

Leveraging a Guest Speaker Event to Advance Transformative Change for At-Risk Student Success

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When the master of ceremonies at a student success conference introduced the keynote speaker, he had my attention. He introduced Dr. Paul Hernandez as a former at-risk youth who grew up engulfed in gang culture and deep poverty, surviving on the streets of Los Angeles, and who dropped out of school in the 8th grade. "Wow," I thought, "This is going to be good." Dr. Hernandez took the stage and I was immediately taken by his appearance and demeanor. He was rather serious and someone stoic and the room quieted quickly in anticipation of his speech. He rolled up his pink dress-shirt sleeves, revealing a full sleeve of tattoos on his right arm and began to speak. It was a pin-drop experience as he shared his incredible story growing up the son of an immigrant in a community plagued by gang violence, and a school system where he did not feel valued - where teachers did not connect with or engage him. Eventually, he dropped out, but his story did not end there. He shared that through the influence of a few key people, including a counselor who stood up for him when she witnessed an injustice, and a custodian who convinced him he was not a monster, and through his own questioning of his older homeboys and realization that those who had power, influence, and a voice, also had an education, he eventually enrolled at a community college. As he continued to realize that education could serve as a tool of empowerment, he continued to earn his associate's, bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D degrees. By the time Dr. Hernandez finished his speech, he had not only my attention, but also my heart. It was a mind/heart connection. His ideas and the passion with which he delivered his message, resonated with my mind and heart. I had never experienced a speech as powerful, and despite my best attempt, I could not hold back my tears.

Dr. Hernandez also conducted a follow-up session teaching his audience about his work with students at-risk, based on concepts captured in his book, *The Pedagogy of Real Talk: Engaging, Teaching and Connecting with Students At-Risk* (2015). After experiencing those two presentations, I was determined to bring him to my institution. I knew that we needed to hear from him. By "we" I mean my students, first and foremost. I direct a student success program, focused on the retention of at-risk students, in the Haworth College of Business (HCoB) at Western Michigan University (WMU), called the Phoenix Program. The Phoenix Program provides support to students on academic probation in jeopardy of being academically dismissed or walking away from the University. I knew that Dr. Hernandez' story would resonate with my students, many who have faced similar challenges, and I wanted to give them his gift of inspiration. I also knew that "we" could benefit from his insight based on his experiences, in terms of staff members who work in student success programs, faculty wanting to better engage at-risk students in the classroom, and leadership encountering a shift in student demographics as more students from underrepresented/underprepared populations access higher education (Hoover, 2014). I was convinced that bringing a guest speaker such as Dr. Hernandez to my institution was something that could positively impact student success and retention throughout the University. With that sense of conviction, I did three things before leaving the conference: 1) I ran the idea

past colleagues who were also at the conference and was encouraged; 2) I connected with Dr. Hernandez by email and got the wheels turning, and; 3) I ordered his new book, which would not be released for a few months, and I could not wait to read it!

Forming the Committee

One of the keys to planning and executing a successful event is getting the right people on the bus and forming a committee comprised of people with the same vision and passion - people with a strong work ethic who bring different strengths to the collective whole (Collins, 2001). With that in mind, I strategically invited stakeholders from various programs, departments, and Colleges to serve on the committee. It was exciting to imagine the potential of what could happen with deconstructed silos and people working collaboratively together toward a common goal of transformative change around student success. The committee was comprised of a representative from the following University departments, Colleges and programs: Center for Academic Success Programs (CASP); College of Arts and Sciences (CAS); Lewis Walker Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnic Relations; College of Engineering and Applied Sciences (CEAS); College of Education and Human Development (CEHD); Lee Honors College (LHC); College Assistance and Migrant Programs (CAMP); Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI); Student Activities and Leadership Programs (SALP); Seita Scholars Program; First Year Experience (FYE); Department of Sociology; Center for Research in Instructional Change in Postsecondary Education (CRICPE); Center for English Language and Culture for International Students (CELCIS); Heinecke Institute for Global Education (HIGE); Haworth College of Business (HCoB); and Office of Admissions. Several of these units made financial contributions to the budget goal, making the event a true University-wide collaboration.

The Application of Appreciative Education

With a goal to help the University community develop appreciation for at-risk students and to see them as individuals "at-promise" rather than problems to be "fixed" (Osher & Kendziora, 2010), it was important to approach the event-planning process from a strengths-based perspective. Some committee members had recently participated in a cross-departmental common read using *The Appreciative Advising Revolution* (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008) and we decided to use an appreciative education approach as the framework for planning and executing the event.

The authors define Appreciative Advising as the "intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials " (Bloom, Hutson & He, n.d., para.2). The philosophy, grounded in positive psychology, social constructivist and choice theory and first applied to academic advising, has since found new and broader applications coined as Appreciative Education. Appreciative Education is defined as "educational theories, innovative practices, and thoughtful reflections that challenge deficit-based thinking in teaching and learning across all levels of education " (Bloom, Hutson & He, n.d., para.1).

There are six phases in the Appreciative Advising and Appreciative Education frameworks: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver and Don't Settle (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008). Through the process of planning and executing the event, it emerged that the categories did not have hard boundaries, nor did they always follow a set pattern; rather, they were fluid and organic. To illustrate this concept, the phases will be discussed using specific examples in some cases, and summaries in other instances.

Disarm

The Disarm phase builds trust and rapport by recognizing the importance of first impressions, and creating a safe and welcoming environment (Bloom et al, 2008). Therefore, the goal in forming the

committee was to provide a positive experience - to recruit, engage and build positive professional relationships with colleagues who could bring passion, purpose, and expertise to the process. To accomplish this goal, clear meeting agendas provided structure, yet allowed for flexibility to discuss unplanned topics that emerged. Meetings were held in a consistent location that was open, bright, and pleasant. Committee members were welcomed with a smile and made to feel at ease by keeping the atmosphere casual and informal, allowing time for small talk to help build a sense of belonging and community. After each meeting, minutes summarizing the meeting were emailed within a few days to all members. The minutes included everyone's input and let committee members know that their voices were heard, appreciated, and valued.

Discover

After disarming the potential committee members, the next step was to engage them through a discovery process. The Discover phase addresses strengths and skills (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Thus, the committee was encouraged to think and discuss the value in creating the event at the University for the committee members as well as for the students. We focused on a positive open-ended format inviting each person to offer input and to share their ideas, initiatives, and programs for advancing student success. The goals of each person were acknowledged to bridge potential outcomes of the event to meet each stakeholder's specific program goals. Committee members who had previously heard Dr. Hernandez at conferences shared the positive impact of his message and this helped build excitement about the event.

Dream

Once the committee was established, members engaged in the Dream phase of the process. The Dream phase, utilizing an appreciative mindset, involves dreaming about the potential of the future (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). In this case, the committee began to dream about the potential impact of the event itself and created outcomes for students, faculty, and staff. This took some work over several meetings as members wrestled with the potential of the event and how to focus and leverage its potential. The final targeted outcomes were:

Students

- Students will be exposed to distinct obstacles that students from economically challenged backgrounds experience.
- Students will identify at least two ways they can transcend their own obstacles to follow their passions.

Faculty and Staff

- Faculty and staff will be informed about how the face and profile of University students are changing to reflect the shifting demographics of the country and will understand some of the implications of this change.
- Faculty and staff will learn some strategies for engaging students at-risk for failure.

The definition of "at-risk" came from Dr. Hernandez (2015, p. 3):

Students who are at-risk for failure (or dropping out of school) include students who have within-person and/or within-environmental circumstances that put them in vulnerable positions for having problems in school. These problems can be academic or behavioral. Within-person risk factors include: learning challenges, limited knowledge/skills, emotional and behavior problems. Environmental factors include: poverty/homelessness, limited support for learning, gangs, drugs, negative interactions at school, home, or between school and home.

Knowing that at-risk students face challenges that increase the likelihood they will make a school-leaving decision, particularly for the lowest-performing students, who are disproportionately minorities (Doll, Eslami, & Walters, 2013), the committee decided to focus on helping students develop a grit and resiliency mindset. In addition, the committee committed to empowering faculty and staff by equipping them with knowledge and tools needed to interrupt school-leaving decisions for at-risk students.

The committee also dreamed about the desired attendance for the event and the format(s) for learning. Based on previous guest speaker events, the committee set a goal of 250 students. The bigger dream was to approach attendance numbers rivaling when Dr. Martin Luther King visited University in 1963, just four months after he made his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Attendance for the Martin Luther King event was estimated at 2,000 people. This was a lofty goal, but by discarding deficit thinking in favor of opportunity thinking, the committee chose to dream big and to move forward with a grand vision of positive outcomes for social justice, student success, equity and inclusion, modeled by Dr. King.

Design

The Design phase involves developing a concrete action plan to realize a goal (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Once the larger purpose was envisioned, it was important to drill down into the minute details, operationalize the goals with specific objectives, and clarify responsibilities and timelines. The plan for Dr. Hernandez' visit was to hold a series of workshops, a lunch with University leadership, and a main event open to the University and general public. Each event had targeted outcomes for the intended audience. A project management document was created and committee members volunteered to handle various aspects of the planning, including meals, marketing, reserving venues, creating paper evaluations for the workshops, and managing the budget. The committee, with input from students, titled the main event, "Breaking Chains: Gang to Graduation." Dr. Hernandez was heavily involved at every stage of the planning process and offered valuable feedback and guidance. In addition, Dr. Hernandez visited campus ahead of time to meet the committee members, shoot marketing photos, and further clarify event objectives.

The finalized plan for the day included the following events, listed in the order in which they occurred:

- Instructor workshop, "The Pedagogy of Real Talk " for 50 faculty
- Luncheon with University leadership
- Staff workshop, "The Pedagogy of Real Talk " for 50 staff members
- Videotaped interview with Dr. Hernandez
- Main event, "Breaking Chains: Gang to Graduation " for between 250 and 300 students and community members
- "Breaking Chains " student leadership workshop

Budget. Making the dream a reality involved a carefully constructed budget. The committee brainstormed on fundraising ideas and formulated a strategic plan to achieve their goals. A guest speaker proposal handout was created and presented, along with a request for financial support, to the Deans of the Colleges at the Provost's Council Meeting; all but one College committed financial support. The event proposal was also presented to the Office of Diversity and Inclusion leadership team who offered financial support through the Martin Luther King (MLK) Visiting Scholars fund. Other smaller programs also contributed and after several months of marketing and campaigning, the budget goal was realized.

After reaching the budget goal, 90 copies of Dr. Hernandez' book were purchased and delivered to faculty and staff who registered for one of the workshops. The books were delivered two weeks prior to the event to give them time to read and analyze the book ahead of Dr. Hernandez' visit.

Marketing. The committee devised a specific marketing plan for each event, paying attention to target audience, timing and budget. Marketing strategies included:

- Designing and posting over 300 flyers and posters across campus, including classroom buildings, residence halls and campus apartment buildings
- Posting a web page for instructors and staff to register for the workshops
- Promoting the event at both a graduate student and a faculty learning intensive meeting
- Advertising the event on digital signs in the main buildings
- Posting ads in both the University and local newspaper
- Featuring the events on MLive, the electronic news reporting media for the community
- Posting the event on the Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) website
- Disseminating information through email blasts from each college by the respective deans

The event was also marketed to approximately 75 First Year Experience instructors during a summer training, inviting them to bring their classes to the main event. Posters were put on the University busses, and information was circulated through social media including college, program, and student organizations' Facebook pages. Marketing was very strategic and focused. "The difference between something good and something great is attention to detail " (Swindoll, 2005, p. 305) and the committee knew that detailed planning was essential to successful attendance and a successful event.

Deliver – Breaking Chains: Gang to Graduation - The Day Itself

The day of the event finally arrived and it was time to deliver on the months of planning – time to execute the vision. The day began early with an informal breakfast that provided an overview of the day's agenda. Dr. Hernandez was remarkably calm, confident, and relaxed, which set the tone for a successful day. Throughout the day, committee members worked together as a team, supporting each other and ensuring that the day would be successful.

Faculty Workshop. The first event of the day was a workshop for 30 instructors representing a breadth of departments across campus. Dr. Hernandez delivered a workshop, based on concepts from his book, designed to help instructors understand and prepare for the demographic shift among today's college students. Specific techniques to engage, teach, and connect with students at-risk of dropping out or being dismissed were shared. "Real Talk " methods were modeled as Dr. Hernandez engaged the audience through stories from his personal life based on his unique perspective as an at-risk youth. After the workshop, one instructor said, "I could listen to him all day. " Many faculty stayed after the session to ask questions, take photos, and connect with Dr. Hernandez personally. Participants also evaluated the workshop using a paper form.

Leadership Luncheon. The leadership luncheon was next and was attended by the University's President and 15 upper-level administrators, including the Vice Provost, associate provosts, vice presidents, program directors, and college deans. Several important topics were discussed related to institutional prioritization of student success, diversity, and inclusion, including how to recruit and retain diverse faculty members given the forecasted impending high rate of faculty retirements. Dr. Hernandez offered insight and advice based on his perspectives from the point-of-view of a

former youth at-risk, minority tenured faculty member, educational consultant, and university administrator.

Staff Workshop. After the luncheon, Dr. Hernandez facilitated a staff workshop highlighting educational theories, innovative practices, and thoughtful reflections that challenge deficit-based thinking in teaching and learning across all levels of education for 50 professionals across campus. Dr. Hernandez taught staff how to make class and program content relevant to at-risk students and create buy-in from the students by understanding and leveraging student "terministic screens", defined as "the way in which individuals view the world-based on their group memberships and ascribed or achieved status as individuals within society" (Hernandez, 2015, p. 17). He taught how to empower students to claim ownership over their own success. Participants evaluated the workshop using a paper evaluation form.

Interview. Next, Dr. Hernandez was videotaped answering questions on his background and experiences. The goal was to create videos to help students address and remove dispositional barriers to success. The 45-minute interview produced 13 short, powerful clips. Questions were designed to motivate and inspire students who would watch the videos in the HCoB's Phoenix Program success seminars in future semesters. Dr. Hernandez shared his thoughts, opinions, and experiences on topics such as the definition of success, how to define core values, the power of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and how to find the "unbreakable you."

Main Event. Students who attended the main "Breaking Chains: Gang to Graduation" event were required to swipe their University identification cards which recorded their names and emails. The room was overflowing with approximately 850 students, instructors, staff, and community members! Also in attendance were several of Dr. Hernandez' former students from institutions where he had previously taught. Community members in attendance included probation officers, a sheriff, high school guidance counselors, teachers and principals, students from an alternative high school, a priest, a youth pastor, staff from other colleges, and many others.

Dr. Hernandez delivered a riveting speech, where he shared stories from his youth and examples of how he leveraged education to rise above his circumstances. These stories provided powerful word-pictures to help the audience appreciate and understand how to reframe challenges as obstacles to overcome. After his speech, the audience was invited to text questions to Dr. Hernandez using the Google Voice text messaging service. Questions were varied and prompted Dr. Hernandez to address issues of social justice, diversity and inclusion, and student success. Examples of questions included, "How were you able to rise above your circumstances to change your life," "What can I do to be successful," "What was it like growing up in gang culture"?

At the end of the main event, a line formed consisting of audience members seeking to take photos with Dr. Hernandez and to connect with him personally. He gladly shared his contact information to several people, including a doctorate student who requested to meet with him regarding her dissertation. He hugged one of his former students from Detroit and whispered, "See, I told you you would make it, man. This is only the beginning for you. I am so proud of you!" He also signed a copy of his book with a personal message for a CAMP student who had been dismissed from the University and readmitted through the Phoenix Program. This student later revealed that Dr. Hernandez' personalized message was so motivating for him that he could not put the book down and that he kept reading his words over and over. The student also reported that Dr. Hernandez texted him later that week to offer to meet with him later in the semester to check on his progress. These heart-felt gestures were evidence of the incredible impact a guest speaker can have on an audience. The ripple effect of his words and actions was immense.

Student Leadership Workshop. The final event of the day was a leadership workshop for 18 student leaders of registered student organizations. Dr. Hernandez invited the leaders to share their perspectives on student success topics based on their personal experiences and he prompted

them to think about how they could become better campus leaders. He also challenged the group to think about how they will use their education to contribute to society in a positive way after graduation. At the end of the last workshop, Dr. Hernandez sat down and put his head in his hands and just sat for several minutes, exhausted and spent. The day was over.

Don't Settle – Lessons Learned and Building on the Momentum

The Don't Settle Phase involves continually raising the bar of expectations (Bloom et al., 2008). Where do we go from here? How do we build on the momentum of the event? How do we continue to advance progress around student success, diversity and inclusion at all levels at the University? These are the questions that will drive further work. "Don't Settle" is a critical Appreciative Education phase. After the excitement of a successful event, it is easy to quickly move on, with the attitude that the event was great, it is over now, and it is time to move onto the next thing or to "get back to work" and fall back into ruts of everyday job demands.

At the end of the day, a Vice Provost asked Dr. Hernandez, "What should we do next?" to which Dr. Hernandez replied, "That is up to you. That is up to you to figure out. What are you going to do?" This was not said in a dismissive way, but rather as a challenge to the campus to keep raising the bar for student success, social justice, diversity and inclusion and to keep the momentum of the day going.

Lessons Learned. The committee met again after the event to unpack and reflect on the event successes and challenges. As with any event, in retrospect, there are things that we could have been done better. One oversight was not having a photographer to capture the day's events. Also, we should have built in more time for people to interact with Dr. Hernandez after each event, especially after the main event. The short transition times between events limited the opportunities for people to personally interact with Dr. Hernandez. Another thing we wish we had incorporated was a sign-in sheet for community members who attended the main event. This would have provided an important opportunity to follow-up with a "thank you" and to gather feedback from community attendees. Lastly, the day should have been shortened as all who were involved were extremely exhausted.

Evaluation Plan. Faculty and staff completed paper evaluations at the end of the workshops. They were asked to identify two points they learned about working with students at-risk. Examples of rich responses from faculty included:

- Building rapport is critical. Apply content to real world students live in.
- Overcoming "the social construction of difference" as a value/goal.
- Connect. Be a person and not just a professor.
- They are people first. They view the world from their experiences.
- The importance of personal connections. The power of vulnerability.
- In relation to the terministic screen, they don't see us (faculty/administrators) as real people. I thought this was mind blowing.

Responses from staff included:

- I have no idea how students feel. I need to become aware of what I don't know.
- They are not homogeneous.
- They come into the university with a terministic screen that is not from the college world.

- Start off with positives-what are the options before going into "issues."
- Everyone has different realities viewed through personal [terministic] screens.
- Teaching is an art form.

A survey will be developed and emailed to the 700 students who attended the main event. The goal of the survey will be to evaluate the impact of the event and to hear from students about their ideas and experiences around issues of student success, social justice, diversity, and inclusion. These survey results, coupled with information gathered from student focus groups, will inform future decisions. Survey results will be shared with leadership at University to help inform them of ways to make University the best choice for all students considering higher education in Michigan. The logic model in Table 1 illustrates the evaluation plan for the guest speaker event.

Table 1. Guest Speaker Evaluation Plan.

Inputs	Activities	Short-term Outcome	Long-term Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guest speaker event • Event planning including formulation of outcomes, workshops, marketing plan, main event, technology use • Copies of "Pedagogy of Real Talk: Engaging, Teaching and Connecting with Students At-Risk" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty workshop • Staff workshop • Lunch with leadership • Main event: "Breaking Chains: Gang to Graduation" • Student leadership workshop 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop participants gained new tools based on Dr. Hernandez' pedagogy • Leadership conversation and reflection on issues related to shifts in student demographics • Inspired students with increased levels of motivation and resiliency • Enhanced leadership skills for student leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workshop participants are informed and empowered • Increased student retention • Deconstructed silos • Strengthened community partnerships • Systemic institutional change

To build on the momentum of the event, assessment for the "Breaking Chains: Gang to Graduation" main event will focus on students' ability to identify at least two ways they can transcend their own obstacles to success. The long-term goals of the guest speaker event were to create a more welcoming, positive campus climate for all students and to increase student retention rates and the levels of cultural appreciation and resiliency for students. The goals for faculty and staff were to increase awareness about the shift in student demographics and to enhance faculty and staff members' ability to connect and engage with their students. For faculty and staff, evaluation will seek to measure understanding of how to apply new classroom and program methods and tools to better engage with at-risk students.

Discussion

Dr. Hernandez' visit to our campus helped change our campus conversation around topics such as student success, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Framing the experience from an appreciative approach proved instrumental in the success of the event. The six phases of the Appreciative Education framework were intentionally used to focus educational theories, innovative practices, and thoughtful reflections that challenge deficit-based thinking in teaching and learning across all levels of education through the vision, planning, structure, and execution of the event. In fact, Dr. Hernandez mentioned that even though he has delivered keynote addresses and workshops at hundreds of universities, colleges, and conferences all over the world, he shared that our institution has set the standard and model for other institutions to follow in terms of creating and delivering an impactful day of learning. Using an appreciative approach to planning and executing events can be a powerful way to motivate and guide the work on a planning committee. Used as part of an overall strategy, the application of the six phases of the appreciative education framework can help committee leaders optimize the committee experience, as members build friendships through networking and listening to different perspectives, contribute to the organization through service, and enhance their skills and career paths. The outcome is an engaged and motivated team, bonded together around a common vision with shared goals.

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