A Holistic Understanding Of Integrational Support From University Students' Perspective Through Appreciative Inquiry

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Abstract

Student integration into the academic community is a primary condition for student success and achievement. This research explores the potential enhancements of supportive activities and key peer facilitator traits to maximize social and academic integration of first year university students. Focus group interviews (n=16) were conducted with first-year students (n=93) coming directly from secondary school. Using Appreciative Inquiry, participants indicate that current informally organized support activities in a university environment during the first semester of the academic year are highly desirable (e.g. welcome activities, extra-curricular activities, co-curricular activities). The need for support in social integration in the beginning of the year and the need for support in academic integration at the end of the first semester clearly arise out of this study. When addressing some specific criteria related to the objectives, form and design, this paper suggests that peer-assisted support activities are particularly useful in increasing sustainable informal peer support and integration among students. This article aims to prompt further discussion on the potential, value and purpose of department-specific structural peer assisted support and peer learning approaches for integration of first year university students.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary perspectives on learning highlight the need of supporting students during their transition process in order to reduce academic drop out. Indeed, successful transition and student success imply student integration into the academic community (Borglum & Kubala, 2000; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). In the seminal work of Tinto (1975) the term 'integration' was originally defined as a primary condition for student success. It was conceptualized as a twofold concept, encompassing both a academic component (i.e. academic integration) and a social component (i.e. social integration). The academic component encompasses the level of adherence students demonstrate to the structural rules and requirements of the institution, i.e. the institutional culture (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). Its refers to the perceptions individual students have about their experiences in the formal and informal academic system: interactions with staff and students inside and outside the classroom settings that enhance the intellectual development of the student (Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). The social component on the other hand refers to the degree of willingness students demonstrate to share attitudes and beliefs with their peers and faculty at the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009) and encompasses the perceptions individual learners have about these interactions, as well as involvement in extra- and co-curricular activities (Tinto, 1993; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). This present paper builds upon the importance of student integration and contributes to the body of theory that stresses the value of peer learning when promoting students' social and academic integration (e.g. Byl et al., 2015). Peer learning is considered not only to encourage students into their academic integration process, but also to engage them in social forms of integration as well (Loots, 2009; Byl et al., 2011; Rubin & Wright, 2014). The central research question we addressed, is the way in which peer support activities should be organised during the first semester of the academic year to optimise the social and academic integration of students.

2. Methodology

In this study we opted for a strength-based approach: Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI differs from traditional research methodology as it recognises the power of positive language and builds upon assets and strengths rather than problems or weaknesses (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1996). There are four main stages within AI (Figure 1): discovery, dream, design and destiny (Barrett, 1995).
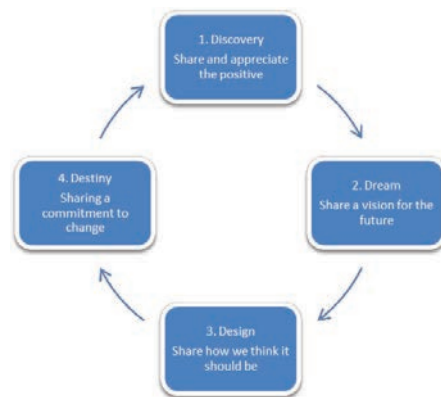

Fig. 1. Four main stages within Appreciative Inquiry.

The first stage, Discovery, involves determining the best of what is. Participants are asked to focus on experiences of best practice, positive moments, and successful processes. Dream, the second stage, calls for imagining an ideal future, how the status quo could be even better, creating a positive vision. The third stage, Design, deals with ways to make the future vision become a reality. In this study, participants were encouraged to think about strategies that assist them to realize their needs. The last stage, Destiny, refers to the implementation of actions to strive for the