NACUBO Student Success Training for Campus Employees - Module 1 Activity

This Ladder of Inference exercise can help us understand how biases can lead people to make assumptions about others.

This activity can be done by an individual, or in a group setting as part of a workshop or training. What follows is a facilitator’s roadmap to lead this exercise with a group. If you are completing this activity as in individual, you can follow the instructions and complete this exercise independently.

Logistics:

- Attendees break into groups of 3 or 4.
- Each group is given a sheet of paper (ideally large flip-chart paper)
- This sample drawing (below) should be pre-drawn on flipchart papers, or posted as a display for each group to draw.

![Observations Assumptions Ladder of Inference](image)

- Each attendee is given a marker or crayon.

Duration: Ideally, no less than 45 minutes
  - 10 minutes for introduction
  - 20 minutes for break-out group activity
  - 10 minutes for report-back after break-out
  - 5 minutes for facilitator wrap-up & call to action.

Facilitator’s Guideline:

- After watching the Feature Video in Module 1, this activity is used to introduce attendees to the “Ladder of Inference”, a model that helps us to ‘unpack’ assumptions we may bring to our work with students.
- Facilitator Explains: The Ladder of Inference; a mental ladder we sometimes climb in our mind. It can lead us to make assumptions based on our biases; on previous experiences, beliefs, and data points that we hold to be true.
- Provide a quick review of the definition of “inference”.
  - Something that is inferred, a conclusion or opinion that is formed
  - NOTE: Facilitator can encourage attendees to look up the definition on their mobile devices. This can be especially helpful if native speakers of different languages are present at the training.
- Show this brief video (less than 4-minute) video that introduces the Ladder of Inference:
- Let attendees know how much time they will have in their small group to complete this activity (determined by facilitator)
- Facilitator provides instructions for the activity after watching the video linked above:
  - We want you to use the flip chart to document just two aspects of the Ladder of Inference.
  - On the left, write down observed behaviors that you see students sometimes demonstrate, that can impact their success and outcomes, related to their interactions with your department.
  - On the right, document some of the assumptions (potentially accurate or potentially inaccurate) that staff may make about students, based on the behaviors observed.
  - You will have ____ minutes (ideally 20…more or less as your schedule allows).
  - As you complete the activity with your small group, we'll ask you to consider and share what biases were potentially at work that led to the assumptions that people make about observed student behaviors.
- Here are a couple examples (share examples below verbally or in writing)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student appears disengaged and non-communicative</td>
<td>Student was out partying late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student takes a phone call in the middle of a</td>
<td>Student works a night shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meeting with financial aid / advisor / registrar</td>
<td>Student had to go home for family emergency and was up all night before</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and begins speaking in a foreign language</td>
<td>returning to campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student is rude and is prioritizing talking to others instead of focus on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>this conversation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student is needed urgently to support a family member with a medical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>emergency who does not speak English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note to facilitator: Examples can be customized to better align with your school’s unique challenges.

- Now work together in your groups:
  - Write down observations or behaviors that you’ve experienced working with students, and then generate assumptions that could be made about the underlying reasons why the behaviors observed might have occurred.
Report Out:

- Provide each group (or a sample of groups depending on number of attendees) a few minutes to report out.
- Ask participants to consider what biases, or impressions of students impacted the 'climb up the ladder' from observation to assumption.
- Examples from the flip chart can be shared and analyzed by attendees collectively to keep conversation flowing.
- Encourage attendees to share biases that lead to both a more positive, or more negative assumptions.
- If we go back to the example we provided at the beginning, the biases or beliefs held may include:
  - Students tend to party a lot
  - Students often must work a lot to cover expenses
  - Students have family obligations that must be balanced against schoolwork
- Note to facilitator: Biases can be documented on flip chart paper or just discussed.

Wrap-Up & Call to Action:

- Ask attendees to consider:
  - What can we be doing as a team to make sure that our biases lead to more positive assumptions that support student success?
  - When we encounter biases that are potentially detrimental to student success, how could we shift or alter those biases?
- Commit to future conversation & follow-up
  - Facilitators should block time on future staff agendas to discuss how future trainings and on-boarding for new staff could better integrate awareness & management of bias to improve student outcomes.