

Appreciative Advising as a Theory-to-Practice Framework for Recruiting and Retaining College Student-Athletes

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Abstract

This article showcases how the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework can be used to help recruit and retain prospective college student-athletes. With the world of college athletics continuously expanding to new opportunities for players, colleges and universities are tasked with creating new ways to recruit and retain student athletes in their systems. Appreciative Advising is a theory-to-practice approach used widely by academic advisors that has enhanced student success outcomes and can easily be adapted by college coaching staff to enhance their recruiting efforts.

Keywords

Student-athletes, Appreciative Advising, recruitment

Recruiting college athletes has become an expensive proposition for higher education institutions. For example, when Arch Manning, a highly touted high school quarterback, visited the University of Texas for his three-day official recruiting visit, the institution spent over \$280,000 entertaining him and other top prospects, including paying for lobster, TopGolf, and world-class luxury hotel rooms (Khan, Jr., 2022). According to an analysis of the 2019 recruiting season, the average spent on recruiting for football by Power 5 Conference members exceeded \$100,000, with the University of Georgia spending \$3.7 million just that year alone (Crawford, 2021). However, not all higher education institutions and college sports have unlimited recruiting budgets. Most college coaches, especially in non-revenue sports like track & field, softball, and golf, rely on recruiting student-athletes by building trust-filled relationships with prospects and their families. The purpose of this article is to introduce college coaches to the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework and how to utilize it to build trust-filled relationship and increase the retention of student-athletes.

Appreciative Advising Overview

Appreciative Advising is a theory-to-practice framework introduced by Bloom and Martin (2002) to help academic advisors enhance the effectiveness of their interactions with their students by infusing principles of the organizational development theory of Appreciative Inquiry. The Appreciative Advising framework is designed to help students optimize their educational experiences, discover their full potential, and achieve their goals (Bloom et al., 2008). Bloom et al. (2008) introduced the six phases of Appreciative Advising: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. The remainder of this article will lay out how college coaches can adapt the phases of Appreciative Advising to undergird their recruiting efforts.

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Disarm

The Disarm phase is focused on creating a positive first impression with prospective student-athletes (Bloom et al., 2008). Whether it be a personalized sign the student-athlete sees as they drive onto campus, someone waiting to hold the door for them, or simply a warm greeting from a coach, the Disarm phase sets the tone for the remainder of each relationship. Gaining the trust of prospective student-athletes and their parents is key in the recruitment process because, like students, parents are invested in their student's decision about college and do not want to send their child to a school with which they themselves are not comfortable. Having a systematic formula for welcoming prospective student-athletes to campus and into facilities can go a long way in securing commitments from student-athletes.

One of the best ways to host prospective student-athletes is to personalize their visit. For example, by inquiring with prospective student-athletes about their favorite food items and then serving their favorite foods at meals conveys to prospective student-athletes that one listens to them and cares enough to meet their needs. In addition, creating fuel stations featuring their favorite athletic recovery drinks and protein bars and providing them with personalized jerseys with their name imprinted helps prospective student-athletes visualize what it would be like to attend that institution. Matching interests and creating commonalities is a good way to disarm a recruit.

Given the importance of first impressions, upon the family's arrival on the campus, make sure to have a member of the coaching staff or team present to open the front door and immediately introduce themselves as they escort the student and family to the appropriate area. Ideally, the prospective student-athletes and their family will have multiple opportunities to interact with teammates and the coaching staff in both individual and small group settings, which allows them to build relationships within their potential team and fosters a sense of community athletic teams strive to create. It is imperative that the institutional hosts remember how important their role and the role of student-athlete representatives are and that maintaining a clear focus on the student-athlete and guests is vital to creating the warm welcoming environment needed.

Discover

In the Discover phase, the focus is on asking open-ended questions to learn more about the prospective student-athlete (Bloom et al., 2008). This step is an important opportunity for coaches to continue to build rapport with the recruits and to demonstrate their genuine interest in the student-athlete as a student, athlete, and person. Examples of questions that coaches can ask recruits include:

- When are you at your best both on and off the field?
- Tell me about a time that you felt that your athletic talents allowed you to make a positive difference in someone else's life?
- What is the most important lesson you learned from participating in athletics?
- What is one skill or topic that you hope to learn more about while in college?
- Tell me about a time that you were proud of yourself? When was a time that you felt your parents were really proud of you?

All these discover questions will allow coaches to build trust and rapport quickly with prospective student-athletes and get to know them better.

Dream

The Dream phase is centered on ascertaining the student-athletes hopes and dreams for the future both on and off the field (Bloom et al., 2008). By asking open-ended Dream questions, coaches will be better positioned to uncover the prospective student-athlete's aspirations for the future. Examples of Dream phase questions are:

- What are your biggest dreams in terms of your athletic accomplishments while enrolled here at our institution?
- What are your biggest hopes for our academic career here at this institution?
- Fast forward four years to graduation, your classmates are congratulating you on graduating from this institution and asking what you will be doing after graduation - how will you answer that question?
- Pretend it is 20 years from now, what do you hope a typical day will look like for you?

The visualization of their future and what they hope to accomplish as a student-athlete can help motivate them to overcome obstacles that will emerge on their journey. As the coaching staff listens to the answers to these questions, they must start to formulate individualized plans for helping the student-athlete's dreams become a reality.

Design

With the information acquired during the Disarm, Discover, and Dream phases, coaching staff can begin to co-create an individualized plan with each student-athlete to accomplish their hopes and dreams (Bloom et al., 2008). Although during a recruiting visit the plan may be more superficial than the plan that is co-created once a student-athlete commits to the institution, coaches can take the information they have learned during the first three phases to lay out how the institution has the resources available to help them achieve their personal, athletic, academic, and career goals. For example, if a prospective student-athlete has indicated an interest in playing at the professional level, the coach can highlight how the weight training equipment and coaches that are available can help, can provide the list of former student-athletes who played professionally after graduating, and demonstrate how the coaching staff will personally work with the athlete to help them accomplish their goals. Similarly, in terms of academic and career goals, the prospective student-athlete will meet with athletic advisors and be made aware of individualized tutoring, supplemental instruction, study hall time, and other academic support services available through the institution. Based on where an athlete is strength-wise, skill-wise, and overall talent-wise will determine what their individualized plan looks like. Every athlete is different and requires unique training and care. Every plan should be aimed at maximizing their abilities and helping them accomplish their goals. Co-creating this plan, garnering feedback from the athlete, and later refining the plan once the student-athlete enrolls will ensure that each student-athlete's goals are achievable.

Deliver

The Deliver phase is all about the student-athlete following through on the plan that has been co-created in the Design phase (Bloom et al., 2008). Assuming that the student-athlete commits to the institution, the Deliver phase is where both the student-athlete and coaches deliver on the plan that was co-created during the visit. Although not everyone is going to get as much playing time as they would like, coaches must still deliver on their plan to develop each recruit as an athlete, student, and person. Coaches need to meet regularly

with each athlete to track and discuss progress and to learn about their wants and needs. It takes a team of dedicated coaches to successfully graduate a student-athlete on time and coaches need to be well-versed in the resources (i.e., athletic advisors, athletic trainers, faculty, strength coaches) available to student-athletes to be successful both on and off the field. Surrounding student-athletes with tools and support they need is how coaches can deliver on individualized plans created during the Design phase.

Don't Settle

The Don't Settle phase is a reminder to both coaches and student-athletes that they each need to continue to grow and develop (Bloom et al., 2008). For coaches, it is important to set the standards, values, and priorities for their athletic program and to also uphold them. Most importantly, the coaching staff and other members of the athletic department (e.g., trainers, advisors, etc.) must live out the values that have been established because student-athletes are far more likely to follow the example set forth by the staff than by the words they speak. The academic advisor and athletic trainer must take pride in what they do and hold players accountable for their academic responsibilities. The strength coach must push athletes to make appropriate and necessary gains and changes to set them up for peak performance on their playing fields. The coaching staff must hold their athletes accountable when they break team rules or do not meet expectations set forth. The reminders given out and conversations held are what lead our student-athletes to lead themselves and with their own lives.

For student athletes, the goal is to have them learn how to continuously improve their performance on the field and in the classroom. By teaching student-athletes how to ask reflective questions such as:

- What is one thing that I have done well this week? What is one thing that I can do even better next week?
- When am I at my best? How can I place myself in a position to be at my best more often?
- How can I improve my performance academically and/or athletically by 10%? What would I need to do differently?

These questions promote self-reflection and enhance self-motivation to accomplish goals. Teaching student-athletes the value of self-reflection is a gift that will serve them well throughout their lives.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how the six phases of Appreciative Advising can be used to recruit and retain student-athletes. Coaches can intentionally create a warm, welcoming environment during recruiting visits (Disarm), use open-ended questions to get you know recruits' strengths and skills (Discover) as well as their hopes and dreams for the future (Dream), and then co-create a plan (Design) for students to execute (Deliver) that plan while also continuing to strive to become their best selves (Don't Settle). The Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework has the potential to benefit athletic programs by providing coaches with tools and questions to successfully recruit and retain student-athletes.

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