



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

## THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT STORIES

I will never forget the first time I shared my community college success story. The president of the college—where I had graduated from and was currently working—asked me to share my success story at the college’s annual fundraising gala. I was terrified. But how could I say no? This was the college whose faculty and staff helped me win the \$110,000 Jack Kent Cooke scholarship. How could I not do whatever I could to encourage more people to give to such a college? So I said yes and prepared a short five-minute speech, but what happened next would change my life forever.

A few weeks later, I waited anxiously at the fancy banquet table until my name was called. I walked up to the large stage and began my speech. I talked about my grandma who had moved from Puerto Rico to New York to make my opportunities possible. I talked about her life as a maid, my grandpa’s life as a janitor, and my two brothers’ struggles with paralysis and epilepsy. I talked about the moment I almost lost hope in the advising office on my first day of community college because I was overwhelmed with thoughts that perhaps my life was going nowhere. And then I talked about the people in that community college who changed my life—the advisors, the administrators, the professors, and the donors.

As I spoke, walking in late was the man who had donated one million dollars to create the Art and Phyllis Grindle Honors Institute in which I was involved during my time at Seminole State College. His gleaming white hair and signature thick black-rimmed glasses caught me off guard. In that moment, I realized how deeply his gift and generosity had impacted the story I was sharing. I went off script and explained to the audience why I was suddenly crying. I thanked Art Grindle, and I explained to the audience how community colleges actually do change lives, real lives, like mine.

I was astounded by the response to the speech. It felt like every person in the audience had come up to me expressing how my speech had caused them to cry, as well. Some told me their stories. That night, I learned how powerful stories can be.

As I went on to graduate with my M.Ed and spend my early career working in education, I was surprised at how few student stories I heard. Instead, the conversation always seemed to be about data. And I get it. Good data are *vital*. But I think stories matter too. Stories illustrate a vision that everyone—from presidents to maintenance workers—can wrap their heads and hearts around. Stories give hope to students on the brink and can create the vision needed to motivate professionals to act on what the data are telling them needs to change.

I have since spoken to community colleges all around the country, and I can’t help but notice that the colleges that hire me tend to have a strong sense of mission and vision and a deep understanding of students and their struggles. In short, they believe in stories too. And my story is just one story. It’s certainly not the most dramatic, or the most amazing. It’s just mine, and I tell it with honesty and vulnerability. But if you work at a community college, those student stories are all around you. Your institution is creating stories that can help you achieve your college’s mission and goals. The key is knowing how to leverage them.

I’m not an administrator, faculty member, or college president. I can’t even begin to pretend I know how hard your job is or what you do every single day. I’m not going to pretend I know how to tell you how to do your job. I just want to say thank you for doing that job. And as I thank you, I want to share with you a few ideas that I hope you can use to think about how to tell your college’s story through your students:

- **Develop a student ambassador program** where sophomores at your college are given stipends or full scholarships to represent the college at various functions on campus and in the community. Students could apply for the program and go through an interview process and public speaking trial, as well as be trained in public speaking.
- **Feature student stories in an orientation video.** Students desperately need to see that “people like me” can succeed. While community colleges can’t always afford in-depth orientation programs (nor can all community college students’ schedules afford them), video offers a great way to present a cohesive message. Interview current students

---

and alumni. Have them share their story, what the college did for them, and provide some advice for incoming students. Make that video a mandatory part of a virtual or in-person orientation.

- **Share student stories in a live orientation.** If your college does have a live orientation, coach students to share their stories with other students. Encourage vulnerability.
- **Be creative.** I work with Tallahassee Community College to host their **local college success television show**, in which incredible student stories are featured. Think outside the box.
- **Share student stories in the building.** I was at Valencia College a few months ago and noticed they had student quotes painted inside the building. I felt inspired and amazed at the impact that must have on students. Find ways to share student stories in your hallways or classrooms. Celebrate students and think of ways to inspire them as they struggle through the day-to-day challenges of college. I think inspiration is one of the most overlooked aspects of college success.
- **Hold alumni networking events.** Reach out to your alumni and invite them to come back to share their career insight with current students, as well as their stories of success. The most successful event I witnessed when I worked at Seminole State College was one in which recent alumni came back to share their stories and transfer experiences. The students who attended were rapt and taking avid notes. (Free pizza helps too!)
- **Encourage students to share their stories in class.** In my college success class, we had an assignment where we had to write our top 10 life moments on a timeline—the ones up to that point that had the biggest impact on who we were—and then present it to the class. It was so encouraging to hear other students' stories and it was an important reminder that we were not alone.
- **Bring students to recruiting events.** When I worked in admissions and was charged with giving presentations to high school seniors who weren't sure if they were going to attend college, my first instinct was to bring some current students along. I recruited student leaders from SGA and let them lead the high school students in some fun icebreakers and then share their college experiences. The high school students' eyes lit up when they saw these near-peers explaining how accessible college could be. From that point forward they were much more excited about filling out their FAFSA and college application.

There is nothing I love more than visiting a new community college campus and seeing what creative initiatives are happening. Not only can community

colleges and their students benefit from the stories on your campus, but the nation needs to hear these stories too. Community colleges are the American Dream, and the best people to illustrate that hope are sitting in your classrooms every single day.

**Isa Adney**, *Author, Community College Success, and Founder, #SoCanU Project.*

Isa is the featured speaker at the Excellence Awards Dinner and Celebration, held during **NISOD's 2014 conference**. She is a graduate of Seminole State College in Florida and has her M.Ed. from the University of Illinois. She was recently named one of *GOOD Magazine's* Top 100 People Moving the World Forward. You can learn more about Isa at [isaadney.com/about](http://isaadney.com/about). Email: [isa@isaadney.com](mailto:isa@isaadney.com)