakeholders. All undertook the Discover and Dream stages of the 4D AI cycle (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2003) as data collection that focused on the strengths of the college and imagining further to build on these strengths. The core planning team took the data from the summits to design strategic goals and directions for the institution.

Another example is a university Faculty of Dentistry summit where faculty, staff, students and alumni met for two days with the purpose of collecting data for the academic plan. Over the next several months the Academic Planning Working Group developed the plan based on the data collected at the summit. As well as collecting data for planning purposes, the summits engaged and inspired through the conversations that transpired, the collective learning that occurred, the building upon each other's strengths. As a result, stronger communication was forged throughout the school.

Summits for creating institutional momentum

Another purpose of an AI summit is to create institutional momentum around a single idea or strategic thrust. Often this type of summit is used to ignite everyone's passion for a direction the institution is already moving in, and is a process to generate strong personal commitment and understanding of what the institution is already doing. It supports the directions and examines where individuals can make a personal commitment and/or the institution can create new momentum to move the organisation forward.

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For example, one multi-campus college held a summit, the first ever all-college gathering, at a time of reorganisation and change. They explored the theme, “One College – One Team.” There were almost 800 participants. The planning team selected the topic “Making a Positive Difference”, which built upon their work as a whole college and celebrated what they did every day. Prior to the summit, the planning team (made up of principals and professional development staff) undertook AI training and co-facilitated the day.

The feeling of all 800 people coming together around their common work of making a positive difference for learners and for themselves was extraordinary. At the lunch break, everyone was able to review the walls filled with their images of the future. After this, they created provocative propositions and table reps marched these around the room for all to see. Back at their tables, they came up with strategies to create their future, both individually and collectively.

Reflections

As we reflect on the summits that we have facilitated, each one has been as unique as the culture of that institution. That said, there are some commonalities. In gathering together to share stories and build preferred futures, the participants engage with joy and energy, leaving with a renewed sense of pride in the work they do and commitments to strengthen communication across their diversity. We have seen summits lead to institutional shifts to more positive cultures and to strengths-based approaches to their work and learning. In higher education institutions, the opportunity to gather and to examine the force of higher education for positive change is rare, but when it does happen, the very soul of education opens up to the possibilities for learners, the institution, stakeholders and the wider communities in which they exist.

Jeanie Cockell and Joan McArthur-Blair (2017)

Jeanie and Joan, co-presidents of Cockell McArthur-Blair Consulting, specialize in collaboratively designing strategies to surface the wisdom of individuals, groups and organizations in order for them to build positive futures and to respond effectively to change. They work with groups of all kinds to make a positive difference. Co-authors of *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force*, they are currently writing *Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey Through Hope, Despair and Forgiveness*, due out in 2018.

2017: From Threads to a Quilt – AI in Education

In the May 2012 *AI Practitioner* issue, *The Appreciative Inquiry Summit*, we contributed “Tapping the Soul of Higher Education” based on our summit work with higher education institutions. This article reflects on that work and how the threads of summits weave their way into the fabric of institutions. We reflect upon educational institutions we have worked with (colleges, universities, schools...); on the impact of using Appreciative Inquiry summits; and on using AI in difficult times. In all of our work, “We believe that higher education is one of the most powerful forces for social and economic good in our world, and through Appreciative Inquiry, higher education can tap that force to create possibilities and transformation” – to be an agent of world benefit (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012).

The same year as the *AI Practitioner* article, we published *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force*. The summit chapter provides examples of planning, designing, facilitating and working with the data/design from

The Vancouver School District Reception and Placement Centre Team Summit display:

“At the heart of DRPC is our universal provocative statement. The images illuminating reflect our vision of DRPC at its best. Our themes are represented as rainbows, as they bring hope and dreams and add beauty to our work. Our action plans are reflected in the clouds, as clouds are ever changing and evolving as we are, too.”



summits and illustrates how “summits are like symphonies: so many things come together to create the sound of the future coming to life” (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). We have experienced first-hand the ongoing impacts of summits on institutions and the requests for AI summits continues to grow.

Out of summits come: ongoing summits; AI training; executive, board and other team development using Appreciative Inquiry; and strengths-based work in many forms. For example, a university faculty used an AI summit to launch academic planning that resulted in a ten-year strategic vision framework for ongoing academic planning – keeping it alive. Another college has done strategic planning using AI every four years since the mid-2000s and continues to do so, using both summits and smaller stakeholder sessions for gathering input from students and external stakeholders. Other institutions have used AI summits for strategic planning, and followed with further AI training, executive, team and board development.

A daily dose of AI

One of the inspiring impacts of this work is the daily practice of AI that begins to infuse organisations. People begin looking through an AI lens, intentionally asking appreciative questions and seeing the strengths that each person brings. We co-authored an *AI Practitioner* article with two college presidents who had brought AI summits into their institutions and then evolved the practice of AI into many aspects of institutional work. The article emphasised the impact of using AI and concluded with each college president. The first said that “AI allowed me to build on my strengths and an appreciation of people and has given



George Mason University summit on redesigning the student experience - creating design projects for the future

George Mason University summit on redesigning the student experience - sharing design project ideas

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me more tools in my tool box to assist people to be at their best”; the second that “We are a different place because we did this” (Carry, Henning, McArthur-Blair, & Cockell, 2015, pp. 37-43).

Recently, we worked with a university to facilitate a gathering of 240 people from across the university to redefine the student experience. By the end of the day, the group had designed concrete projects to redefine the student experience in six key areas that the institution had researched. And everyone present committed to some level of engagement after the summit – to lead or to be a member of a project team, to be on the advisory team, to receive updates on the progress of the projects.

We also worked with a large school district department that had a mandate to provide services to immigrant children and their families. The whole staff engaged in an AI summit focused on “our team at its best”. One of the outcomes of the summit was a display in the hallway reminding everyone of the visions,



actions and commitments made. After implementation, they gathered in a second summit to explore diversity, conflict and collaboration, and to inquire into using appreciative perspectives and questions to work well together.

Over the years of doing summits in education, we have learned that each institution is unique and each is transformed. The process of focusing on strengths and life-giving forces allows people to creatively and innovatively build futures together. We have seen concrete outcomes from planning and development to the daily practice of AI. We have learned that the daily practice of AI as a mindset and a way of working with others increases the ability to work well with conflict in human systems.

In response to our work with organisations seeking to work well with conflict, especially in difficult times, we are writing another book, *Building Resilience with Appreciative Inquiry: A Leadership Journey Through Hope, Despair and Forgiveness*. We are aligning the many facets of AI (practices, philosophy, mindset, leadership, principles) with the ability to be resilient, individually and organisationally. We have found that leaders experience daily the states of hope, despair and forgiveness and that practising appreciative processes within each of these states increases the capacity for resilience over time. Our hope is that this book will help leaders remain appreciative and curious in difficult times.

We are constantly uplifted by how AI summits can bring people together within complex agendas to create powerful and clear designs, and how the threads of a summit weave their way into the quilt of an organisation. We are privileged to continue working with amazing educators committed to being agents of world benefit through education.

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