

Six Ways the Appreciative Advising Institute Made Me a Better Graduate Student

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Abstract

The Office of Appreciative Education hosts virtual Appreciative Advising Institutes. During the Institute, participants spend most of their time in small groups facilitated by a Facilitator and a Facilitator Assistant. This article explores my experience as a Facilitator Assistant and how my time at the Appreciative Advising Institute enhanced my skills as a graduate student.

Keywords

Appreciative Advising Institute, Facilitator, Facilitator Assistant

The Live! Virtual Appreciative Advising Institute is an interactive, four-day immersive experience hosted by the Office of Appreciative Education at Florida Atlantic University. According to the Office of Appreciative Education's (n.d.) website, "the focus of the Institute is to share practical suggestions for translating the theory of Appreciative Advising into your practice" (para. 2). The Office of Appreciative Education hosted three virtual Institutes in 2022 and welcomed a total of 563 participants from across the world (J. Bloom, personal communication, November 9, 2022). The Institute is held from 1-5 p.m. Eastern Time Zone for four consecutive days (Monday-Thursday) and most of that time is spent in small groups, which are facilitated by a Lead Facilitator and a Facilitator Assistant. The Facilitator Assistants are charged with helping each small group's Lead Facilitator with managing Zoom logistics related to admitting participants into the room, facilitating breakout rooms, placing links into the chat, monitoring participant engagement, and helping to facilitate activities. My graduate advisor, Dr. Jenny Bloom, nominated me to serve as a Facilitator Assistant for the July 2022 Appreciative Advising Institute. The purpose of this paper is to share my top six take aways from serving as a Facilitator Assistant at the 2022 Appreciative Advising Institute and how this experience has helped me become a better graduate student.

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“Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway”

My first takeaway from the Institute is “feel the fear and do it anyway” (J. Bloom, personal communication, July 18, 2022). I could have easily said no to the experience because it required me to take time off from work and rearrange my schedule for the week. Instead, I said “Yes!” and although I had no idea what I had gotten myself into, it turned out to be the best decision that I made all summer. Although I was feeling the imposter phenomenon (Clance & Imes, 1978), I was confident that Jenny would not have asked me to be a Facilitator Assistant if she did not believe that I could do it. It turns out that I am qualified, and I did deserve to be in this role.

Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

Once I said yes to the opportunity, I focused on preparing myself to be the best Facilitator Assistant that I could be. I attended the trainings provided by the Office of Appreciative Education, dug deep into learning about the six phases of Appreciative Advising, and carefully surveyed the lesson plans for each day of the Institute. Once the Institute started, I learned that no matter how prepared one is ahead of time, adaptability is the key to being an effective Facilitator Assistant. My Facilitator, Angel Nevin, and I scratched some activities and added in new activities at the last minute based on the feedback from our small group. I learned how to read the room, recognize when the participants needed an energy boost, and pivot to an activity in which they could interact with each other in small groups.

Facilitators are Humans Too

My third takeaway from the Institute is that I got to see the humanity in both professors and advisors. As an undergraduate student, I tended to look up to my professors and advisors as these “gods” who were so smart and sophisticated. The Institute gave me the opportunity to see that they are also real humans who laugh, tell jokes, and make mistakes. Having Angel as my Facilitator was a great pairing. For example, she showed me that it is okay to make jokes to make everyone feel at ease. And, in between activities, she was vulnerable with me and asked if she did okay and if what she was saying made sense. Ever since the Appreciative Advising Institute, I changed how I look at my professors. I now know how much preparation often goes into teaching and how much easier it is to teach when students are actively engaged in the conversation. I also feel more comfortable staying after class to talk with them, to ask for help, and to have more compassion for them as fellow human beings.

Someone in My Corner

My fourth takeaway is understanding and appreciating having someone in my corner. As I have taken classes in my graduate program and talked to academic advisors, I have learned that advisors are always “on” from the moment they arrive at the office in the morning until 5 p.m. or whenever the last student leaves the office. I had to always be “on” for the participants in my small group and saw how much they appreciated how prepared Angel and I were as their facilitator team. I now find that not only do I appreciate the people who are there for me, but I am also more likely to ask for help because I know how much Angel and I wanted to help our participants make the most of the Institute.

The Power of Clear Communication

I learned how important good communication is between participants and their facilitator team. During the Institute, if a participant did not show up, we would reach out to

them to make sure they were okay. I am now better communicating ahead of time with my own professors if I am going to be late or must miss a class. Clear communication is a way of showing others one cares and is listening to them.

Ask for Feedback

My last takeaway is to ask for feedback. At the end of each day, participants were invited to provide anonymous feedback to their facilitator team about what they enjoyed most about that day's activities and whether they had constructive suggestions for making the next day even better. The feedback was shared with each small group facilitator team and based on the feedback, we made adaptations to our lesson plans for the next day. We also shared what we learned with our small group the next day, thanked them for the feedback, and explained what changes we were making to today's plans based on those feedback. Seeing how helpful feedback is has not only helped me to be a better receiver of feedback from my professors, but also it has made me more intentional about giving constructive feedback to others. Taking in this form of communication and adapting the small group discussions shows the participants they are being heard and helped us deliver an experience that better met the needs of our participants.

Conclusion

The Live! Virtual Appreciative Advising Institute was an invigorating experience. Working with the other facilitator teams and with our small group participants to deliver a high-quality educational experience to professionals across the world truly taught me so much and has made me a better graduate student. I have learned the importance of being prepared; of seeing more fully the humanity in others, which allows me to communicate effectively to create relationships and know that I have someone in my corner; and to give and receive feedback. My advice to anyone considering serving as a Facilitator Assistant at a future Live! Virtual Appreciative Advising Institute is to "feel the fear and do it anyway," (J. Bloom, personal communication, July 18, 2022), trust yourself, and give your all to your small group. You will be the better for it!

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