

THE NISOD PAPERS



An occasional publication dedicated to topics of interest to community and technical college educators.

“AIR”—Not Just for Breathing

I have had many roles supporting students and their success. I have served as a grant mansteager, student services administrator, counselor, professor, and textbook author. In every role, I have found limitations to fully breaking down barriers to student success—no one position was able to resolve all of the obstacles faced by students. Here, I discuss an incredibly productive and useful strategy for effective problem resolution that I call *AIR* (Assess, Identify, Reason), because it is as essential to student success as air is to breathing and living! Following the discussion, I present two examples in which *AIR* was effective in eliminating a barrier impeding student success.

AIR Necessitates Collaboration

AIR is not a procedural response to a “new” issue—we all have struggled in our attempts to resolve barriers to student success. However, *AIR* is a fine-tuned strategy, developed over time and in response to challenges that were difficult to manage within the context of my personal roles and responsibilities.

I define a barrier as a problem over which a student has no control or responsibility and that threatens the ability to persist successfully in college courses and programs. There are two types of barriers: those that affect only the individual (personal barriers) and those that are built into the institutional processes and systems (systemic barriers).

It is imperative to resolve and eliminate barriers to student success as they emerge. This requires action on the part of the “advocate,” or the person who assumes responsibility for facilitating the elimination of the barrier. However, developing the role of advocate can be challenging because it requires a different perspective of our role, abilities, and available resources.

Becoming an advocate is often most difficult because people tend to orbit within their particular job classification. However, once you assume the role of advocate, moving beyond these comfort zones is essential. When confronted with issues for which there are no internal resources or dollars available, implementing *AIR* can be very helpful in executing an effective barrier-resolution strategy.

Procedural Breakdown of the AIR Strategy

Assess

This step assesses the situation by identifying the barrier, a probable resolution, and potential strategies to achieve that resolution. Ask yourself:

1. What is the barrier? Is it a “personal issue”—related to an individual student—or is it a “systemic issue”—one that affects many students?
2. What are desired and possible resolutions to the barrier? (Remember there is a strong imperative to eventually address a personal barrier systemically if it potentially affects many current or future students.)
3. What are possible strategies that can potentially resolve the barrier?

Identify

This step identifies who or what, specifically, can help remove the barrier. This can require a bit of research and internal college knowledge. You may want to look at an organizational chart and talk to others to determine individuals with the authority or resources to resolve the issue. Ask yourself:

1. Who has the ability to resolve the barrier?
2. If no one in my college is able to resolve the issue, who or what is available outside of the college?
3. Is there anyone within the college who is able to connect with outside resources for possible barrier resolution?
4. If not, am I willing and able to make the connection to external resources within the scope of my role, commitment to student success, and responsibilities at the college?

Reason

Once you identify the individual who can effect change or eliminate the barrier, it’s important to determine the common goal or mission. This is the reason for involvement in addressing the barrier. Ask yourself:

1. What’s the “hook”? How do I catch the attention of those who can help resolve this barrier? Why would this department or individual want to help my student(s) or change the system to eliminate the barrier?
2. How does this problem resolution fit into their personal, departmental, or organizational mission?

Once you have answered these critical questions, you are ready to have a meeting with the identified person who or organization that can resolve the barrier. During the meeting, let the person or persons know how much you value the work they do, the level of appreciation you have for the work they do, and how their work aligns with your mission as an advocate for your student. Then, describe the challenges your student is facing and its impact on his or her ability to be successful, with possible strategies to address barrier resolution that are within this person or organization's purview. You should also solicit other ideas that can effectively eliminate the barrier during the meeting.

AIR has proven to have very satisfactory results for on-campus as well as off-campus problems that created barriers to student success. Below are two situations in which I used the *AIR* strategy to eradicate a barrier to student success, one personal barrier and one systemic barrier.

Case Study 1: Advocating to Resolve a Personal Barrier

In my role as a counselor, a student in obvious distress came to see me. She tearfully explained that her father had very strict, unreasonable rules and had locked her out of the home because she returned home late and had not cooked dinner for him. Her stepmother (divorced from her father) and grandmother had agreed to let her live with them in the meantime; however, she was still unable to access her clothes, books, and belongings in her father's home. She was an exceptional student who had overcome many obstacles to be in the college and was afraid that she had gone through everything for naught if she couldn't access her clothes, books and belongings. Her father was also a sheriff's deputy, which further complicated the issue.

Assess

What is the barrier?

I asked the student to explain her situation to me. I learned that this student's father wanted her to carry a full load of college classes, cook his meals, wash his clothes, and clean their home while maintaining Honor Roll status. He also did not want her to develop friendships with other students. She was afraid of him and his influence as a deputy sheriff. She was currently staying with her stepmother (divorced from her father) and grandmother with whom she got along well. They wanted her to stay with them until she completed her degree and transferred to the university of her choice.

What are desired and possible resolutions to the barrier?

The most probable resolution to this personal barrier was to ensure her safety as she retrieved her belongings.

Identify

Who has the ability to effectively resolve the barrier?

The Dean of Student Services has often voiced his support for students and his willingness to intervene on behalf of students who could benefit from his assistance. I left the student in my office, went directly to his office, and requested to see him immediately. He was available and willing to see me.

Reason

What's the "hook"?

I explained the student's situation to the dean and reminded him of our commitment to our students. He immediately returned to my office, spoke with the student, and got more details. He asked her to remain in my office while he made some phone calls.

Resolution and Results

The dean contacted the Sheriff's Department, informed them of the situation, and requested assistance for this student. Under the supervision of two officers, she was able to retrieve her books, clothes, and belongings from her father's home without incident and move in with her stepmother. She graduated with honors and several universities offered her full scholarships. Ultimately, she successfully transferred to an Ivy League university.

Case Study 2: Advocating to Resolve a Systemic Barrier

In my role as professor and student success textbook author, the Director of our college's TRIO program approached me to discuss a problem related to incoming students in the Summer Bridge Program. The immediate issue was assisting TRIO-eligible students make a successful transition into the college environment. (TRIO eligibility includes being a first-generation college student, at an economic disadvantage, and/or at an academic disadvantage.)

Assess

What is the barrier?

Students in the Summer Bridge Program take math- and English-intensive developmental courses based on placement test results. Many students in the Summer Bridge Program struggled with their college classes due to a lack of information about college expectations. There was no process for assisting these students become successfully acclimated to college life.

What are desired and possible resolutions to the barrier?

The most probable resolution was to include a Student Success Seminar in the Summer Bridge Program to increase students' understanding of the

college environment.

Secondary Barrier

There were insufficient dollars in the program's grant to fund an instructor for the Seminar at the faculty rate.

Identify

Who has the ability to effectively resolve the barrier?

The director of the Summer Bridge Program was aware of the student success textbook I authored and the standardized pre- and post-test it included that formed the framework for the textbook.

Reason

What's the "hook"?

Knowing that I was the author of a potential text for the course and a strong student success advocate, the program director set up a meeting with me to discuss the proposed Seminar.

Resolution and Results

I agreed to teach the Seminar for two hours a day, four days a week for six weeks at the non-instructional rate. Textbooks were purchased for each student through the Summer Bridge Program's grant. Student test scores indicating adequate preparation for college strongly increased by the end of the Seminar, and several students reported their families' enthusiasm in seeing such tangible improvement in their scores.

As you can see, *AIR* is a simple and very effective strategy for resolving barriers to student success. When educational leaders are contacted by students struggling with an issue they can help to resolve, we realize our agency for helping to solve students' problems. Students benefit when we develop a new perspective of our "resources" and draw upon them as an advocate to eliminate barriers to success. It is incredibly satisfying to help students in ways we may not typically be able to in our day-to-day roles and routines—especially when we understand that most barriers to success are beyond students' control—and using the *AIR* strategy can help us do just that.

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