

Beyond Disarm, Discover, and Dream: Completing the Appreciative Advising Process

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Abstract

How can academic advisors maximize their use of Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle, the last three phases of Appreciative Advising? Appreciative Advising is most effective when advisors can guide students through all six phases of the cycle to help them successfully achieve their goals. This article focuses on the last three phases, providing practical tips and innovative ways to implement the phases with students. Advisors are the informed consultants and encouragers who see the innate talents and abilities each student possesses. By fostering collaborative goal-setting and offering ongoing support, advisors can empower students to navigate challenges and realize their full potential.

Keywords

Appreciative Education Conference, academic advising strategies, student success

How can academic advisors maximize their use of Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle, the last three phases of Appreciative Advising? Although Appreciative Advising is most effective when advisors can use all six phases of the cycle, this article focuses on the final three phases, providing practical tips and innovative ways to utilize them with students. As academic advisors ourselves, all of these suggestions are strategies we regularly use and consider when working with students; they are based on our lived experiences.

In this article, academic advisors refer to higher-education professionals that engage in academic advising interactions with students. As defined by The Global Community for Academic Advising, NACADA, academic advising "is a series of intentional interactions" with the goal of helping students understand the meaning and purpose of higher education and to foster their academic success (2006). Although we use the terms "academic advisors" or "advisors" widely throughout this article to refer to academic advisors, other student service professionals can apply the suggested tips to their own practice. Other student service professionals include high school guidance counselors, career advisors, admissions counselors, and other professionals that interact with students and would benefit from incorporating Appreciative Advising into their practice.

Appreciative Advising is a collaborative, narrative-based advising approach to help students maximize their education and achieve academic, professional, and personal success (Bloom et al., 2008). Advisors work with students, learning their background, dreams, and goals, by asking open-ended probing questions. The origins of Appreciative Advising can be found in the organizational developmental theory of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), choice theory and reality therapy, self-worth theory, and social-constructivism theory (Bloom et al., 2008).

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The first three phases of Appreciative Advising, Disarm, Discover, and Dream, are the building blocks to the three phases discussed in this article. The Disarm phase is the first chance to build rapport with students, setting the tone for the rest of the advising session. Building rapport opens the door to trust and vulnerability between students and advisors. In the Discover and Dream phases, advisors continue to build trust by asking probing questions and using active listening. These phases are important for information-gathering as advisors learn students' interests, strengths, passions, dreams, and goals. This information is critical as the later phases build upon these initial discoveries. Before moving on to Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle, it is important that advisors have built rapport and connected students' strengths to their goals. The power of the first three phases of Appreciative Advising is manifested in the later three phases.

Design: Making Dreams Reality

The Design phase is the planning phase, where advisors can take what the student has shared and help them figure out the next steps (Bloom et al., 2008). President Theodore Roosevelt once said, "keep your eyes on the stars and your feet on the ground" (Theodore Roosevelt Association, 2025, "Children" section). Roosevelt's quote illustrates the connection between the Dream and Design phases. The dream is the big goal students are shooting for, and the plan or design for how to achieve that dream is the "on the ground" work that gets them there. Students' ability to clearly define their dreams is another reason why the first three phases of Appreciative Advising are critical to success; before students can design their dream, they need to know what the dream is. Although research is sparser for the Design phases compared to other phases, well-documented strategies that support students in this phase are backed by research (Belenky et al., 1986; Bloom et al., 2008; Rehfuss & Mentzer, 2006; Stapleton-Corcoran, 2023). The co-creation aspect of the Design phase can yield more benefits for students than creating a plan by themselves.

Navigating from Dream to Design can be exciting but also overwhelming because it is a time to determine how to move forward and make the dreams happen. Fear of failure can keep students stuck in the Dream phase. One way to help students move forward is to keep the steps concrete, incremental, and achievable. Achieving small wins with mini-goals along the way keeps progress realistic, the student engaged in their designed plan, and is something every student is capable of.

Hearing from students about where they want to go or who they want to become can help advisors "backward design" a plan with them (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 75). During this collaborative goal-setting approach, students make a plan while advisors begin with the end in mind and offer input and support where they are needed. Backward design is a framework often used in curriculum planning, where educators consider the learning objectives for their students and then design the course based on that end goal (Stapleton-Corcoran, 2023). Designing backwards fits in nicely with the Design phase, as advisors start by helping students identify their dreams, and then move to designing the steps to achieve the dream. The Design phase builds the path from where they are now to where they want to be.

As with all the phases of Appreciative Advising, student empowerment is vital in the Design phase. The student is steering or leading, while advisors serve as informed consultants. One effective way to play the role of consultant is to connect the student with resources that will help support them on their journey. Are they interested in doing an internship, exploring a specific major, or participating in community service? A pitfall to avoid as an advisor is leaning on prescriptive advising when it is not warranted. There may be times when advisors need to share specific information with their students, or explain a

process or procedure at their institution. However, the practice of asking open-ended questions and allowing students to guide the conversation whenever possible can lead to students feeling empowered to not only take the next steps towards their goal but also feel confident in the goal they have created.

Advisors do not have to play the role of consultant for everything; informed referrals and connections to other people or services can help students take control for themselves (Bloom et al., 2008). Informed referrals can be a powerful tool for advisors. To give a good referral, advisors must acquaint themselves with the various people and resources available to students. Rehfuss and Mentzer (2006) described the referral process in three steps: try to empathize with the student, consider an appropriate referral, and transition the student to the other resource. Referring students to other resources is also an opportunity to show students that, even as professionals in our field, advisors do not know everything. Advisors can demonstrate how to look up information from their institution or resources in the local community, for example, which illustrates to students that advisors are also people who are learning and growing, just like they are.

Sometimes, in the Design phase, students are faced with a tough decision and do not know what choice to make. They need strategies to use for making hard decisions. One decision-making aid to use in these scenarios, specifically when it is between two options that could benefit the student, is the “Coin Flip” (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 66). Once in an advising session, Rachel Terry met with a student who was struggling to decide between two similar majors. The student completed every required course that overlapped between the two programs, so they had arrived at a juncture where a choice needed to be made. After reviewing the differences and similarities with the student and their individual circumstances, goals, and dreams, they were not any closer to making a decision. At that time, Terry brought out a physical coin and told the student that “heads” would be one program, and “tails” would be the other. Terry flipped the coin and kept it concealed, then asked the student, “What does your gut tell you? Which one are you hoping for?” And that is when the student realized they had already known which choice to make—they named the program they would be pursuing with no hesitation! This strategy may not always be applicable, but it can be helpful in certain situations, especially when students are faced with deciding between two options.

The Design phase appears on the surface to be the most concrete of the phases. Yet it is also an incredible opportunity to get to know a student’s story even more and begin crafting the essential details and steps students will take to achieve their goals. It can be exciting to talk about dreams, but it is even more exciting to talk about how to make those dreams a reality.

Design Tips and Tricks:

- Co-create micro or mini goals: bite-sized chunks that motivate students to persevere toward their bigger goals.
- Begin with the end in mind, designing a plan based on the end goal.
- Act as the informed consultant, asking students open-ended questions and providing resources as needed.
- Make appropriate and timely referrals.
- Utilize strategies like the “coin-flip” to propel students forward and avoid getting stuck in decision fatigue.

Deliver: Executing the Plan

The foundation of the Deliver phase is empowerment. This phase directly builds on the work accomplished in the Design phase. Although students implement their plans, advisors are instrumental in helping them have confidence, resources, and strategies to be successful (Bloom et al., 2008). Bandura's self-efficacy theory is founded on the belief that individuals do better when they feel they can succeed (Bandura, 1997). When students feel supported by others, they feel increased self-efficacy and are more likely to achieve their goals.

Advisors can improve student success in the Deliver phase by implementing the principles of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory suggests that when students feel autonomous, competent, and connected, students are more likely to accomplish their goals. Advisors foster autonomy by allowing students to carve their own paths and encourage competency by celebrating progress and accomplishments. As students encounter challenges, advisors should hold students accountable and encourage them to persist despite the difficulties. Advisors may offer structured choices for completing tasks, encouraging them to track their progress and offering on-going reporting as needed.

Academic advisors can draw valuable insights from the Pygmalion Effect, also known as the Rosenthal-Jacobson study (1968). In this landmark experiment, researchers administered intelligence tests to all the students. Disregarding the test results, researchers identified a random group of students and labeled them high-achieving students. Teachers were informed of this label, and at the end of the school year, intelligence tests were administered again. The results were remarkable. The students who were initially identified to be high achievers showed significantly greater improvements in their academic performance compared to their peers. This improvement was not due to the differences in the students' abilities but stemmed from the teachers' expectations and the increased attention and support they received as a result (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Likewise, when advisors genuinely believe in a student's potential, that belief can fuel a student's confidence and persistence through a challenge. When a student feels support, they are more likely to believe in themselves, which is a powerful catalyst for success.

This study underscores the power of belief. When educators hold high expectations for students, they positively influence those students' motivation to seek success. The power of belief can be seen with college students (Komarraju et al., 2010). If advisors have high expectations and communicate their confidence in students' potential, students will be motivated to seek success. High expectations build the students' self-efficacy, which improves their success academically and professionally (Bandura, 1997). It is no coincidence that higher expectations lead to higher performance. It is the advisor's job to not only see potential in each student, but help them to see it for themselves.

Students who see their potential can be characterized as having academic hope, hope that they can achieve their academic goals (Bloom et al., 2008). Snyder (2002) theorized that academic hope includes three critical elements: the presence of a specific goal, knowledge that there are many ways to achieve that goal, and belief in an individual's ability to act on the goal. When students possess high levels of academic hope, they are more persistent and resilient in the face of hardship (Rand, 2008). Such hope is more than positive thinking and optimism. Hopeful students set goals, make plans, monitor their progress, and problem-solve. These components are measurable skills that are necessary for long-term achievement.

Advisors have a vital part in promoting academic hope by assisting students to see challenges as opportunities for growth and exploring multiple pathways to the goal. This can

be strengthened by noticing and complimenting their persistence, recognizing when they have overcome obstacles, and cheering for the growth they experience. If students perceive only a singular route to their objectives, they may be inclined to abandon their efforts when faced with challenges. Advisors have the ability to remind them of their progress and that there are numerous pathways to success, fostering resilience and adaptability.

Appreciative Advising emphasizes the importance of the first few minutes in an appointment; it is the key to building rapport (Bloom et al., 2008). Equally important is the final impression, the last few minutes of the interaction that lingers with the student. Although some advisors may see the student appointment as another in a long line-up of student meetings, the appointment is the foundation of a student's educational experience. It is their future, hopes, and dreams. An advisor's goal is to send the student off with a strong sense of confidence in their ability to achieve the plan. Students should know what the next step is on their path to success.

Ending the appointment well may include troubleshooting possible roadblocks, considering potential back-up plans, reviewing the student's responsibilities and the co-created deadlines, encouraging the student to reach out if they run into problems, and reiterating confidence in the student and their ability to accomplish their goals. The key is to end on a high note! Doing so helps a student leave the conversation feeling supported, capable, and emboldened. When students leave with this sense of empowerment, they are more likely to not only follow through on their plans, but achieve them.

Deliver Tips and Tricks:

- Build confidence through using affirming language, celebrating progress, and holding high expectations illustrating to students that their advisor believes in them.
- Encourage flexibility and resilience by helping students explore multiple pathways.
- End the appointment on a high note by troubleshooting potential roadblocks, considering alternatives, and reviewing responsibilities.

Don't Settle: Celebrating the Wins and Continuing to Strive

Now that the student's plan is designed and implemented, advisors have the opportunity to continue to challenge and support students, which is the heart of the Don't Settle phase. Students need to know that achieving the dream is possible, and also that achieving the dream is just the beginning.

Kotler (2014) suggested when planning for growth, that any increase in difficulty should only be about four percent more difficult than the current skill level of the person. Kotler's guideline is based on Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory, which suggests that people are most engaged with tasks that are just beyond their current abilities (1990). It is quite easy to overdo this percentage and set challenges at a level of difficulty far beyond the current skill level. To achieve success, the change in the level of difficulty should be minimal. Advisors can provide "scaffolding" to students, giving support and filling in the gaps where a student does not yet have the experience to achieve the goal (Wood et al., 1976). For example, a first-year student may need an advisor to help with fundamental skills like how to use the university's registration system whereas a more experienced student may need more support with planning classes and making career goals. Advisors guide students to this "sweet spot" of challenge by assessing the student's current skill level, and then recommending more challenging tasks. The advisor's role is to balance both support and challenge so that the step forward is achievable.

There is a good reason to suggest that advisors continually try to raise the bar. In the book, *212 The Extra Degree*, Parker and Anderson (2006) highlighted that at 211 degrees water is hot and at 212 degrees water is boiling. A tiny change has the power to make a huge difference. Even little tweaks in a student's routine can lead them in a completely different direction. Small changes create big results. The power of small changes is not just a reason for advisors to challenge students, but also to raise the bar for themselves. Consider the small changes in daily practices that lead to large impact.

This quest for improvement does not mean students and advisors are chasing some never-ending unattainable goal with no end in sight. Advisors should celebrate the wins with their students. Rebecca Weidner has a world map in her office, and when students meet with her for the first time, they put a blue sticker on the map indicating where they are from. When students come in to apply for graduation, they get a gold sticker to put on the map illustrating where they are headed next. As this is explained within the first appointment, students look forward to "getting their gold sticker" upon graduation. The celebration sticker also facilitates the "what next" conversation. Even something as small as a gold sticker can be a fun and meaningful way to celebrate.

Clear (2018) said "success is not a goal to reach or a finish line to cross. It is a system to improve, an endless process to refine" (p. 252). Real happiness comes from growth and having the appropriate amount of challenge. As students succeed, they will feel motivated to continue their growth, creating a cycle of success that helps them to change. Bloom et al. (2008) referred to this process as the "virtuous cycle" (p. 99). Positive changes in one area bleed over to another area, reinforcing students' belief in themselves and their resilience. With this continuous improvement, students (and advisors) can achieve results beyond what they may have thought originally possible (Clear, 2018).

While challenging themselves and students, advisors also must maintain a growth mindset. Dweck (2006) defined a growth mindset as the belief that "your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others" (p. 7). With a growth mindset, failure is not something to be embarrassed or ashamed about; it is an opportunity to learn (Dweck, 2006). Many people have resumes that illustrate their success. Herrera suggested preparing a failure resume that highlights everything in between those successes (2019). A failure resume would include every job applied for, all the publication attempts, rejected presentations, and other missed opportunities illustrating that for each success on a resume there were likely many failures first. One of the best ways to teach students about a growth mindset is to demonstrate it. Advisors can share their failures with students to help them understand that life is not just about wins. Learning occurs with each mistake. Being open about their own failures normalizes the idea that setbacks are ultimately a part of the learning process, something that everyone experiences.

Don't Settle Tips and Tricks:

- Provide appropriate scaffolding to students as the difficulty of their goals increase.
- Make improvements small and incremental.
- Celebrating the wins can be as simple as handing out a small sticker or pin.
- Talk about failures with students to normalize setbacks.

Conclusion

Each part of Appreciative Advising focuses on a unique component critical to student success. Disarm, Discover, and Dream may be more often the first part of the student experience, but Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle are key elements.

We encourage advisors to try and implement one or two of the suggestions outlined above not only with their students, but with themselves. That could mean making effective referrals or using the coin-toss decision method. Alternatively, it could be demonstrating a growth mindset, not being afraid to name failures and learn from them. Advisors can be experts and encouragers who see the amazing strengths of every student. Carefully executing the Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle phases will empower students to navigate challenges and realize their full potential.

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