An Appreciative Approach to Building a Sense of Belonging Among First-Year Students

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Abstract

A sense of belonging is a key contributing factor to student retention and engagement. Sense of belonging is defined as, "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group and others on campus" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 3). Sense of belonging is a mid-level need that needs to be satisfied before students can begin to learn and thrive on campus. At Nova Southeastern University, program administrators for the Razor's Edge Shark Teach program work to intentionally build a sense of belonging among students beginning during recruitment. By utilizing the Appreciative Advising framework, administrators strive to create a community that leads to higher GPAs, increased graduation rates, and better retention.

Keywords

Appreciative Advising, sense of belonging, retention, undergraduate

Retention rates are an important criterion for institutional rankings (U.S. News & World Report, n.d.). Research shows that students' development and continued maintenance of a strong sense of belonging is one of the primary factors that leads to retention (Hoffman et al., 2002; Strayhorn, 2012). Therefore, higher education institutions spend millions of dollars annually to create programming, resources, and a campus culture that will foster a strong sense of belonging. When considering how institutions can best enhance students' sense of belonging, the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework seems like a natural choice. Inspired by the organizational development theory of Appreciative Inquiry and the field of Positive Psychology, Appreciative Advising is a strengths-based approach to building relationships with students (Bloom et al., 2008). Through a series of six phases, the application of Appreciative Advising by program leadership aims to actively engage and support students by making students feel welcome (Disarm), inquiring about their stories through asking open-ended questions (Discover), learning about their aspirations for the future (Dream), co-creating a plan for achieving their dreams (Design), empowering them to complete the plan (Deliver), and encouraging them to continue to grow and develop (Don't Settle; Bloom et al., 2008).

With its heavy emphasis on building genuine and trust-filled relationships by asking generative, open-ended questions and actively listening to students' answers (Bloom et al., 2008), the Appreciative Advising framework can be used to help students successfully transition into higher education institutions from the moment a relationship is established. The Appreciative Advising framework has undergirded the development of Razor's Edge Shark Teach program, a premier scholarship program for future educators, at Nova Southeastern University (NSU). By implementing Appreciative Advising strategies at the beginning of a student's enrollment process during interviews for the program, Razor's Edge

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Shark Teach administrators utilize the framework to build a sense of belonging among participants, with the goal of increasing student retention and engagement. The purpose of this article is to define and explain the importance of a sense of belonging among first-year university students, provide background on the history and mission of the Razor's Edge Scholars programs at NSU, and detail how the administration utilizes the Appreciative Advising framework to build a sense of belonging among the Razor's Edge Shark Teach Scholars cohort.

Sense of Belonging

Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging as, "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group and others on campus" (p. 3). Strayhorn's definition focused on students' perceived experiences and feelings they have toward campus and their peers. This focus reinforces the idea that students must be receptive to the support available and see value in the connections made for them to be effective (Strayhorn, 2012). Simply having events on campus is not enough. Simply attending events is not enough. Engagement does not equate to belonging. Administrators must make intentional efforts to ensure students experience meaningful connections on campus and are driven to action by them.

Strayhorn (2012) identified seven core elements of sense of belonging. He found that sense of belonging:

- "is a basic human need" (p. 18);
- "is a fundamental motive, sufficient to drive human behavior" (p. 19);
- "can have heightened importance in some context, sat certain times, and among certain populations" (p. 20);
- "is relating to and a consequence of mattering" (p. 21);
- "intersects with, and is affected by, social identities" (p. 22);
- "engenders other positive outcomes" (p. 22); and
- "must be satisfied on a continual basis and likely changes as circumstances, conditions, and contexts change" (p. 23).

These elements support the idea that a sense of belonging is reciprocal. Students must not only see themselves as members of the community, but also they must feel that other members of the community have accepted them. This acceptance creates a feeling of being at home (Strayhorn, 2012). Once students feel integrated into the campus culture, they are more likely to be retained.

Razor's Edge Shark Teach

Nova Southeastern University (NSU) is a medium-sized, private institution with approximately 7,000 undergraduate students located in Ft. Lauderdale, FL and is known for innovation in education and co-curricular programs that offer student's hands-on experiences both inside and outside the classroom (NSU, 2022). One of the most popular co-curricular programs offered to undergraduate students is Razor's Edge, a leadership development program that helps students explore their passions and interests both inside and outside the classroom. Razor's Edge is broken into five specialized branches to which students can apply. Each branch focuses on a different content area that students are interested in, offering a unique experience to their educational journey:

- Razor's Edge Leadership - general leadership studies

- Razor's Edge Global - multicultural and international relations

- Razor's Edge Research - qualitative and quantitative research studies across the disciplines

- Razor's Edge Shark Talent - studies in performing and visual arts

- Razor's Edge Shark Teach - education and learning theory focused

Each Razor's Edge program is organized using a cohort model. Twenty undergraduate students are admitted to each of the five Razor's Edge programs per academic year. Participating students live on campus all four years and are assigned to specific floors to create learning communities. In addition to completing courses required for each student's academic major, students also participate in courses designed to develop leadership skills through the lens of their Razor's Edge area of specialization. Students also participate in various roles and responsibilities where they are charged with both making a positive impact on the NSU community and encouraging their fellow students to participate in the arts, travel overseas for a study abroad program, and/or participate in learning support events.

The Razor's Edge programs were created with a goal of improving participants' retention rates, grade point averages, and affinity to the institution. Specifically, administrators of the Razor's Edge Shark Teach program, a leadership development scholarship program, have intentionally worked to develop and implement programming efforts to increase students' sense of belonging. Razor's Edge Shark Teach program was established in 2016 and is the youngest of the five Razor's Edge programs. Since the inception of the Shark Teach program, enrollment in undergraduate education majors has increased by 350% (NSU, 2022). The overall retention rate for Shark Teach program participants is 81% and the average GPA of program participants is 3.55 on a 4.0 scale (Stein, 2022). In addition, after graduation, nine participants continue at NSU as graduate students or full-time employees (Stein, 2022).

Appreciative Advising and A Sense of Belonging

Created by Bloom et al. (2008), Appreciative Advising is a framework designed as a strengths-based approach to educational experiences. Inspired by Appreciative Inquiry (Hammond, 2013), Appreciative Advising is "the intentional collaborative practice of asking generative, open-minded questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Appreciative Advising, n.d.). Originally conceived as a framework for advisors to enhance their interactions with their students, the use of the Appreciative Advising framework has expanded to all functional areas of higher education, including student affairs offices, classroom instruction, and other administrative offices (J. Bloom, personal communication, August 29, 2022). The framework consists of six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle (Bloom et al., 2008). Participants' active roles in all phases of the framework lead to buy-in, connection, and a sense of pride for the project. The following subsections will highlight how the Razor's Edge Shark Teach administration has adapted the six phases of the Appreciative Advising framework to build and maintain a strong sense of belonging among Shark Teach participants.

Disarm

The Disarm phase is the first of six phases in Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008). Designed to break the ice with participants and begin to build trust, the Disarm phase is built into the very beginning of the Razor's Edge program during the Shark Preview weekends when all Razor's Edge candidates are required to attend an in-person interview

weekend. During this three-day program, students meet other applicants from a variety of programs, participate in interviews and group process activities to gauge their fit for the program, and connect with current students to learn more about NSU.

All Shark Teach candidates are welcomed to campus two days before their arrival by a designated "Shark Pal." The pal is a current student in the program tasked with providing support and connection to applicants during their interview weekend. They communicate via text message and meet at least once in-person during the weekend. Each applicant and Shark Pal take selfies together and submit them for use in the closing ceremony at the end of the weekend. Once the applicant leaves, the pal checks in one final time, thanking the applicant for attending the Shark Preview Weekend and wishing them luck. Often this mentoring relationship continues throughout the summer via exchanges on social media apps like Instagram, TikTok, or Snapchat.

Two weeks after an applicant participates in a Shark Preview weekend, they are told their status in the Shark Teach program. Students receive one of three results: Offered, Not Offered, or Alternate. Decisions are provided via email and snail mail directly from Undergraduate Admissions. However, students admitted into the Shark Teach Program also receive a phone call from the Shark Teach program director to congratulate and welcome them and to talk them through the next steps. Admitted candidates appreciate the personalized outreach from the Shark Teach program director, which seems to deepen the connection between candidates and NSU, Shark Teach, and the Shark Teach administration. Participants report through informal communication that the phone call from the director makes them feel important. Participants state the individual communication is seen as proof of commitment from leadership to the students on both a personal and an individual level.

Being active on social media is another important way that the Shark Teach program disarms students. Shark Teach hosts student-run accounts on Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok. By allowing current Shark Teach students to operate these social media accounts, not only do the postings reflect current students' values and goals, but the candidates are also able to gain valuable and accurate insights into what life as a member of the Shark Teach program entails. Candidates can connect with current students and visualize themselves on campus as they monitor pictures and videos from the Shark Teach social media accounts throughout the rest of the academic year.

Discover and Dream

The Discover phase of Appreciative Advising entails the use of open-ended questions and reflection prompts about values and strengths to allow participants to learn about themselves and each other (Bloom et al., 2008). During the Dream phase, participants reflect on their career and personal aspirations for the future. The Shark Teach program intentionally infuses both the Discover and Dream phases from recruitment season (January – April) through the move-in week in August. Students admitted to the Shark Teach program after the Shark Preview Weekend are given a deadline of May 1 to confirm their participation in the program and incoming cohorts are typically finalized by mid-May. By mid-March, there are typically three to four students who confirm their participation in the program (Stein, 2022). It is at this time that a cohort specific GroupMe chat is created. Chats are created by two to three current students and are moderated by the administration to begin to engage confirmed students early and to begin setting expectations about what the Shark Teach community will become. As each new student joins the chat through May 1st, the other incoming first-year students join the current students in welcoming students aboard. Student leaders encourage each new student to introduce themselves, including their name, hometown, major, engagements on campus, other hobbies and interests, and a photo. Each week, additional

questions are posed by student leaders to the chat using creative and colorful infographics. Examples of Discover and Dream questions posed include:

- Where is the coolest place you've visited? Share a picture of that trip.

- Share a picture of you in your hometown.

- Tell us about your pet(s) and/or plants and share photos.

- If you could only eat one food for the rest of your life, what would it be and why?

- What is something you will not travel without?

- Who is your favorite musical artist and why?

- Tell us your favorite candy and try to convince us why it is the best.

- What are you most nervous about starting college?

- Describe your favorite TV show or movie in a few sentences and see if we can guess what it is.

- What are your career goals?

In addition to the ongoing conversations via GroupMe, the program also hosts Accepted Student Zoom chats that last 60-90 minutes throughout the summer before enrollment in the fall. These Zoom chats are hosted in the evening on a weekday and current students from each cohort are also invited to participate. The format for the Zoom meetings includes participant introductions, a brief presentation about important dates and events over the summer and at the start of the year, advice shared by current students, and the rest of the time is spent answering questions from the incoming students.

Design

Over the summer, students learn about their own strengths and aspirations, as well as the strengths and aspirations of their classmates, so that when they arrive on campus in August, they are ready to create a plan for accomplishing their goals. During the Design phase, staff and students work together to develop a plan for empowering students to accomplish their hopes and dreams for the future (Bloom et al., 2008). Before fall classes begin, Shark Teach students move into their residence hall to participate in the mandatory Retreat Week.

The first Retreat Week event is an all-day, all-cohort meeting that focuses on building connections and community. Examples of activities on the first day include a reflection activity called "Leave It in Last Year" during which students journal about habits that no longer serve them and ceremonially throw the habits in the trash to symbolize moving forward; a PowerPoint Party, during which students present a two-to-three-minute presentation about themselves; and a Scavenger Hunt around campus. Students also learn about the Leadership Council, which is a group of students involved in long-term planning and goal setting for the program. First-year students are given the chance to volunteer to serve on the committee of their choice. Finally, Big-Little matches are revealed, that is, first-year students are paired with a second-year student mentor. The second day of Retreat Week is focused on first-year students learning about specific programmatic expectations and requirements. They participate in discussions and activities to design a plan for how they can make a positive impact on the Shark Teach program as well as how they can achieve their own academic and personal goals.

Deliver and Don't Settle

The final two phases of the Appreciative Advising framework are Deliver and Don't Settle. Both action-oriented phases, the Deliver phase involves the students putting into action the plan created during the Design phase while the Don't Settle phase is about helping students continue to raise their own internal bar of expectations for themselves (Bloom et al., 2008). Students inevitably run into roadblocks during their first year in the program and they are encouraged to reach out to the program administration and/or to their second-year mentor when they encounter challenges. There are also activities to continue to build community and a sense of belonging among the first-year Shark Teach members. One of the most important ways of enhancing the first-year cohort's sense of belonging is the opportunity to name their cohort after a notable educator who inspires them. Students brainstorm names together and then vote on their group name. Their selection represents the values and ideals of the individual cohort and serves as an inspiration to continue to strive to become the best educators they can become.

Another way that sense of belonging is reinforced throughout the academic year is through workgroups that include members of each cohort who are charged with delivering a joint 45- to 60-minute presentation on a professional development topic that is relevant for future educators. The group presentation requires students to work together to create informative and interactive presentations for their peers.

Conclusion

The Razor's Edge Shark Teach program has intentionally employed the Appreciative Advising framework to help successfully transition new students into the program and enhance cohort members' sense of belonging. The program allows students to learn and develop their own leadership skills while earning a scholarship. NSU benefits from the recruitment of enthusiastic and driven students who are excited to make an impact on the community and become talented educators. Because these students have the opportunity to feel that they truly belong on campus, they often benefit from higher grade point averages, improved graduation rates, and increased retention rates (Stein, 2022). The adoption of the Appreciative Advising framework has given program leadership the tools needed to enhance students' sense of belonging through intentional community building within the Razor's Edge Shark Teach program.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

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