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Changing an Institutional Environment through Appreciative Inquiry: Rochester Institute of Technology's College of Liberal Arts

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Changing an Institutional Environment through Appreciative Inquiry: Rochester Institute of Technology's College of Liberal Arts

Cover Page Footnote

This paper is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1209115 as well as by RIT's College of Liberal Arts.

CHANGING AN INSTITUTIONAL
ENVIRONMENT THROUGH APPRECIATIVE
INQUIRY:
ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF
TECHNOLOGY'S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL
ARTS¹⁸

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INTRODUCTION

Changing our institutional environment to make it more beneficial to the success of women (and colleagues of all genders), while not changing ourselves to better fit into the existing environment – this is the goal of the Appreciative Inquiry process underway at Rochester Institute's College of Liberal Arts (COLA). Appreciative Inquiry is a strength-based approach that builds on positive psychology as well as social construction of language (Cockell and McArthur-Blair). Based on interviews that reveal existing strengths of an organization, it leads practitioners to envision and realize a future organization that builds on and reinforces these strengths by developing concrete steps to implement their vision. We are using this approach to enhance professional and leadership development among women in the college,

¹⁸ This paper is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1209115 as well as by RIT's College of Liberal Arts.

expand representation of diverse faculty in leadership positions, and improve overall faculty satisfaction in the college. At the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues, we introduced participants to Appreciative Inquiry and reflected on the process in our college. This article provides an overview on Appreciative Inquiry, analyzes the results of our session at the Seneca Falls Dialogues, and discusses the Appreciative Inquiry process in our college. It aims to introduce readers to Appreciative Inquiry as a form of feminist engagement in higher education and other institutional environments.

Our Appreciative Inquiry process at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) is part of a larger Advance grant funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) under Grant No. 1209115. AdvanceRIT aims at increasing the recruitment of women faculty candidates in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) including Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS), strategically increasing the representation of women on RIT's faculty, reducing women faculty attrition rates, and promoting women faculty career advancement. In 2012, RIT received a 3.5 million dollar NSF grant to work towards these goals over a 5-year period. Based on a previous self-study of gender disparities in faculty attrition rates, salary, climate, and satisfaction, AdvanceRIT includes a dual-career hire initiative and work-life integration efforts, pursues policy development such as automatic extension of the probationary period for parental leave for tenure-track faculty, and addresses unconscious bias in faculty hiring and various evaluation processes. In addition, AdvanceRIT organizes a *Connectivity* workshop series to promote recruitment, retention, and advancement of women faculty in STEM fields by offering resources and strategies related to career satisfaction, career navigation, work-life balance, leadership, recognition of work, and scholarship to RIT faculty, and *Connect* grants to support leadership and career development for all tenured and pre-tenured faculty at RIT. Our Appreciative Inquiry process is funded through one of these Connect grants. Many gender equity programs aim at making women better fit in the existing institutional environment, for example, by improving their negotiation

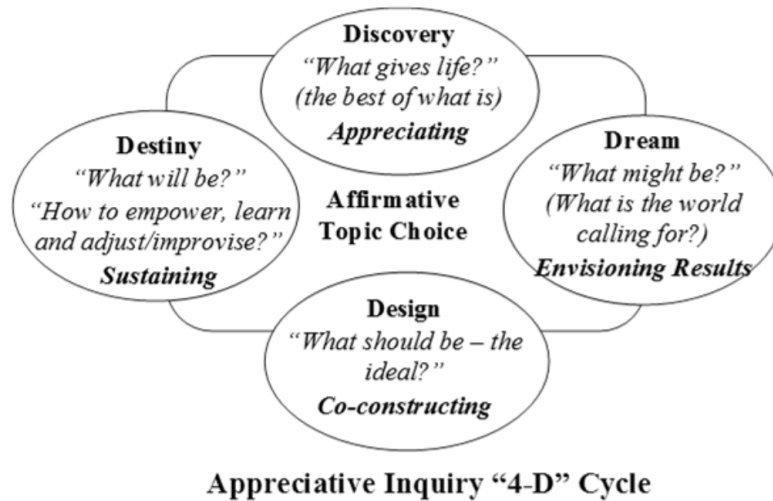
and career navigation skills. Program approaches such as these put the onus on women to fit better into the existing institutional environment. By contrast, Appreciative Inquiry aims at changing our college's institutional and organizational environment to create a culture that better accommodates its faculty.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: AN OVERVIEW

Appreciative Inquiry is a narrative-based organizational change approach developed in the 1980s by scholars at Case Western University and has spread widely in the field of organizational development. It is the foundation for positive organizational studies and strength-based organizational management. When the positive core of an organization is revealed, it nourishes personal and organizational change and, potentially, transformation (Cockell and McArthur-Blair). According to Whitney and Trosten-Boom, Appreciative Inquiry is a form of personal and organizational change “based on questions and dialogues about strengths, successes, values, hopes and dreams” (1).

Grounded in social constructionist theories, Appreciative Inquiry assumes that we live in worlds of meaning that emerge from our personal history and shared culture and that we create in our conversations (Gergen; Watkins, Mohr and Kelly 38-9). In higher education, people come from various social backgrounds and cultures with different beliefs and norms. Dominant cultures are the “established ways of doing things, beliefs and norms that are often based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, ability, religion, class, and so on” (Cockell and McArthur-Blair 53). While institutions of higher education nowadays often seek to attract faculty, students, and staff from diverse cultures, members of the dominant culture often unknowingly exclude others from fully participating in the institution such as from conversations about the preferred future of the institution or in the dominant daily dialogue about institutional priorities. Appreciative Inquiry provides a framework for people to construct stories that have common themes and future images and that recognize the social inequities of those participating in the process.

Appreciative Inquiry involves an iterative process consisting of four phases (see fig. 1):



Cooperrider, D.L. & Whitney, D. *A Positive Revolution in Change: Appreciative Inquiry*.

Figure 1.

1. **Discovery:** At the heart of this stage are *appreciative dialogues*.¹⁹ A semi-structured interview guide is used for one-on-one conversations. Participants are encouraged to discover personal and organizational high points and what they value. These interviews explore the success factors and personal experiences that contribute to the participants' personal success and the success of the organization. From these conversations, themes that describe the positive core of the organization are identified.
2. **Dream:** The purpose of this stage is to move beyond the status quo and to discuss what the organization would look like if the

¹⁹ Most Appreciative Inquiry practitioners refer to these exercises as “interviews.” We call them “dialogues” because the notion of interviews carries methodological implications, particularly in the social sciences, which the conversations and narratives in an Appreciative Inquiry process do not necessarily meet.

personal and organizational strengths and aspirations were realized.

3. Design: At this stage, participants are asked to plan the ideal organization, the social architecture or actual design of systems that give rise to the articulated vision of the possibilities. (Cooperrider and Whitney call this the design of the *appreciative organization*.)

4. Deliver: Participants identify their intended actions and ask for support. Self-organized groups plan and carry out the next steps.

Five basic principles arise from Appreciative Inquiry's theoretical foundation and practical approach. First, following from the constructionist foundation, practitioners believe that the way one describes things guides one's perception of the world, and they pay attention to where conflict arises from the assumption that others see the world in the same way. The second principle, simultaneity, poses that the process of Appreciative Inquiry itself creates change, by leading participants to reflect on the questions and issues that arise. Third, the poetic principle states that practitioners choose what to focus on in their inquiry. Without ignoring problems that need to be changed, practitioners focus on reframing problems creatively and collaboratively in view of a desired state. Fourth, the approach is anticipatory in that the image that participants create of their shared future inspires their actions. And fifth, the underlying positive principle reinforces the notion that questions lead to positive change (Cockell and McArthur-Blair 16-9; Cockell 2014).

Appreciative Inquiry thus moves away from focusing on deficits to searching for, and finding, the positive core of a team or organization. Cooperrider and Whitney, among the co-originators of the process, describe it as "the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organization, and the world around them. It involves systematic discovery of what gives life to an organization when it is most effective and most capable" (8). By recognizing participants for their strengths, successes, and effective work, Appreciative Inquiry energizes

them to do more of that rather than discourage them through a focus on their weaknesses and failures. As Cockell and McArthur-Blair emphasize, “[b]y beginning with what is wanted and finding out where it already exists, however small, people get grounded in their successes and therefore become more confident that they can do more and build their ideal futures” (15).

While organizations are often seen as problems to be solved, Appreciative Inquiry sees organizations as a solution or as a mystery to be embraced (see table 1). In other words, Appreciative Inquiry encourages a style of leadership that focuses on what in an organization is working well, fosters inquiry and dialogue, acknowledges strengths in others and oneself, and reframes problems to desired outcomes (Cockell 2014).

Problem Solving	Appreciative Inquiry
Identify Problem	Appreciate “What is” (What gives life?)
Conduct Root Cause Analysis	Imagine “What might be”
Brainstorm Solutions and Analyze	Determine “What should be”
Develop Action Plans	Create “What will be”

Table 1 adapted from Cooperrider and Whitney; see also Cooperrider.

Appreciative Inquiry has been implemented in a number of higher education settings and circumstances, including those focused on student retention, curricular change, adult education, program evaluation, and faculty development (Alston-Mills; Davis; Goen and Kawalilak; and Nemiro, Hacker, Lucero-Ferrel and Guthrie). At least one institution, California State Polytechnic University of Pomona, has used Appreciative Inquiry in its ADVANCE project. The Appreciative Inquiry team at Cal Poly recognized that Appreciative Inquiry encourages building on what an organization is already doing well,

rather than trying to pinpoint problem areas and fix what is not working... [Simultaneously, Appreciative Inquiry] enhances an

organization's capacity for collaboration and change. Appreciative Inquiry is a particular way of asking questions and envisioning the future that fosters positive relationships and builds on the basic goodness in organizations and the practices within them (Nemiro, Hacker, Lucero-Ferrel and Guthrie 11).

The Appreciative Inquiry process at Cal Poly included eight focus groups among faculty in science, engineering, and math. The focus areas were recruitment of women in STEM disciplines and career development for women. The goal of these focus groups was to determine department strength in these areas for new women faculty. Each focus group meeting lasted about an hour and followed the process outlined above, incorporating all Appreciative Inquiry process stages. The Appreciative Inquiry process resulted in a series of strategies and best practices in recruitment and career development for women in STEM, and by 2009, implemented several of these initiatives.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AT THE 2014 SENECA FALLS DIALOGUES

During our 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogue session, we asked participants to engage in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues before we introduced them to the approach. We thus provided conference participants with an inductive experience, exposing them to Appreciative Inquiry on an experiential basis before familiarizing them with the approach's theoretical background. We had successfully used the same inductive sequence (and a similar set of questions) for an informational session for women faculty in our college. In both cases, we thought that a direct engagement with this set of questions that emphasizes the positive would convey the different kind of methodology adopted by Appreciative Inquiry more effectively than a mere description of the method. Furthermore, this process-based and interactive approach challenged the more traditional critical analysis methodology to which we have grown accustomed in academic circles. Since our less common approach challenged participants to think about their expectations for the session, it brought to the foreground that the academic approach often shapes the

organization of meaning and experience, something usually hidden underneath the content conveyed.

For the Seneca Falls Dialogues, we adapted a set of questions commonly used in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues. Usually, partners who work in the same organization or institutional environment, and who are interested in improving their shared environment, participate in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues. At the Seneca Falls Dialogues, however, our session participants came from different institutions and professional backgrounds. Therefore, we added an introductory question in which the participants introduced themselves and explained the organizational environments in which they worked. We asked the Seneca Falls Dialogues session attendees to address the following four questions:

1. Where do you work, and what is your role at your workplace?
2. Describe your best experience at your workplace – when you felt the most alive and vibrant, and most excited about your work.
3. Without being modest, describe what it is that you value most about yourself and your work.
4. Imagine your workplace ten years from now, when everything is just as you always wished it could be. What is different? How have you contributed to making the dream possible?

It was a testimony to the open and interactive nature of the Seneca Falls Dialogues that, after the dialogue questions were distributed, session attendees very quickly formed groups of two or three and the room instantaneously hummed with conversation. The attendees knew that we were hoping to collect their dialogue notes after the session for the purpose of our own data analysis for this article. Fourteen participants – that is about half of the session attendees – did return their dialogue notes, and their responses provided helpful insights into their institutional backgrounds and their self-images and visions as well as revealed a hidden bias present in the Appreciative Inquiry questions.

First, the dialogue notes revealed information about the institutional affiliations of the session attendees. The majority of the attendees – six out of fourteen respondents – were undergraduate students from

different majors, including three students from computing disciplines, two students from humanities backgrounds, and one student with a science background. Four session attendees worked as university faculty or staff, and two worked in the service sector as sales associates or lifeguards. To preserve the anonymity of the respondents, we had made the response to the first question optional, and two participants chose not to respond to the first question.

Second, the best workplace experiences seemed to depend on the institutional backgrounds of the session attendees. The students tended to identify a particular content area as their best experience, for example, building math foundations, literature and writing, or coding to design games. One student identified as his or her best experience classes that convey a new perspective. All three faculty identified teaching as the best experience in their workplace, and they specifically mentioned the opportunity to connect with students, to see students learn, and to observe them see something in a new way. One faculty member also mentioned research as a best experience, particularly the ability to take a project from its inception to completion and to create new knowledge. A staff member described doing a perfect job as the most satisfying experience, even if that person was not individually credited for the work done. Of the four attendees who did not identify themselves as being part of higher education, three identified helping – both customers and co-workers – as their most satisfying experience, while one was most satisfied when she or he receives comments and appreciative remarks from clients and supervisors. The responses also suggest that those inside academia see their best experiences as related to a certain subject matter – the major in the case of students, and teaching in the case of faculty – while those outside of higher education identified helping as the most satisfying experience. If further data supported this finding, it would suggest that one possibly essential way to improve institutions of higher education is to support people's ability to relate to their subject matter.

Third, it appears that what session attendees valued in themselves and in their work also depended on their institutional affiliation.

Notably, the students and those working outside of academia reflected on what they valued in themselves and not so much in their work. For example, they valued their own directness, what they are doing, being a responsible person, being a good writer, learning things, drawing connections between texts and creating syntheses, their passion and impetus to pursue it, their brain working like a computer, self-respect and mutual respect, honesty, being helpful and feeling needed, and being personable and knowing their clients/customers and their needs well. By contrast, faculty and staff mostly valued being able to reach out to others. For example, faculty mentioned valuing inspiring others and sharing experiences, creating space for others and building communities, and being able to teach different subject matters to diverse student populations. Some students also valued their ability to reach out to others, such as encouraging learning in other people, wanting people to be happy, promoting good character, and keeping people safe. These responses suggest that reaching out to others and being able to collaborate is an essential positive value for persons in higher education, and this could be strengthened in an Appreciative Inquiry process.

Finally, responses to the fourth question revealed a hidden bias in the Appreciative Inquiry questions: Appreciative Inquiry assumes that participants will remain in their current organizations or institutional environments for a significant amount of time, and may therefore be interested in improving these environments. Of course, this applies to employees in corporations – the area in which Appreciative Inquiry was developed – and it applies to faculty and staff in higher education. However, it applies less to transient students who expect to move on to new environments after graduating. Either students need to be altruistically motivated to improve their environment for future generations, or the Appreciative Inquiry process will have little to offer them for their current environments. Consequently, the majority of students – and one staff member – answered the fourth question by giving the place where they expect to be in 10 years from now, such as opening a business in computer networking, having or running a computer game store, coding for space robots, completing a graduate

degree, and acquiring an academic job. By contrast, faculty and staff as well as those working in non-academic environments imagine improvements of their current environments such as fewer divisions between faculty, staff, and the administration, better pay for teaching and professional development, and more encouragement for part time faculty. Given our current focus on improving the situation of women faculty, this hidden bias has not had any direct bearing on our own Appreciative Inquiry process; yet, it suggests that the methodology will have limited use or at least require adaptation for those seeking to improve the situation of women students or other more transitory groups.

In addition, a notable number of session participants wished that their workplaces had a more diverse staff in the future. Expressed by participants working in higher education, in the legal system, at a computer game store, and among service associates, this may be a vision emerging from the shared values of those participating in the Seneca Falls Dialogues. There also were a few visions that included improved values rather than environments. Thus, one student hoped to better understand perseverance, a faculty member hoped for a vibrant intellectual culture around a specific subject area, and two persons from outside academia hoped for more respect for elders. Most people focused on the first part of the fourth question ("Imagine your workplace ten years from now, when everything is just as you always wished it could be") and did not specifically address the last part ("How have you contributed to making the dream possible?"). The key, and the most challenging part of Appreciative Inquiry, is to identify how to transform the workplace into an ideal organization. To focus on the transformation piece, perhaps the last question should have been split into two questions. The Appreciative Inquiry Dialogue we conducted at the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogue session was likely not long enough to tackle the transformation step.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY AT RIT'S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS

In 2013, RIT conducted a survey administered by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) at Harvard University. Serving as part of the data collection for the AdvanceRIT grant, the survey revealed strengths and weaknesses in the situation for women faculty. For the College of Liberal Arts (COLA), the COACHE Survey results indicated several strengths, including mentoring, promotion and tenure, college leadership and department collegiality, and departmental quality. They also identified four areas of concern and four areas of mixed results, three of which Appreciative Inquiry addresses through fostering leadership among women faculty: collaboration opportunities, interdisciplinarity, and appreciation/recognition.

Appreciative Inquiry involves a whole college process rather than one that is department-based because the majority of COLA departments, nine out of thirteen, are small, with twelve or fewer faculty. Some of these departments have only three or fewer women faculty. Furthermore, among the thirteen COLA departments, only five are chaired by women. The majority of associate and full professors in the college are men, and the majority of assistant professors are women (currently less than 10% of the full professors are women). Nine departments have only one or two tenured women, and one department has no tenured or tenure-track woman.

In January 2014, a core group of five women faculty from different ranks and departments applied for funding for an Appreciative Inquiry process in COLA through an AdvanceRIT Connect Grant, which was awarded and officially launched in February 2014. Like at other institutions, our core group defined the Appreciative Inquiry process and guided it through the initial stages. By now, four additional women faculty have become involved in planning and guiding the Appreciative Inquiry process, and the core group has met five times – in February, May, August, September and October 2014 – for planning purposes. So far, the core group has organized three events, all of which were open to all women faculty in COLA: (1) An introductory lunch meeting in March 2014, (2) a one-day Appreciative Inquiry training workshop in April

2014, and (3) a follow-up Appreciative Inquiry Workshop in October 2014.

The lunch meeting in March 2014 aimed at introducing women faculty in COLA to the Appreciative Inquiry approach, and inviting those interested to join the process. About twenty-five women attended the meeting, which the core group organized in a similar fashion to the way we organized the session at the Seneca Falls Dialogues. After a very brief overview on Appreciative Inquiry and introductions by the core group, participants engaged in Appreciative Inquiry Dialogues that included the last three questions. The Dialogues invited women to share their best experience in COLA, when they felt most alive; what they valued about themselves and their work; and how they imagined a better COLA in 10 years.

Two workshops with Jeanie Cockell, an Appreciative Inquiry consultant and co-author of the leading publication on Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education, have been an essential part of our Appreciative Inquiry process (Cockell and McArthur-Blair). In April 2014, Dr. Cockell conducted a one-day Appreciative Inquiry training with nine women from the core group and other interested COLA women faculty. This training led the group through the four-phase process of Appreciative Inquiry. The group began by identifying what everyone valued in themselves and in their work so as to discover what gave life to their work. Values such as “people valued and respected,” “real connections,” and “authenticity” achieved the highest support among the group, leading the group to appreciate existing strengths in the college. The group then engaged in a dreaming exercise to envision what could be, and to envision results. To do so, they reframed current issues as positive values on which the group can build to change the college. For example, issues such as “fraternity,” “two-facedness,” “dismissiveness,” and “under-evaluation of women’s research, service and teaching” were reframed as “community,” “honesty,” “consideration,” and “support, lifting people up.” The group agreed that they wanted a “healthy life, positive environment, unconditional support for careers,” and a “collegial and inclusive environment.” In the next step, the group designed its

ideal: “COLA – thriving & inclusive” would be the goal to work towards. In the final step, destiny, the group discussed how to realize a thriving and inclusive COLA and how to sustain the positive dynamic. Ideas ranged from forming a research group to foster dialogue and connections among women to founding a women faculty club to create an intimate atmosphere in which women can connect and support each other.

In October 2014, finally, the extended core group met with Jeanie Cockell for a three-hour workshop to review and reorient the Appreciative Inquiry process. The core group created the idea of bracelets with the inscription “COLA - thriving and inclusive” for raising awareness of the group’s goals among all COLA faculty, the idea of writing an AdvanceRIT Partnership grant to conduct an Appreciative Inquiry survey for additional data on the situation of women in COLA and their aspirations and dreams, and the idea of conducting drop-in sessions to encourage participation in the survey. One of the major challenges of the Appreciative Inquiry process has been that the process is emotionally demanding of its participants. Because Appreciative Inquiry requires participants to reframe problems to strengths, in effect, it called upon participants to think and feel differently. The reframing exercises challenged participants to change their own workplace identities and strategic competencies, and that challenge, was in and of itself, revolutionary. Members of the core group responded in different ways to this challenge. For those of us in junior positions, the Appreciative Inquiry process carries the insecurity of how what we do may affect our tenure cases. And for those of us in leadership positions, the Appreciative Inquiry process requires laying open the planned calculus and luck that it takes to arrive and survive in these positions, and to play and subvert the game at the same time. The emotional intensity of these challenges has occasionally pervaded the core group discussions, and during these discussions, the personal and professional support within the group has been critical. While we feel that it is important to be transparent about the emotional dimension of the methodology, it may preclude participation of those who choose not to be open emotionally in their professional environments. It will thus

function as a potential exclusionary factor. Creating a “safe” environment for Appreciative Inquiry dialogues may help overcome this exclusionary factor. Since the concept of “safe” may be specific to a given environment, those organizing Appreciative Inquiry activities may want to take this into consideration.

The COLA group has also faced more practical challenges such as the timing of the Connect grant cycle and the high demands of teaching, research, and service commitments on faculty time. The timing of the Connect grants led the core group to organize the full-day workshop with Jeanie Cockell in April, towards the end of the academic year, when additional meetings and other activities increase the already high demands on faculty time. This may have impeded the already difficult recruitment of faculty for the Appreciative Inquiry process. Although many faculty had to leave and rejoin the workshop throughout the day because of teaching and other commitments, those participating developed supportive group dynamics and created constructive ideas for change. Unfortunately, the group dispersed over the summer, and other scholarship and teaching commitments diverted any individual activities for the Appreciative Inquiry process. Being able to work together again with Dr. Cockell in the fall allowed the group to regain momentum and to set new directions.

Another challenge is to what extent to include non-women COLA faculty in the Appreciative Inquiry process. The core group has had many discussions about this question, recognizing that transforming the organizational culture will require participation across the college. Indeed, the core group is aware of women – including women in leadership positions – who act in masculine ways that exclude other women, as well as of men who are not part of the masculine in-group, and who would likely benefit from participation in the Appreciative Inquiry process in similar ways as many women faculty. So far, the core group has limited Appreciative Inquiry activities to women faculty for the main reason that this allows the group to create a “safe space” where women can feel free to address problems openly. Yet, the core group continues to reassess when and how to expand their activities.

Overall, the Appreciative Inquiry process started at a very opportune time, and this may be a factor that will help us change COLA's institutional environment. The results of the COACHE survey revealed information on the RIT overall climate for women and other minority groups that the College and Institute leadership has been compelled to act upon. For example, the current COLA Dean has pursued new policies aimed at supporting a better work-life balance. Thus, in Fall 2014, COLA instituted a parental teaching leave and reduction of responsibilities policy after the birth or adoption of a child, and is now considering a childcare emergency fund, with the understanding that the focus on the needs of young families should, in a second phase, be complemented by a focus on the needs of families in later phases that may have, for example, the need to care for an aging parent or partner. The Appreciative Inquiry process thus was initiated in a changing environment, rather than in a stable environment, and it may contribute to changes in the right direction.

There are other institute-wide changes underway to improve the success of women faculty at RIT. For example, the AdvanceRIT team has successfully worked towards changes in policies and procedures such as an automatic extension of the tenure probationary period for the birth or adoption of a child, allowing for better work-life balance. The Appreciative Inquiry process is part of a recent shift to more strongly highlighting the cultural aspects that obstruct women's success such as stereotype threat and hidden bias in recommendation letters and student evaluations. Together with colloquia and town hall meetings on these topics, Appreciative Inquiry reveals the ways in which our acting, speaking and thinking create environments that support or hinder women. It also leads us to develop a vision and measures for institutional change. We must ensure that the changes that the college and the institute are undergoing are not only seen as a mere pipeline problem – increasing the number of women faculty – but as a climate problem, that is, as the need to change the environment to make it more beneficial to the success of all faculty.

CONCLUSION

At the completion of this article, we are almost a year into the Appreciative Inquiry process, which is still a work in progress. This process has certainly helped those involved build new networks and develop support and trust. We know more about what each of us is doing to improve the situation of women and other groups with diverse backgrounds in the college (for example, starting women's mentoring groups or vocally supporting our women peers in committees), and we can better provide each other with personal and professional support. In other words, in keeping with the simultaneity principle, Appreciative Inquiry is already effecting change in our college.

Our session at the 2014 Seneca Falls Dialogues revealed some specificities of the higher education sector. Both students and faculty are tied to the subject matter of their interest, and faculty, given their role as educators, value being able to collaborate and to reach out to others. We discovered similar values in our own Appreciative Inquiry process, and we designed a future that involves a journal club or writing groups that would allow us to share our research subjects, and a women faculty club of some form that enables us to interact and collaborate more closely. One session participant asked about the place of students in Appreciative Inquiry. While individual students may have limited benefit from Appreciative Inquiry, given their transient time in institutions of higher education, students will certainly benefit from interacting with diverse, inclusive and thriving faculty.

We expect the results of our Appreciative Inquiry process to be qualitative not quantitative. We do not anticipate claiming that more women faculty are hired, or promoted, or serve as department chairs as a consequence of the process, although, if such demographic changes happened, we could certainly welcome them. But if women's voices and their issues are heard in committee meetings and given fair attention; if women no longer feel the need to cringe at some of their colleagues' supposedly funny remarks; and if women feel free to embrace leadership positions because they no longer require them to either act in masculine ways or exclude them from the real locus of power, our college's

institutional and cultural environment will have undergone a change for the better that embraces women (and many more).

Our goal in using an Appreciative Inquiry process with all interested women in COLA is to achieve the “ripple effect” desired in the Cal Poly ADVANCE project; that is, through the Appreciative Inquiry process, participants will become change agents who can support and encourage other faculty and create a momentum for change that will benefit all faculty in the college and across the institute. Already, based on the experience at our April 2014 Appreciative Inquiry workshop, the leadership of RIT’s Wallace Center – which includes RIT’s library as well as a number of service centers from web development and faculty career development to video production and RIT Press – used Appreciative Inquiry for their own strategic planning process in Fall 2014. Likewise, at least one participant at our Seneca Falls Dialogues session indicated that she wanted to start an Appreciative Inquiry process in her own institution. Appreciative Inquiry thus has and will continue to contribute to changing institutional environments in higher education at RIT and elsewhere, as a form of feminist activism to improve the institutional environment for women and colleagues of all genders.

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