Mason Leads
Appreciative Inquiry Project 2008-2009

Project Overview
In order to understand and promote Mason's culture of leadership, Mason Leads committee launched an Appreciative Inquiry project in Fall 2008. Appreciative inquiry is a process of organizational development rooted in the organization's strengths and assets. During the fall semester, consultant Barbara Sloan came to campus to provide training and guidance to launch the project. Twenty-nine students, faculty and staff participated in designing the interview protocol and conducted the initial round of interviews. At a second meeting with Barbara Sloan, interviewers examined the results and identified common themes among the stories shared. The team also identified areas for future work including continuing to interview and communicating the leadership stories and learning from the project with others.

To meet the goal of 100 interviews completed by the end of the Spring semester, two additional interview facilitation training sessions were facilitated in Spring 2010 by Stacey Guenther, Heather Hare and Robyn Madar. The first session was held in January for fifteen students enrolled in a winter intercession course on leadership and communication. The second session was held in March for five faculty and staff members. In order to make more efficient the process of to submitting results, interviews were submitted via the web using Adobe Acrobat. In addition, fall interviews were compiled in order to create a shared resource of all interview data.

The team used a wiki to wiki as a central resource for project materials and as a place for interviews to note observations and emerging learning. Interviewers identified participants through their own diverse interests and connections across campus. Interviewees included all levels of campus administration, faculty (including some adjunct/part-time faculty), administrative faculty, staff and students from multiple units. Perhaps because the majority of our interviewers are students, they represent the greatest number of individuals interviewed as well.

Interviews completed and submitted by April 2009 included,
>Students 43
>Faculty 17
>Admin Fac 18
>Staff 9
>Alumni 6
>Unspecified 4
>**Total 97**

Future Considerations
Because we are close to our goal of 100 interviews, it is a good time to reconsider our goals and how we wish to move forward with this project. Ann Baker, Elizabeth Bernard, Stacey Guenther, Heather Hare and Sarah Hershler, contributed ideas and suggestions for moving forward based on their experiences with AI and Mason's project.

1. Continue Interviewing
The interview itself can be considered as a transformative event. When we invite stories of individual leadership successes, we are promoting appreciative reflection that may prompt new consideration and conversations about leadership. The interviews could become an ongoing source of new stories to deepen our understanding of leadership at Mason as well as to share with our campus community. However, though it has not been difficult to develop interest in the project and recruit individuals to participate in interviewer training, it has been challenging to coax trained interviewers to complete and submit interviews. The establishment of the web-based submission could make this easier for interviewers in the future. If we would like to continue interviewing on an ongoing basis, considering how to encourage follow-through on interview completion and submission is needed.

2. Use the Interviews to Launch a Full AI Process
The completed interviews provide a foundation for launching a full AI process. This would involve inviting a team to review the interviews to locate themes and select topics for further inquiry. Using a revised interview protocol based on the topics that emerged as significant in the first round of interviews, continue interviewing for a determined amount of time to gain more depth in understanding and validating the topics. This second round of interviews can then be used to develop strategies to extend and develop leadership based on validated themes, thus rooting future leadership innovations in what have been identified as the foundations for Mason's leadership effectiveness. For greatest reach and impact, this set of interviews should seek to engage as many members of the campus community as possible.

3. Reporting the Project to our Community
In November, the initial interviewing team noted that communicating this project to the community should be a priority. With almost 100 completed interviews, we have a significant resource of stories and ideas about leadership at Mason to review, and it is an appropriate time to revisit how we want to use and share this data. Several individuals volunteered at this time to work collaboratively on communicating the project, but perhaps due to competing work priorities, this team has not been able to meet to move forward.

There are a number of areas worth exploring in developing a directions report,
• Select the leadership stories that best exemplify great leadership at Mason
• Examine the data and stories to identify the themes that are illustrative of excellent leadership at Mason
• Share what we have learned about the AI process/appreciative interviews

Questions to consider:
• Who is our audience? What is our goal?
• What aspects of this work do we want to showcase?

Next Steps
In order to move forward, convening a subgroup of the steering committee to consider this report and possible directions is needed. The appreciative inquiry process, at its root, is one about positive change. Perhaps, as a committee, we could ask ourselves,

based on our experiences and learning from this project, what positive change could we affect?

From the AI Commons: "AI deliberately, in everything it does, seeks to work from accounts of this 'positive change core'—and it assumes that every living system has many untapped and rich and inspiring accounts of the positive. Link the energy of this core directly to any change agenda and changes never thought possible are suddenly and democratically mobilized."

After weighing options, if we decide to end the process at this point, we raised awareness surrounding leadership in an appreciative format, which in itself is powerful outcome.