

Empowering Success: Leveraging the Advisor-Student Relationship to Foster Thriving

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Abstract

The measure of a college student's success should be multifaceted to extend beyond mere academic achievement to encompass well-being, engagement, and overall thriving. Advisors play a pivotal role in supporting students through the complex transitions of college life. This article explores the concept of thriving as a holistic framework for student success (Schreiner, 2013; Schreiner et al., 2020) and examines how the advisor-student relationship can be strategically leveraged to promote it. Advisors can implement practical strategies and enhance the student experience by understanding pathways to thriving and the use of Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008), to cultivate student well-being and engagement. This approach empowers advisors to move beyond transactional interactions toward a more transformative model that fosters student thriving.

Keywords

college student thriving, Appreciative Advising, student success, student-advisor relationships, Appreciative Education Conference

Higher education rates of success often focus on persistence, retention, and graduation rates, rather than the holistic development of students. The concept of Thriving is a comprehensive framework that focuses on the overall student experience, including their academic, interpersonal, and psychological well-being (Schreiner, 2016). Thriving is beyond just surviving college and encompasses a fuller and richer experience (Schreiner, 2020). Advisors are uniquely positioned to serve as a key point of contact to support students as they are transitioning into the college setting. This article notes how an advisor can use the advising relationship to leverage supporting students by employing the Appreciative Advising theory to better support students in their thriving in college.

Thriving: A Holistic Framework for Student Success

Thriving is a holistic approach to student success that focuses on the student experience when students are fully engaged, energized, and making the most out of college (Schreiner, 2020). Three components comprise thriving: academic, interpersonal, and psychological thriving (Schreiner, 2016). For students to thrive, they need to fully engage in the student experience academically, personally, and relationally (Schreiner, 2016). The five latent variables that comprise thriving are Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship (Schreiner, 2013).

Seligman's (2011) flourishing and Bean and Eaton's (2000) psychological model of retention and higher education are the foundation for thriving. Thriving focuses on college

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students' malleable attributes (Schreiner, 2016), which allows for institutional efforts to provide the support that enables students to thrive. Research across various student types, including traditional residential undergraduates, online students, and graduate students (Schreiner, 2024), shows that when thriving is a mediating variable, demographic characteristics lose their significance (Schreiner, 2015). Recent findings in models built on a Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) study reveal that for traditional undergraduates, the model explained 72% of the variation in thriving, 77.4% for adult learners, and 70% for graduate students (Schreiner, 2024). When students thrive, there is a wealth of positive outcomes. These outcomes include an enhanced sense of belonging and fit at the institution, greater academic achievement, persistence in degree completion, and higher retention (Schreiner et al., 2015).

Components of Thriving

Thriving comprises three components: academic, interpersonal, and psychological (Schreiner, 2016). Academic Thriving consists of Engaged Learning and Academic Determination (Schreiner, 2020). Students' ability to set and achieve academic learning goals and invest in their learning comprise the Academic Determination construct (Schreiner, 2010). Engaged Learning is how much students invest in thinking about what they are learning both in and outside class (Schreiner & Louis, 2011). Interpersonal thriving comprises Diverse Citizenship and Social Connectedness (Schreiner, 2020). The Diverse Citizenship scale measures students' openness to interacting with people different than themselves and making a difference in their community (Schreiner, 2016). The Social Connectedness scale measures the students' feeling of being known through meaningful connections and relationships (Schreiner, 2016). Positive Perspective comprises the psychological components of thriving (Schreiner, 2016) and measures students' outlook on life and how they maintain a positive view of the world and reframe negative experiences (Schreiner, 2020). Notably, the components of thriving comprise malleable psychosocial factors (PSFs), that is, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, that can be influenced through intervention (Schreiner, 2013).

Pathways of Thriving

Students thrive by learning more about their strengths and how to use them, building healthy and supportive relationships, reframing adverse events, having meaningful involvement on campus, being engaged in their community, and feeling engaged in their learning (Schreiner, 2013). Various pathways help students thrive, and by an institutional focus on increasing support for these areas, students are better supported in their success and engagement in the college experience.

Pathways to student thriving include an enhanced psychological sense of community, positive student-faculty interaction, meaningful campus involvement, an increased sense of spirituality, feeling confident about their major choice, and a high sense of institutional integrity (Schreiner, 2013). Additionally, feeling they are in good mental health and have family support enhances thriving (Schreiner, 2024). Advisors can play a vital role in helping build these pathways as academic advising has been described as the “ideal vehicle” (Schreiner, 2020, p. 28) to help students thrive.

Psychological Sense of Community

A psychological sense of community was initially described by Sarason (1974) as the extent to which students feel they belong to and are proud of their community or institution

and have meaningful connections. A psychological sense of community is the biggest predictor of student thriving (Schreiner, 2016; Schreiner, Pullins, et al., 2020).

To enhance a psychological sense of community, students need to feel valued and supported and feel they have enough meaningful personal relationships (Schreiner, 2014). Advisors can help enhance a sense of psychological sense of community by being key members of their support team, assisting students to get connected throughout campus and to other students and staff, and especially by connecting students to faculty.

Student-Faculty Interaction

Student-faculty interaction is a well-documented area in the research that reveals that relationships with faculty are key to student success (Kim & Sax, 2017). It is not the mere frequency but the quality of interactions with faculty that impacts student thriving (Schreiner, Martinez, et al., 2020). Additionally, quality interactions with faculty lead students to feel that faculty have an openness and appreciation of diverse perspectives in the classroom, which leads to deeper engagement in the classroom and a more profound sense of connection (Schreiner, Martinez, et al., 2020). Advisors can help students learn how to navigate the institutional culture for interacting with faculty by coaching them in writing emails, explaining the value of going to office hours, and helping students sign up for research opportunities (Bloom et al., 2008; Keetch, 2021).

Campus Involvement

The quality of campus involvement, not the mere amount of involvement, is a pathway to student thriving (Vetter et al., 2019). Students who find an intentional way to engage in the campus community are more likely to thrive (Schreiner, 2016). Advisors can help students find connections by learning more about their interests, suggesting campus group opportunities, events, jobs and internships, and campus activities that allow students to find a sense of belonging. Helping connect students to jobs on campus may benefit thriving as previous research shows that undergraduate students working on campus were found to thrive at higher levels (Schreiner, 2024).

Spirituality

Spirituality is defined as a sense of meaning and purpose for college students and can also be a method of coping through hard times (Schreiner, 2016). For some students, spirituality is an anchor in their persistence and success (Derrico et al., 2015; McIntosh, 2015). Advisors can help students connect their academic work to their bigger purpose in life to help enhance their thriving and find a connection to their sense of spirituality during hard times.

Major Certainty

Students' sense of major certainty, being sure their chosen major is the right fit for them, is a pathway to thriving (Schreiner, 2024). Advisors can help students feel more certain about their majors through meaningful appreciative conversations (Bloom et al., 2008) and by knowing major requirements to help answer questions about making academic program decisions (Keetch, 2021).

Institutional Integrity

Students' sense of institutional integrity is the extent to which they perceive the institution to have delivered on promises made to them (Braxton et al., 2004; Braxton et al., 2014). Experiencing a connection with caring institutional representatives is one way for

students to feel the institution has delivered on their promise (Schreiner, Martinez, et al., 2020; Sriram & Tharp, 2020), and academic advisors are well poised to fulfill that role. Students experience many transitions (Schreiner, Louis, et al., 2020), and advisors are positioned to support them throughout those seasons when they may need additional support. By espousing care and concern for the student, advisors can help deliver on the promise of student support and enhance a sense of institutional integrity.

Mental Health and Family Support

Recent thriving research reveals the importance of a positive sense of mental health for college students and their sense of positive family support for their college attainment (Schreiner, 2024). Mental health is a more consistent conversation in higher education literature and the need to support college students (Flannery, 2023; Kafka, 2024; Mowreader, 2025). Students feeling a sense of support from their families in college was important for undergraduates and online learners (Schreiner, 2024). Academic advisors can help students' mental health by normalizing help-seeking and question-asking (Keetch, 2021) and by assisting them to find meaningful ways to engage with their families. Additionally, advisors can connect students to the support available, and institutions can find methods to engage families, so they feel connected and build a desire to support the student's college careers.

Satisfaction with Academic Advising

More frequent interactions with academic advisors also support students' thriving (Keetch, 2021). Students who more frequently interacted with their academic advisor reported higher levels of satisfaction with their academic advising, an increased sense of major certainty, a more positive perspective of faculty members' appreciation of diverse perspectives, and an increased sense of spirituality and institutional integrity (Keetch, 2021). The satisfaction with academic advising variable was from the Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2019) Student Satisfaction Inventory that asked about students' sense of their advisors' approachability, investment in their success, goal-setting help, and knowledge about requirements in the major. Intentional advising interactions and conversations can enhance student thriving. Advisors can help students find ways to connect throughout campus and in the classroom.

The Role of Advisors to Help Students Thrive

There is a "quiet power" (Keetch, 2021, p. 168) in the advising relationship that can be a catalyst in promoting the various components of student thriving due to the inherent connection within the student-advisor role. Advisors can help foster a supportive environment for students and help get them connected throughout campus and to needed resources. Academic advising, notably, is an intervention that particularly "seems to influence a trifecta of interrelated PSFs in college students: *self-confidence... motivation... and persistence*" (Critelli et al., 2002, p. 12). More specifically, advisors can contribute to student thriving by engaging in Appreciative Advising (Cuevas et al., 2017).

Leveraging Appreciative Advising

Theoretically rooted in Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider et al., 2000) and its core principles (The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.), Appreciative Advising is "the intentional collaborative practice of asking generative, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Appreciative Advising, n.d.). The theory-to-practice framework comprises six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. Bloom et al. (2008) explained the framework as follows:

Embracing the Appreciative mindset, advisors intentionally use positive, active, and attentive listening and questioning strategies to build trust and rapport with students (Disarm); uncover students' strengths and skills based on their past successes (Discover); encourage and be inspired by students' stories and dreams (Dream); co-construct action plans with students to make their goals a reality (Design); support students as they carry out their plans (Deliver); and challenge both themselves and their students to do and become even better (Don't Settle). (p. 11)

By leveraging the framework, advisors can help students identify their strengths, assets, and successes; academic and career goals; interests and curiosities; and spoken or unspoken needs and challenges (Bloom et al., 2008; Bloom et al., 2014). Notably, advisors can help students discover what may promote or prohibit their thriving levels by asking Appreciative questions informed by an awareness of the concept of thriving and its pathways.

Asking Appreciative Questions

Advisors are encouraged to ask Appreciative questions, that is, generative, open-ended questions that invite students to share their stories and lived experiences (Bloom et al., 2008). Importantly, advisors are encouraged to ask Appreciative questions related to various pathways of thriving and phases of the Appreciative Advising framework. Below are some example questions:

- **Psychological Sense of Community/Disarm:** I'm thinking of going for a walk this afternoon. What is your favorite spot to hang out on campus?
- **Student-Faculty Interaction/Discover:** So far, who is your favorite professor and why?
- **Campus Involvement/Dream:** Which 1-2 campus clubs and organizations do you plan to engage in this academic year?
- **Spirituality/Design:** Think about an obstacle you anticipate facing this semester. What will help you persist and succeed in spite of it?
- **Major Certainty/Design:** What two career-related goals do you have for this semester, and how do you specifically plan to accomplish them?
- **Institutional Integrity/Deliver:** How has the institution delivered on the promises made to you?
- **Mental Health & Family Support/Deliver:** How, and with whom, will you celebrate your accomplishments?
- **Satisfaction with Academic Advising/Don't Settle:** It is a privilege to be your academic advisor. If you could have your wish, what is one thing I could do (differently) to better support you in your college journey?

Alternatively, academic advisors might apply the six phases of Appreciative Advising to one specific thriving pathway. Below, we illustrate this strategy using the Major Certainty Pathway.

- **Disarm:** Tell me what has been the best part of your day so far.
- **Discover:** What degrees/majors/pathways/certificate programs interest you right now?
- **Dream:** When you were eight years old, what did you imagine you would be when you grew up? What about now?

- **Design:** Let's map out a plan together with some courses you could take and/or some extracurricular activities you could get involved in to give you more experience in your area(s) of interest.
- **Deliver:** How will you deliver on your game plan and who is best suited to help you?
- **Don't Settle:** You are doing great in delivering on your goals so far! Given your interests, I was thinking you might really enjoy this [name of opportunity]. What do you think?

To practice developing an Appreciative compendium of questions, we encourage advisors to pick other pathways of thriving and write new questions following the example above.

A Word of Caution

For illustration purposes, we included questions on each phase of the Appreciative Advising framework; however, Bloom et al. (2008) cautioned that "Appreciative Advising is not a lock-step process for working with students" (p. 27). Rather, the Appreciative Advising framework enables advisors to ideally develop trusting relationships with their advisees over time. Although one can get through all six phases of the Appreciative Advising framework in one advising session, it is more likely that an advisor will get through all phases during a series of advising appointments over time. Advisors should use their best judgment to determine which questions and phases of the framework are most applicable to ask during any given advising session.

Conclusion

In conclusion, academic advisors contribute to fostering college student thriving, a critical student success concept in higher education. By leveraging the Appreciative Advising framework and asking Appreciative questions, advisors can discover what may be contributing to or detracting from students' levels of thriving. Additionally, the mere act of asking Appreciative questions is an intervention that unlocks the process of creating positive change (The Center for Appreciative Inquiry, n.d.) and enables advisors to empower students to not only survive the college journey but also to truly thrive and flourish in it.

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