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Appreciative Inquiry

Twenty Years of Change and Innovation in a School of Nursing's Quality Improvement Process
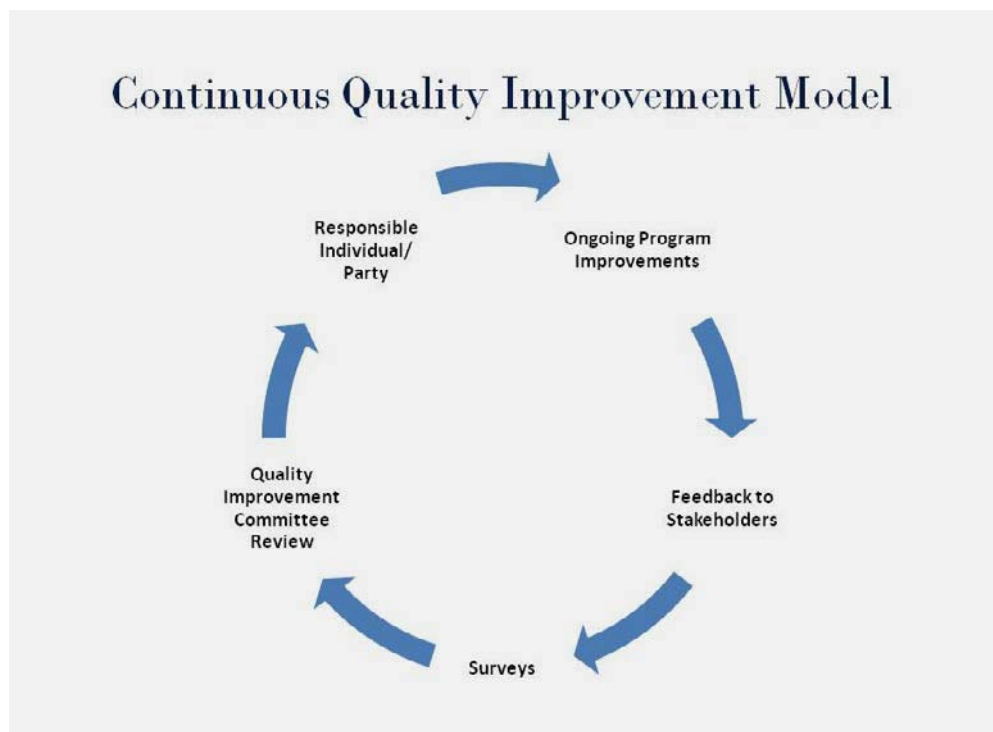
For nearly twenty years, the Lienhard School of Nursing, College of Health Professions at Pace University in New York has led a robust quality improvement program.
In April 2012, the decision was taken to reimagine the QI process using an AI framework.

The Lienhard School of Nursing (LSN), College of Health Professions (CHP) at Pace University in New York has led a robust quality improvement (QI) program for almost twenty years. Early data collection used surveys, originally paper and pencil, and then moved to electronic formats. Surveys were distributed to all stakeholders including students, faculty, staff, alumni and employers. The main objective, as with most QI surveys, was to obtain data with regard to overall satisfaction.

For the student surveys, the most important data was satisfaction with course work, classroom instruction and overall program of study. For the faculty and staff, the satisfaction surveys again were designed to extract information with regard to job satisfaction, evaluative input for administrators and for general input with regard to support and resources.

Although a great deal of time and effort was spent on survey improvement in order to maximize data retrieval, the data was at best mediocre. In fact, at times, much of the data was inflammatory, subjective and not very helpful. If we really wanted to capture the essence of the student, faculty, staff, alumni and employer experience, it was clear that the QI process would need to be revamped, reimagined and refurbished.

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framework.

With that in mind, the LSN's interim dean requested volunteers to evaluate the current QI process and charged them with a complete overhaul.

Redefining QI

In April 2012, a QI team was created which included two faculty members, one staff member and the school's quality data coordinator. The initial team meeting included developing goals, defining roles and establishing communication. During this process, the concept of reframing the QI process was introduced.

One of the QI team members had experience with the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework in the Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program. All courses in the DNP program were evaluated within the AI framework. The DNP students also learned how to conduct interviews and inquiries using the AI framework and found that the data gleaned from this method was rich, comprehensive and extremely useful. The DNP program director found the data retrieved from the AI surveys contributed greatly to the overall evolution of the DNP program, including changes that enhanced and improved the quality of the student and faculty experience, the program of study, and the program overall.

With the success of the DNP experience with AI, the QI team redesigned all of the LSN surveys in the AI framework. Additionally, the new surveys would be shorter, fewer in number and non-anonymous. While self-identification goes beyond the AI framework, the goal of asking participants to self-identify came from the belief that it may encourage greater accountability in the comments offered and could lead to more substantive comments to support the overall goals of QI. The new non-anonymous AI surveys

are meant to help students – and other stakeholders – develop their skills at giving and receiving constructive feedback and foster quality improvement. Although participants were asked to self-identify, responses were to be reported in the aggregate.

Recognizing that initiating this new method of QI would pose some challenges, the QI team decided to pilot the student surveys over the summer session during the 2012 academic year. One graduate course and two undergraduate courses would be evaluated using the new surveys. In preparation for the change, the students received information with regard to the new format and were given the opportunity to ask questions and clarify the process.

The initial concern expressed by students was the non-anonymity, which was discussed and the rationale for this was explained. The overall response was mixed but the students completed the surveys nonetheless. The response rate and quality of the data retrieved from the pilot provided the QI team with the needed evidence to bring to the faculty and staff in the fall with the intent to transition the QI process to the new AI framework.

Student responses to the core key questions

The core key questions for students for all the revised surveys include:

- What did you contribute to your learning experience in this class?

- What do you value most about this class?

- In your view, what has been your greatest academic achievement in this class?

- After reflecting on this achievement/success … if you had three wishes that could help improve or enhance this class and allow you to have more of these successes, what would they be for you?

- I would recommend my instructor(s) to others who will take this course.

Student responses to the above core key questions show evidence of insights to mutuality of teaching/learning and the student's reflection on participating in the experience. For example, one core key question was, *What did you contribute to your learning experience in this class?*

One student responded:

> For my learning experience in this course I contributed greatly by adhering to all expectations and putting in the required time to complete assignments throughout the course. I diligently followed all rubrics and sought various avenues for guidance and assistance. I communicated in a timely and professional manner with my professor when needing clarification on assignments and I also communicated well with colleagues. I put in multiple hours and days into assignments to ensure each rubric point was completed.

The surveys were further refined and the LSNFA voted unanimously to implement them.

I completed all required readings and sought extra avenues for research to enhance assignments.

Another student offered the following insight to the same question:

I contributed my time and energy into learning about the course content. I gained a lot of knowledge about things that never really crossed my mind and at the same time reinforced information that I knew before coming into the course.

The following is an example of a student response to another core key question:

What do you value most about this class?

What I valued most about this course was its relevance to the healthcare system of today. Sometimes we are too busy and overlook certain issues that definitely need addressing. This course shed light on quite a bit of those issues. The one that stands out for me the most is culture. Culture has always been here and will continue to be here. This was definitely a very valued part of this course for me.

Student feedback framed in AI is an invaluable asset to faculty

Learning occurs on a continuum, and often is not fully appreciated until a time after a course is completed, perhaps when one is asked to apply accrued knowledge. Understanding the outcomes of learning at the end of a course may just be the beginning of this appreciation, which needs to begin with reflection, as demonstrated by these students' responses to our core key questions, which serve as a catalyst for AI to discover the best of what is.

QI in transition

In September 2012 the QI team presented the findings of the pilot study to the faculty and staff of the Lienhard School of Nursing Faculty Association (LSNFA) meeting. After much discussion, review and input from these stakeholders, the surveys were further refined and the LSNFA voted unanimously to implement them for the fall end-of-semester evaluation. The faculty and staff had similar concerns with regard to the non-anonymity, not only for students completing the surveys, but also for themselves. When the rationale was explained, these stakeholders were in agreement that this could be beneficial.

What we see has improved with the AI-QI model

1. Improved process/feedback loop

The QI team reviews the comments and assigns review and feedback on those comments to the appropriate individuals within the Lienhard School of Nursing and within the university as appropriate. This may result in department level discussion. Assessment and determination of the need for appropriate planned changed may then occur in a very short period of time.

One year later … all evaluation surveys … have been entirely redesigned in an AI framework.

2. Actions based on feedback

The following is an example of an improvement in course structure that is based on student feedback: at the end of the summer 2013 semester, one of the themes that emerged from the graduate student wishes for advanced pathophysiology and pharmacology courses included extending the semester from 10 weeks to 13 weeks. This feedback was brought to the faculty and, after graduate department discussion, led to a change from a 10-week semester to a 13-week semester, which will be implemented the next time the course is offered.

What is going well and ongoing challenges

Although the interim dean said the change felt like a "tsunami", she was courageous and gave the team the green light to move forward. And move forward they did. One year later, through this groundbreaking plan, all evaluation surveys of courses, faculty, overall student satisfaction, faculty satisfaction and staff satisfaction have been entirely redesigned in an AI framework, streamlined to a handful of essential questions, and are no longer anonymous. The QI team developed a video tutorial on the new evaluation model that was shared with students, faculty and staff, with special emphasis on how to provide feedback in an AI framework, the rationale behind the lack of anonymity and how feedback would be used.

Following a successful pilot of three course surveys in summer 2012, all surveys to baccalaureate and master's degree nursing students were launched in fall 2012 and yielded a 34.3% response rate (n=640/1877). Our course evaluations conducted for the spring 2013 semester resulted in a 43.73% response rate (n=834/1907). The survey response rate prior to the AI survey launch hovered around 50%. While we saw an initial dip in the first semester of the AI launch we are steadily progressing toward the pre-AI survey response rate, and maintain a goal of exceeding the pre-AI survey response rate. Both semesters' results produced rich qualitative data, which has already been analyzed by the QI team, and directed to the appropriate stakeholders for action.

Our new surveys are gathering attention in the university.

Continuous development of our AI practice

The ways we use AI in our practice continue to grow and evolve, and now include:

- Learning to use a new AI lens for data review and interpretation

- Greater curricular integration, such as the threading of AI across the graduate nursing programs

- Faculty, staff and administration development in ongoing AI practice

- Spreading the AI framework to other programs in the College of Health Professions

Our new surveys are gathering attention in the university: in the spring of 2013, the QI team was asked to present our new QI initiative to the Pace University Deans' Council. The university's new provost has been following our experiment with great

Through AI, the 'quest for quality' translates to a quality patient experience

interest and joined our day-long scholarly workshop on AI, led by Dr. Jeanie Cockell, co-author with Joan McArthur-Blair, of the book *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force* (2012).

An electronic newsletter to all LSN students was launched in the fall of 2013 highlighting some of the immediate actions that were taken, thanks to the students' new constructive feedback. In order to encourage increased participation in the new surveys, a contest was announced for the fall 2013 end-of-semester surveys, offering the class with the highest participation rate breakfast with the dean and an opportunity to discuss with her first-hand program improvements.

As we continue to advance this initiative, our practice will include reframing across the LSN and the College of Health Professions to change from the "problem hunter" approach to an ongoing AI "quest for quality".

References
Cockell, J. and McArthur-Blair, J. (2012) *Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education: A Transformative Force.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing.