

Appreciative Advising Inventory: Identifying College Student Assets for Successful Transition

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The major purpose of this study was to illustrate how the Appreciative Advising Inventory (AAI) can be used in student success programs to identify students' assets and strengths in order to promote their successful transition to college. The results of the study indicated that college students who are placed on academic probation shared internal assets related to their commitment to learning and positive values. The student success programming described in this study appeared to facilitate students' development of external assets, especially regarding boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Students' positive values, positive identity, and support/connectedness were noted as indicators for their academic success in college. Implications of the study for college administrators, staff, instructors and students were also discussed.

By the time students have made it to postsecondary education, they have overcome a number of challenges and have had a number of opportunities to activate and apply their personal strengths and talents. Frequently, however, the transition into higher education places students into an unfamiliar culture and academic landscape that appears so different from their previous experience that they feel they must develop a whole new skill set in order to be successful. While much research has been done about this transition to college (Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007), the research generally can be placed into two different categories: 1) examinations of personal characteristics that students need to overcome in order to better transition to college; and 2) discussions of the ways in which institutions can assist students in improving in these areas (Weidman, 1989; Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Berger & Milem, 2000; Barefoot, 2005; Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007).

There are several leading themes in the investigation of entering college student deficits. Several researchers examined the lack of student academic preparation to pinpoint the areas in which students need to develop in order to facilitate their transition to college (Adelman, 1999; Hossler & Vesper, 1993; St. John, 1991). Minority students and students with low socioeconomic backgrounds were

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perceived as being disadvantaged in terms of their academic preparation for college because they tend to take high school courses in vocational rather than academic tracks (Nora & Rendón, 1990), and lack opportunities to participate in pre-college preparation programs or career counseling in high school (Bryk, Lee, & Smith, 1990). Students' and their families' awareness of financial support and resources, especially for low-income families or first-generation college students, is another factor that impacts their successful transition to college (Flint, 1997). Even though these are critical factors impacting students' transition to college, neither their academic preparedness nor awareness of financial support truly reflects students' aspiration to college degree (Perna & Swail, 2001).

From the institution's perspective, research focuses on what can be done for students to help them, including addressing the impact of pre-college and college factors on the socialization experience of students (Weidman, 1989), promoting academic and social involvement (Tinto, 1998), and encouraging engagement with peers and social networks (Pascarella, 2005; Phinney & Haas, 2003). Ender and Wilkie (2000) have emphasized remedial courses for basic reading, writing, and math skills as central in supporting incoming students, while Jones and Becker (2002) have discussed the need for programs that teach decision-making skills, provide curriculum intensive advising, and provide services to support students during their first year. However, even with these efforts to remedy student shortcomings, as Braxton (2000) has pointed out, the concern over retention in colleges and universities has only increased despite a history of research on student departure that has spanned over seven decades.

Even though previous research has provided us insights into how students might need to develop to successfully transition into college and what institutions could do to better support students' academic pursuits, the skill sets, strengths, and assets students bring with them to college tend to be overlooked. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to shift our perspectives from finding out "what is wrong" to discovering and emphasizing "what works" and focusing on how institutions could learn from and better leverage students' assets and strengths.

Literature Review

In an effort to improve retention, many institutions are enrolling students who have not reached their academic potential into success courses. Frequently, course instructors emphasize study skills and other forms of remediation, while administrative offices use these courses as an opportunity to raise students' awareness of the services the institution provides. While such information is indeed valuable to students, this model will often lead to a fragmented experience, especially if there is no core methodology or philosophy in place to provide an integrated course identity (Gahagan, 2002; Hutson, 2010; Ryan & Glenn, 2004). Additionally, these courses typically operate from a deficit perspective, serving as a remediation mechanism through which students have the opportunity to "fix" their problems, while attitudes, aspirations, abilities, and other assets students bring into college—and which could facilitate their transition—are neglected.

In order to better build upon individuals' strengths to enable optimal student academic performance, various strength-based approaches have been developed and applied to educational settings (Lopez, 2006; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). These strength-based approaches, grounded in positive psychology and other social cognitive theories, focus on the articulation of one's strengths and assets by examining positive experiences from the past, the encouragement of hope and optimism for the future, and the development of emotional satisfaction with the present (Seligman, 2002).

The StrengthsQuest program is probably one of the most well known applications of strength-based theories that focuses on one's past positive experiences. Developed by Donald Clifton, StrengthsQuest builds upon the distinction between one's talents and strengths (McKay & Greengrass, 2003). While one's talent is "a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling and behavior that can be productively applied," strength is defined as "the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity" (Hodges & Harter, 2005, pp. 190–191). The StrengthsQuest instrument is developed to facilitate individuals to maximize their potential for strengths building upon their identified natural talents from past positive experiences.

Instead of focusing on past experiences, hope theory (Snyder, 1995) highlights goal setting and self-efficacy to promote future development. Hope theory emphasizes both the "will and the way" in "the process of thinking about one's goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals (agency), and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)" (Snyder, 1995, p. 355). Measures were developed to identify both constructs and have been used with various age groups (Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, & Feldman, 2003).

The research of Seligman (2002) emphasizes individuals' "authentic happiness" with the present. He defines happiness in three aspects: developing positive emotion, seeking engagement, and finding meaning in life. Multiple instruments including the Values in Action (VIA) Signature Strengths Questionnaire have been developed to measure each of the three distinct aspects of happiness (www.authentichappiness.org).

Although the theories discussed above highlight one's assets and strengths, none of them emphasizes the process of asset development. Appreciative Advising, on the other hand, is a social constructivist advising framework that depicts the process of optimizing advisors' interaction with students in both individual and group settings. Appreciative Advising was developed from Appreciative Inquiry (AI), an organizational change theory that "provides a positive rather than a problem-oriented lens on the organization, focusing members' attention on what is possible rather than what is wrong" (van Buskirk, 2002, p. 67).

Expanding AI's four stages (Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver), Appreciative Advising involves a six phase model through which advisors and instructors intentionally use positive, active, and attentive listening and questioning strategies to build trust and rapport with students (Disarm); uncover students' strengths and skills (Discover); encourage and be inspired by students' dreams (Dream); co-construct action plans with students to make their goals

a reality (Design); support students as they carry out their plans (Deliver); and challenge both themselves and the students to do and become even better (Don't Settle) (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The Appreciative Advising model has been used successfully with first-year experience courses, undecided students, and academic recovery programs (Hutson, Amundsen, & He, 2005).

In this study, we describe how Appreciative Advising was implemented in a first-year student success program to support college students' development of personal assets and academic performance. While student academic achievements are often linked with the development of their strengths, hope, and optimism, it is not the ultimate purpose of the approach (He, 2009). Rather, success courses centered on the Appreciative Advising framework are designed to promote an alternative way of thinking that enhances confidence, resilience, and creativity in both students and instructors. Students and instructors are motivated to not only become aware of their own strengths but to also optimize each other's strengths and motivation.

Appreciative Advising Inventory

The Appreciative Advising Inventory (AAI) is designed to accompany the Appreciative Advising framework and was modeled after the 40 Developmental Assets instrument developed by The Search Institute (www.search-institute.org). Similar to the 40 Developmental Assets instrument, the AAI helps individuals to identify both external assets (support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time) and internal assets (commitment to learning, values, social competencies, and positive identities). While the 40 Developmental Assets instrument focuses on asset development among K-12 students, the AAI was designed specifically for post-secondary students. The AAI instrument was developed in response to the need among institutions using the Appreciative Advising framework to find an efficient method for starting assets-focused conversations with students, and was designed and piloted in collaboration with advisors from eight different institutions (He, Hutson, & Bloom, 2010).

The AAI instrument is a 5-point Likert scale survey (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree) containing 44 items addressing two main subscales: internal assets (items 1-22), and external assets (items 23-44). For internal assets, four internal constructs are measured: commitment to learning (items 1-7), positive values (items 8-11), social competencies (items 12-15), and positive identity (items 16-22). For external assets, four external constructs are measured: support/connectedness (items 23-27), empowerment (items 28-36), boundaries and expectations (items 37-40), and constructive use of time (items 41-44). The reliability of the instrument was .95, and LISREL analysis confirmed the constructs of the instrument (RMR = .08; GFI = .95) (He, Hutson, & Bloom, 2010).

The AAI instrument has been used as a supplementary advising tool to facilitate individual or group advising that applies the Appreciative Advising framework. In this study, AAI was used as a self-assessment tool for students to

identify their own assets and strengths before and after the program.

Method

Program context

The Strategies for Academic Success (SAS) program was designed around the six stages of Appreciative Advising, with curriculum, course activities, and assignments aligned with the six stages both structurally and philosophically. It was developed at a large public university in the southeastern United States in order to assist students on academic probation to recover good academic standing. While undergoing several revisions, since 2001 the course has been an eight-week, pass/fail, non-credit course that combines mandatory classroom attendance with regular face-to-face meetings with the instructor. The SAS program assists students on academic probation in acting interdependently and gaining personal insight by taking responsibility, managing their behaviors, believing in themselves, and setting goals accordingly.

The SAS program shifted its curriculum from a deficit-based to an Appreciative Advising framework for several reasons. Selective institutions have identified their students as being capable of success and completing their degree, and under this assumption have invested resources in these students' efforts. This suggests that starting from a deficit-based paradigm, (i.e., looking for areas of academic weakness or poor time management) may not be an appropriate starting point, since students should already have adequate preparation in these areas prior to matriculating. Further, students in academic trouble typically have a very limited time in which to correct their status. Practically, it is quicker to correct this status by building on strengths, and maintaining a course load and engaging in academic and social behaviors that reflect these strengths, than it is to attempt to correct long-standing deficits (Hutson et al., 2005).

In addition to the emphasis on Appreciative Advising, the SAS program emphasizes group interaction among students. The students interact in a small group setting where reflection and self-disclosure occur regularly. Students are encouraged and guided to share their experiences with each other while other students provide support and guidance. A supportive environment is created for students to relate to other students in a similar academic situation (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). Further, each student is required to meet with his or her SAS instructor twice during the eight weeks of the course. The student is asked "appreciative" questions that require him or her to tell stories of past academic successes (e.g., "Tell me about a time when you felt most alive in the classroom"). This type of discussion reinforces past successes and allows the student to relive these positive experiences (Hutson et al., 2005).

Research questions

In order to identify the impact of the Appreciative Advising-infused Student Academic Success (SAS) program, three specific research questions are identified in this study: 1) What are the self-identified assets students bring into college? 2) How do students develop their self-perception of assets after completing the Appreciative Advising-infused SAS program? and 3) What are the major indicators for student academic success?

Participants

Participants included 124 first-year or continuing students who were placed on academic probation during the Spring 2010 semester. The distribution of the gender and ethnicity of the participants is similar to that of the campus undergraduate population. Among all the participants, 70 (57%) were female and 54 (43%) were male. The majority of the participants were White (N = 67, 54%), while 39 (31%) were African American, 6 (5%) were Hispanic, 5 (4%) were Asian, 6 (5%) of the students identified themselves as multiracial, and one student (1%) identified himself/herself as Native American.

According to the institution policy, first-year students whose first semester grade point average (GPA) is lower than 1.75, or continuing students whose cumulative GPA is lower than 2.0, are placed on academic probation and are required to participate in the SAS program. Because of the unique academic support that first-year or new transfer students need to recover from their academic standing, the SAS program offers the SAS 100 course specifically for those students. Students who have already completed one or more semesters with academic success before going on probation take SAS 200. The courses differ primarily in the activities in which students engage, rather than in curricular design; for example, while new students may examine positive academic experiences at their previous institution to identify areas where they excelled, continuing students would consider their past performance in the institution where they are currently enrolled. In this study, 76 participants (61%) were enrolled in SAS 100 sessions, while 48 participants (39%) were enrolled in SAS 200 sessions.

Data collection and analysis

Two sets of quantitative data were collected for this study: participants' pre- and post-GPA and their responses to the AAI instrument. GPA information was collected from the university student data management system, while the AAI data were collected using a Web-based survey format. The AAI instrument was made available to students on the institutions' website and students were required to take the survey at the beginning and the end of their SAS sessions. Based on the data collected in this study, the instrument's reliability is .98.

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze all the data in this study. Descriptive statistics including frequency, means, and standard

deviation were reported for the AAI pre- and post-results. To compare participants' pre and post scores on AAI subscales, *t*-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used assuming an alpha = 0.05 significance level. Correlation and regression analysis were also conducted to explore the relationship between participants' asset development and GPA gains.

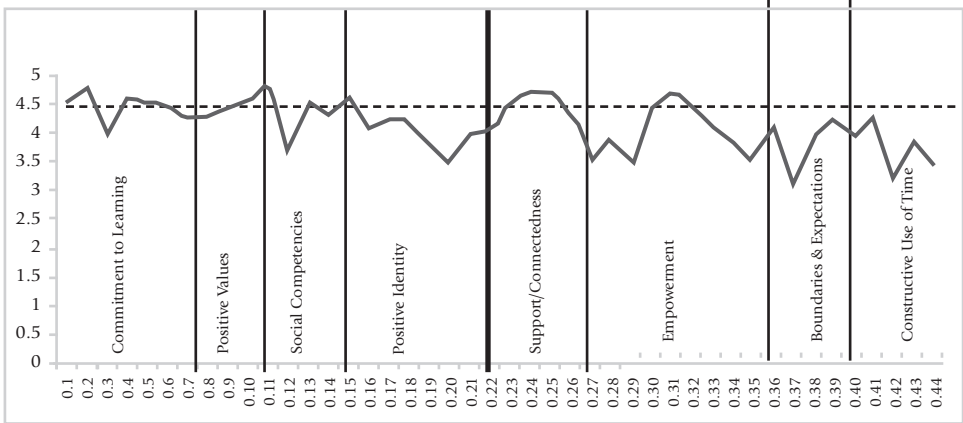
Results

First-year student assets

Based on the pre-AAI survey results, we noted that the majority of our participants identified numerous internal and external assets they bring into college. Overall, participants confirmed having internal assets, especially in terms of their commitment to learning (items 1–7), and positive values (items 8–11) (mode = 5.00).

FIGURE 1

Pre-AAI Mean



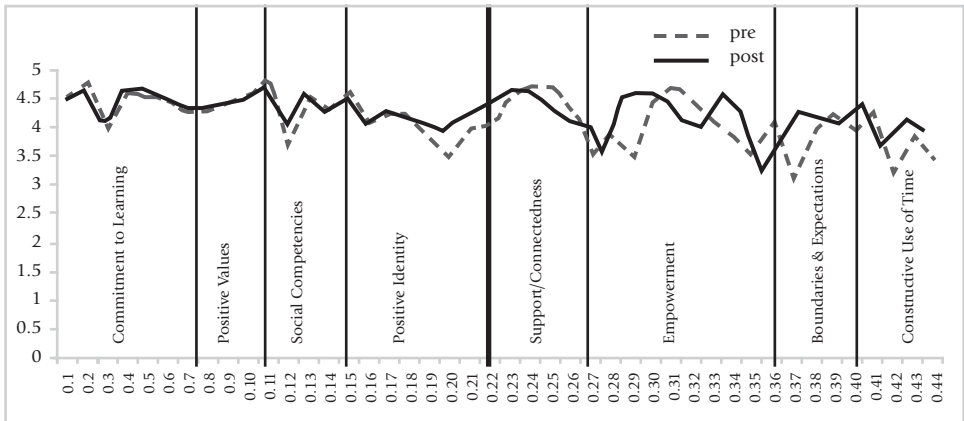
As is indicated in Figure 1, items 1, 2, 4, 5, 10, 11, 15, 24, 25, 31, and 32 have mean scores above 4.5, with item 2 (“I am committed to earning a degree”) and item 11 (“I have a strong desire to make something of my life”) having the highest mean scores ($M_{pre} = 4.72$ and 4.76 respectively). For external assets, items 24 (“I feel loved by my family”), 25 (“I value my parents’ advice”), and 31 (“My close friends support my educational pursuits”) had the highest mean scores ($M_{pre} = 4.65$). Based on the correlation analysis, participant GPA has a significant correlation with their reported assets regarding support/connectedness ($M_{pre} = 4.18$, $\alpha < 0.05$).

Student Asset Development

After taking the AA-infused SAS course, participants provided post-AAI responses. Comparing participants' pre and post AAI-responses, statistical significant differences were noted in terms of their reported assets regarding positive identity (items 16–22, $\alpha < 0.05$), support/connectedness (items 23–27, $\alpha < 0.05$), and constructive use of time (items 41–44, $\alpha < 0.05$).

FIGURE 2

Pre/Post AAI Mean



More changes of reported assets were noted in terms of participants' external assets rather than internal (see Figure 2). For internal assets, the pre- and post-responses are almost identical in terms of commitment to learning, positive values, and social competencies. Increase in participants' reported assets regarding positive identity were noted especially for items 19 ("Right now I see myself as being pretty successful"), 20 ("At this time, I am meeting the goals I have set for myself"), 21 ("If I should find myself in a difficult situation, I could think of many ways to get out of it"), and 22 ("I can think of many ways to reach my current goals").

For external assets, the pattern of changes was noteworthy. While consistent increase was noted regarding participants' assets related to boundaries and to expectations and constructive use of time after they took the AA-infused SAS course, their responses for support/connectedness and empowerment showed a different pattern. Overall increase of assets was reported regarding support/connectedness, especially for item 27 ("It is important that I not let my professors or teachers down"). However, slight decrease was noted for items 24 and 25, which were among the items that scored the highest in the pre-AAI responses. In terms of empowerment, increase was noted for items 29 ("Someone outside my family

supports my educational pursuits”), 30 (“My parents support my educational pursuits”), 34 (“I have at least 2 adults in my life that model positive responsible behavior”), and 35 (“My best friends model responsible behavior. They are a good influence on me”). At the same time, decrease was noted especially for items 31 (“My close friends support my educational pursuits”) and 32 (“My university is a caring and encouraging place”).

The correlation analysis indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between participant GPA and their positive identity, support and connectedness, and constructive use of time ($\alpha < 0.01$), which were also the three aspects that demonstrated the highest growth.

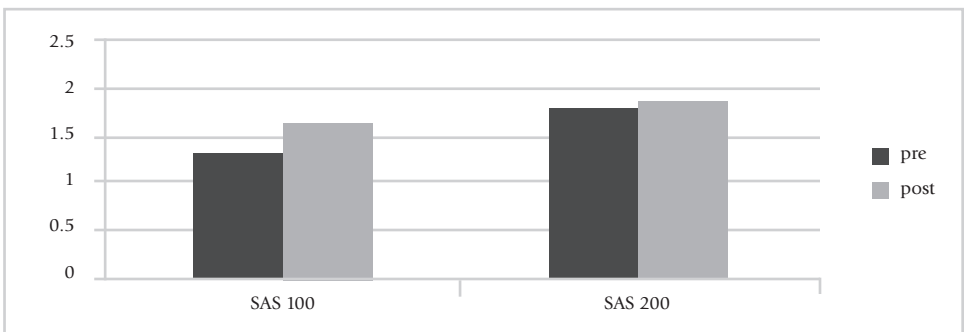
Indicators for student academic success

Comparing participants’ pre- and post-GPA in this study, a statistically significant increase was noted as indicated in Table 1 ($M_{pre} = 1.55$, $M_{post} = 1.77$, $\alpha < 0.01$). For both SAS 100 and 200 sections, participants’ GPA increase is statistically significant ($\alpha < 0.01$, see Figure 3). Among the 124 participants, 51 (41%) returned to good academic standing after participating in the SAS program.

TABLE 1
ANOVA-GPA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.957	1	2.957	14.348	.000
Within Groups	50.488	245	.206		
Total	53.445	246			

FIGURE 3
Estimated Marginal Means of GPA by SAS Section



Linear regression was conducted in this study to identify indicators for participants' academic success. Three aspects were noted as significant indicators for participants' GPA increase: positive values, positive identity, and support/connectedness (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

Linear Regression

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta	
(Constant)	1.487	.216		6.894 .000
internal1	-.013	.083	-.019	-.160 .873
internal2	-.227	.082	-.309	-2.765 .006*
internal3	-.102	.092	-.146	-1.104 .271
internal4	.170	.082	.257	2.073 .039*
external1	.161	.079	.239	2.024 .044*
external2	.115	.092	.162	1.248 .213
external3	-.028	.063	-.043	-.445 .657
external4	-.012	.054	-.023	-.232 .817

Note. * $\alpha < 0.05$

Discussions and Implications

The results of this study not only confirmed the reliability and usefulness of the AAI instrument, but also shed light on how colleges and universities could leverage students' assets in order to facilitate their transition to college and maximize students' potential for academic success. There are several specific implications that would be worth noting for both college administrators and instructors teaching orientation or student success courses.

First, the positive and consistent internal assets reported by participants in this study pointed out the need for college administrators and instructors to shift our assumptions about students who are placed on academic probation to an alternative perspective. Different from previous studies where the areas of need for student success were typically stressed, this study provided data to demonstrate the positive aspects we could leverage to enhance college students' success, including areas such as personal commitment and family support. Sharing these assets with administrators, staff, and instructors would facilitate the creation of a positive

attitude and culture where our students' internal assets could be valued and maximized.

Second, the use of the AAI as both a self-evaluation tool and pre/post measure in this study demonstrated the potential of extending its application to facilitating college students' self-reflection on their strengths and assets in their learning. While most orientation and student success courses emphasize students' development of their cognitive skills, such as note taking, we know that metacognitive skills are critical in students' academic success. Different from cognitive skills, it is more challenging to explicitly teach metacognitive skills, such as reflecting on the development of one's assets, through direct instruction. The AAI could be adapted as a reflection guide for students and be used to assist them in becoming more self-aware of not only the assets they possess, but more importantly, how they could utilize support services to develop both their internal and external assets to enhance their academic achievement.

Third, taking the perspective of improving institutional services to meet the diverse and changing needs of college students, the AAI could be used as a tool to assist institutions in aligning key student academic and support services with facilitating students' development of their assets. In other words, the results of the AAI are also indicators of success with regard to the impact of students support services. In addition to celebrating those successes, support services could also view students' development in various subscales of the AAI as goals or measures of the ideal impact of their work. Aligning student support service goals directly with students' asset development would further enhance the quality of data-based decision making in the institution and its attempts to place students at the center of its work.

Conclusion

While we focus on first-year students who have experienced academic challenges in this study, the use of the AAI could and should be expanded to other aspects of college student orientation and transition services. Colleges and universities spend much time considering the needs of new students and the institution's role in ensuring a successful transition to college (Mayhew, Vanderlinden, & Kim, 2010). Taking time to engage students in examination and reflection regarding their strengths using the AAI would allow us to be more proactive in this endeavor to assist individual students in the transition to college by building upon their personal backgrounds.

The use of instruments such as the AAI throughout students' college experiences by both students and academic support services would also help streamline students' college experiences and avoid having fragmented orientation and transition programs (Goldrick-Rab, Carter, & Wagner, 2007; Hutson, 2010; Mayhew, Vanderlinden, & Kim, 2010). By front-loading student experiences with reflection on positive attributes, continuing to reemphasize those positive attributes in times of challenge and difficulty as illustrated in this study, and focusing in strengths in developing post-graduate career paths, we are providing

students with the support necessary for long-term success. Not only do students develop strategies for identifying strengths, they also learn how to rely on and leverage these strengths as they move forward in their personal and professional lives.

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