Utilizing an Appreciative Approach to Support Students in Distress

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Abstract

Staff and faculty are often called upon to support students experiencing distress. Supporting students in distress can be challenging for those without clinical training or regular experience working with distressed students. By utilizing the Appreciative Education framework, staff and faculty can improve their ability to assist students experiencing distress by fostering a supportive and resourceful campus environment. This article will share an institutional example and highlight practical tools to illustrate the process of utilizing the Appreciative Education framework with students in distress.

Keywords

Appreciative Education, higher education, students in distress, Appreciative Education framework

Higher education leaders today are tasked with imagining and enacting innovative solutions to address the complex and evolving demands of their roles. Although the challenges are significant, they also present valuable opportunities for growth and transformation. Appreciative Education (AE) is a theory-to-practice framework designed to optimize learning and organizational effectiveness by intentionally leveraging the assets, aspirations, and potential of students, staff, and institutions. Appreciative Education offers a unifying approach across educational roles and settings (Bloom et al., 2013). At the heart of the framework are six D's: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. The six D's help guide administrators in establishing trusting relationships, co-creating meaningful goals, and fostering continuous development (Bloom et al., 2008). Appreciative Education empowers institutions to move from deficit-based models toward inclusive and aspirational cultures of growth. This article will explore the experiences of a higher education institution that uses the Appreciative Education framework to train faculty and staff to support students who may be experiencing distress.

In 2024, one such institution faced a complex challenge when its counseling center closed. The closure left Student Affairs staff needing to be creative in identifying strategies to support students' well-being while equipping faculty and staff with a framework to assist with de-escalation, difficult conversations, understanding referral resources, and setting expectations for follow-up. Training the faculty and the behavioral intervention team was a priority for this campus. The division of Student Affairs staff had previously participated in the Appreciative Advising online course hosted by the Office of Appreciative Education as a part of the academic coaching implementation. The six D's (Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle) encompass the aspects identified as critical to respond to a student who may be in distress. Although the framework has traditionally been used in the

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context of guiding academic advising interactions, He et al. (2014) described the AE framework as a tool for faculty and staff to provide support to students in multiple contexts, including supporting students who may be in distress.

The training and recommendations were intended for non-clinical faculty and staff to support students who may be experiencing distress. The training defined a student in distress as a student who is experiencing difficulty and/or self-identifies as needing help to address a concern (Matthews, 2016). Beginning in fall 2024, training for faculty and the behavioral intervention team was delivered through team sessions, adjunct training, and annual training days. Over 70 faculty and staff participated in the training. The training used practice examples to illustrate ways in which faculty and staff can support students, even if they are not clinically trained mental health professionals. The Appreciative Education framework, along with *The Appreciative Advising Revolution* by Bloom et al. (2008), served as a guiding resource for faculty and staff in learning how to respond effectively to students in need of support or experiencing distress. The benefit of using the Appreciative Education framework is that it centers on the student's experience and asks those assisting the student to approach each situation as a unique case. One of the theoretical foundations of Appreciative Education is Appreciative Inquiry, which challenges individuals and organizations to "build upon their strengths rather than efforts to fix weaknesses" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 15). Students who are experiencing distress may be focused on what is going wrong and may not be able to see the assets they possess or how to manage and overcome their distress. When in distress, looking beyond what is going poorly to see what opportunities lie ahead can be difficult. Using Appreciative Education provides a framework for initiating difficult conversations, creating a plan for the future, and outlining follow-through and follow-up. He et al. (2014) stated:

> The power of the Appreciative Education framework is its adaptability for enhancing both personal interactions and organizational effectiveness. The framework provides a shared mindset, language, and approach across educational levels, administrative structures, and settings. Yet, it does not dictate how individuals and organizations translate the theoretical framework into practice. In fact, it relies on the creativity and innovativeness of individual and collective members to make it their own. (p. 2)

Individuals working in helping professions, such as education, often seek to remove barriers for students. When working with students in distress, a staff or faculty member may not be able to remove a barrier or fix a problem. The Appreciative Education framework provides an outline for faculty and staff to follow as supporters or co-creators, rather than problem-solvers.

Application of the Framework

The six D's of Appreciative Education can help institutions train faculty and staff on ways to respond to students in distress. Notably, each institution has a set of policies and procedures that may supersede the enactment of all aspects of the Appreciative Education framework in distress response. However, the concepts outlined throughout this article can be used in conjunction with the emergency response procedures or distress protocols required by individual institutions. For example, an institution may require emergency personnel to be called if a student discloses that they are considering suicide. Institutional protocol should be followed; however, the approach used to address and explain the procedures can be practiced using aspects of the Appreciative Education framework. Not all distress situations are life-threatening, but all are serious for the individual experiencing the distress. Safety and well-being considerations for all parties involved should be taken into account when responding to a student in distress.

Although individuals may be familiar with the Appreciative Education model and its application in academic advising, applying this framework in a different kind of student interaction may not be as straightforward. Throughout this article, we will showcase examples of ways in which the six D's of Appreciative Education can be applied when supporting students in distress. As you read the article, take a moment to recall a situation where a student in distress received support. Consider how the framework could have shaped that experience and how it might guide similar interactions in the future.

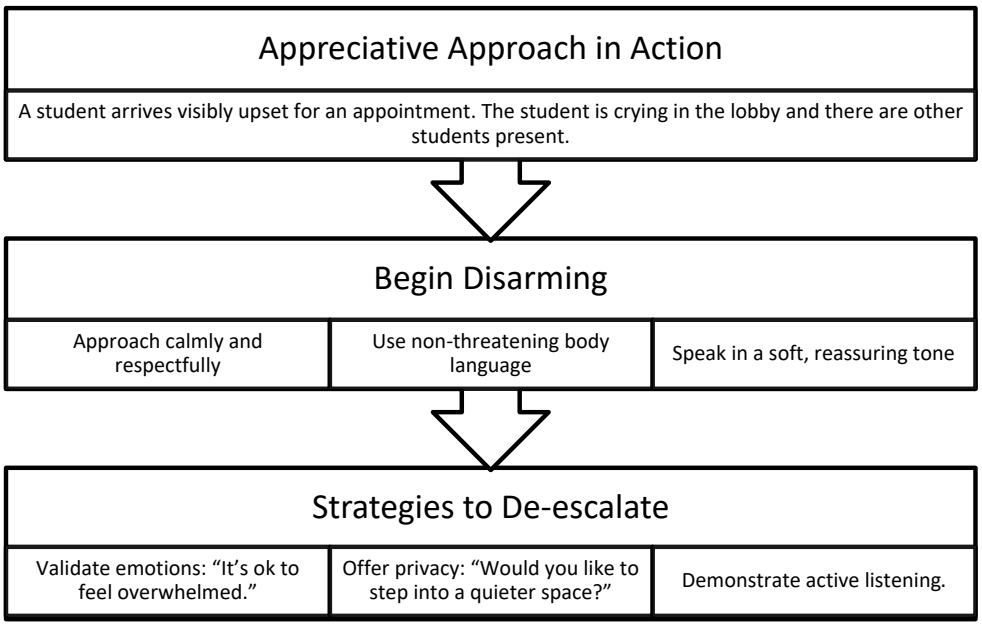
Disarm

Crises and conflicts often arise unexpectedly, and faculty and staff may find it challenging to respond when a student is in distress. The Disarm phase emphasizes "the importance of creating safe environments where all members feel that their voice is valued and respected" (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 8). Using the key aspects of the Disarm phase provides a way to begin the conversation and respond positively (see Figure 1). The Disarm phase allows the faculty and staff responder an opportunity to assess the severity of the situation and determine whether specific actions are needed. Enacting disarming behavior during a distress response allows the faculty and staff responder to de-escalate the situation and establish a tone for the response. Performing introductions is a low-commitment/low-stress way to begin even the most difficult of conversations. The Disarm phase is an appropriate time to involve others, assess personal safety concerns, and call emergency personnel if required.

A disarming environment for the distress response is one in which students feel safe and have privacy. This private place to sit or meet allows all involved to take a breath and focus on the situation at hand. Learning and pronouncing someone's name is one way to demonstrate an investment in the student and the situation. Removing a student in distress from others' view to a more private area also allows them a chance to recover from shock or bad news without an audience. Faculty and staff responders should also consider personal safety when responding - avoid choosing a secluded area when a student is aggravated.

Figure 1

Case Study – Using Disarm in Responding to a Student



Discover

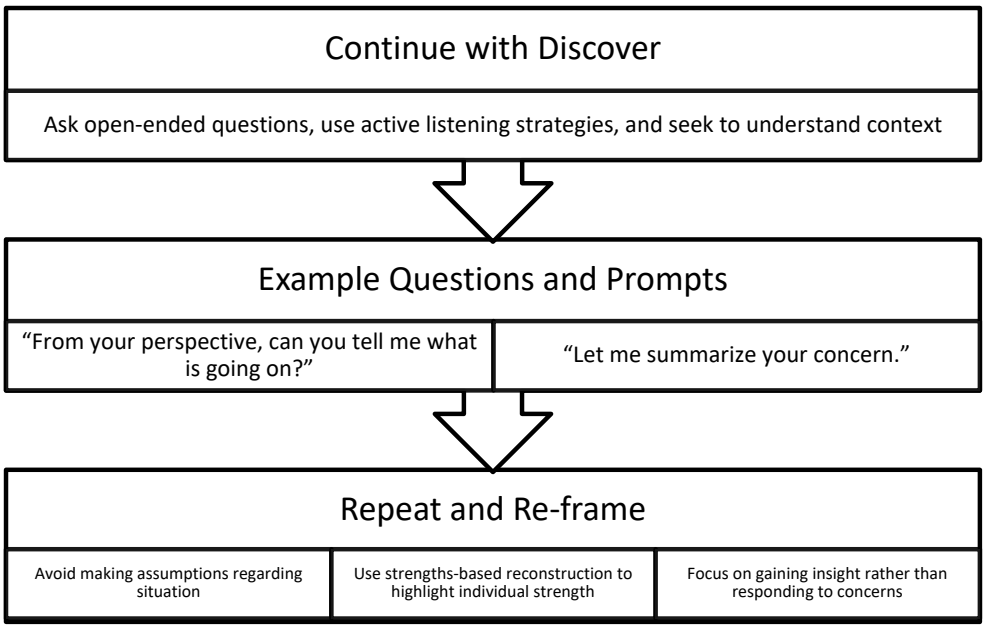
Once the stage has been set for the conversation, the next phase, Discover, can help someone understand the underlying situation to work towards creating a plan to address the distress. When responding to a student in distress, faculty and staff may make assumptions about the situation or the outcomes the student is seeking. The Discover phase challenges the responder to invest in the conversation to address the student's unique scenario. The responder has an opportunity to ask questions, listen to understand, and comprehend the facts of the situation. Exhibiting genuine interest in the student's situation, maintaining open body language, asking open-ended questions, and practicing active listening are crucial behaviors during the Discover phase (see Figure 2).

Faculty and staff may have worked with students in similar situations or may know the student who is experiencing the distress. The Discover phase challenges the responder to suspend assumptions about the situation. Each student brings a unique set of characteristics to any situation, which makes it essential to avoid making assumptions before asking questions. Faculty and staff can ask questions that get to the immediate needs or support of the student. Response to the questions assists the faculty and staff responder in building context around the distress. Based on the student's answers, the faculty or staff may need to involve emergency personnel or ask for assistance from other personnel. Identifying which questions to ask can be challenging in the moment; however, focus on asking questions to seek to understand.

As the student answers questions throughout the Discover phase, an avalanche of information can be shared. Engaging in active listening, repeating and summarizing the answers, and asking follow-up questions can ensure that the faculty and staff responder has the information needed to understand the situation, including any others involved, previous discussions, and resources the student has already used. Faculty and staff who respond can share the information with the student and use this time to highlight the student's strengths, as they may not see any in the moment. He et al. (2014) described this process as strengths-based story reconstruction, in which the responder reframes negative situations to illustrate the student's skills and abilities. To ensure that the distress is managed effectively, the framework emphasizes the importance of asking questions rather than stating facts to the student.

Figure 2

Case Study – After Disarming, Use Discover



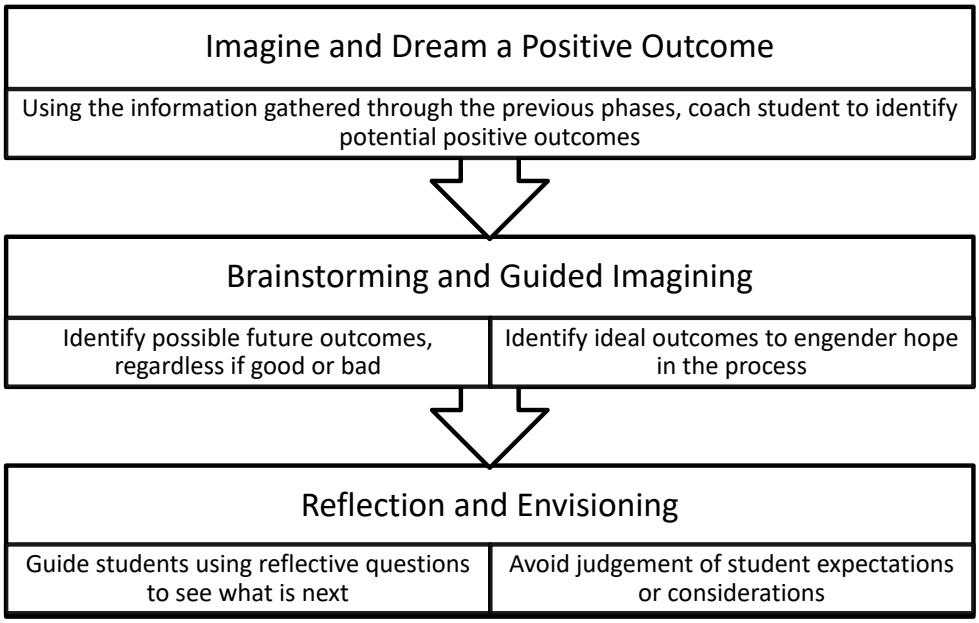
Dream

When a student is in distress, it can seem insurmountable to think about what comes next. Issues like failing a test, a death in the family, or experiencing anxiety can prevent individuals from imagining a positive future. The Dream phase creates an opportunity, without judgment, to consider possible outcomes (Bloom et al., 2008). When responding to a student in distress, the Dream phase can help students identify possible outcomes and begin developing strategies to address the issue at hand. Understanding what the student expects as a resolution to the distress can influence how the faculty and staff shape the remaining aspects of the conversation.

The critical aspects of the Dream phase include identifying potential outcomes of the situation and using guided imagery activities (see Figure 3). Faculty and staff can invite the student to brainstorm all possible futures, the good or the bad. The brainstorming that comes from dreaming opens the pathway forward for determining the necessary actions. Asking the student to imagine their ideal resolution gives them permission to be hopeful and opens the way to identify and implement a plan. By reflecting on the ideal outcome, the students envision what comes next, rather than dwelling on the current situation.

Figure 3

Case Study – Begin Dreaming a Positive Outcome



Design

Higher education is a helping profession, filled with individuals who build programs, efforts, and initiatives to help students achieve their goals. Individuals and institutions provide pathways for students to complete coursework, learn skills, and earn a degree. Faculty and staff have extensive backgrounds in supporting students through academic programs. However, using the Appreciative Education framework empowers learners to take ownership of the learning process (He et al., 2014), rather than faculty or staff members determining the pathway forward for a student. Instead, the student decides to identify assets, understand context, and begin to influence a positive outcome. Faculty and staff provide additional resources, challenge assumptions, and continue to gather information to assist the student in co-creating a plan for what comes next. The Design phase is when the student and the faculty or staff responder form an ad hoc team to co-create a plan for what needs to happen to resolve the distress and to prevent similar experiences in the future (see Figure 4).

Learning how to make decisions and weigh the positive and negative consequences of those decisions is a process that is learned through lived experience. Faculty and staff can help students develop decision-making skills by discussing options and explaining the consequences of each choice. For example, a student facing academic challenges may need to choose between failing a course or withdrawing from it. Each choice has consequences regarding academic and financial aid standing. The choice may depend on the student's individual context.

When setting goals, students may think big, like “I will become a doctor.” The faculty or staff responder in a distress situation may encounter a student who identifies their ideal outcome but struggles to identify the steps to achieve it. If a student needs to increase their GPA, there are multiple strategies they can use, such as improving study skills, utilizing tutoring, and passing all their courses. Students may say things like, “I will just get all A’s in my classes.” Faculty or staff who assist a student in designing a plan help break down the

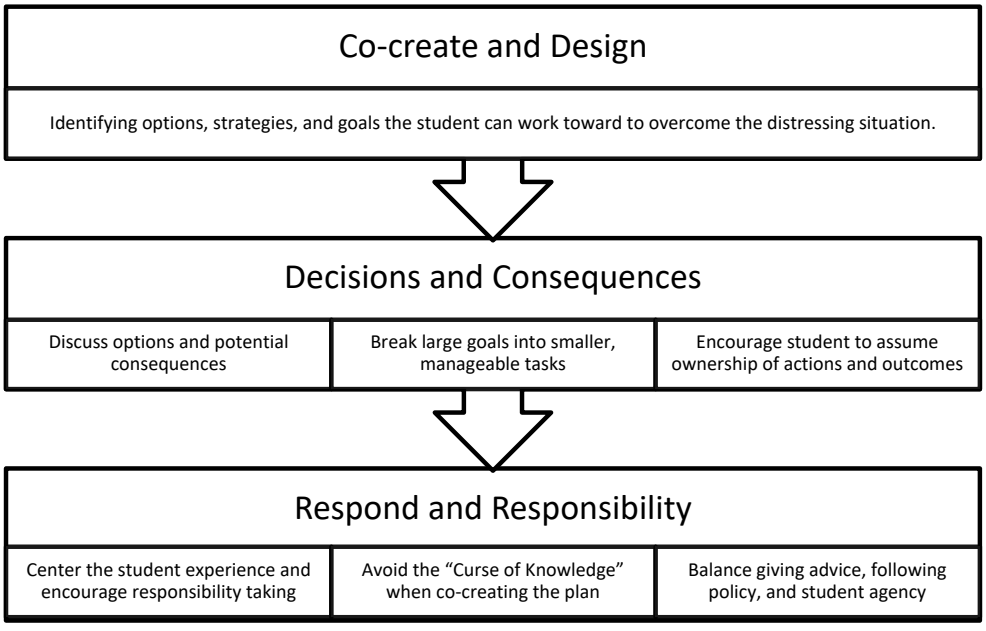
large task of earning A's in classes into smaller steps, such as attending class every day or completing online assignments before the deadline. Helping students see the endpoint and the steps necessary to reach it is part of the Design phase.

Understanding one's personal responsibility is challenging when faced with distress. Students may place blame on others or excuse themselves because they did not read or were unaware of the policies. Throughout the Appreciative Education framework, the student is at the center of the discussion, questions, and solution creation. The faculty or staff member responding to support the student reinforces the need for the student to take action and assume responsibility for the outcomes related to the distress. Students can identify strategies to create the future they want, rather than be a victim of their current circumstances.

One of the pitfalls to avoid when responding to a distress is failing to explain policies or procedures. Faculty and staff responders may have significant experience at the institution and omit information or assume that "everyone knows" the policy. In the Appreciative Education framework, this is called the curse of knowledge. Failing to recognize that others may not have the same level of knowledge on a topic can reinforce a student's belief that the university is complicated and that they do not belong (Bloom et al., 2008). Co-creating a plan to assist a student experiencing distress involves balancing adherence to policy, giving the student agency, and providing professional advice.

Figure 4

Case Study – Using the First Three Phases to Design a Plan



Deliver

After faculty and staff have responded and supported a student through the Disarm, Discover, Dream, and Design phases, the responder now provides support as the student takes action to recover from the distress. By the start of the Deliver phase, ideally, the student will have engaged in a productive conversation and identified their next steps. To use a sports metaphor, the responder transitions from coach to sideline cheerleader. The role of faculty and staff is to encourage action and support students as they begin to implement the plan they

co-created. The Deliver phase of the Appreciative Education framework outlines how faculty and staff can support students as they work to achieve their goals by providing follow-through, encouragement, fostering academic hope, and concluding conversations effectively (Bloom et al., 2008; see Figure 5).

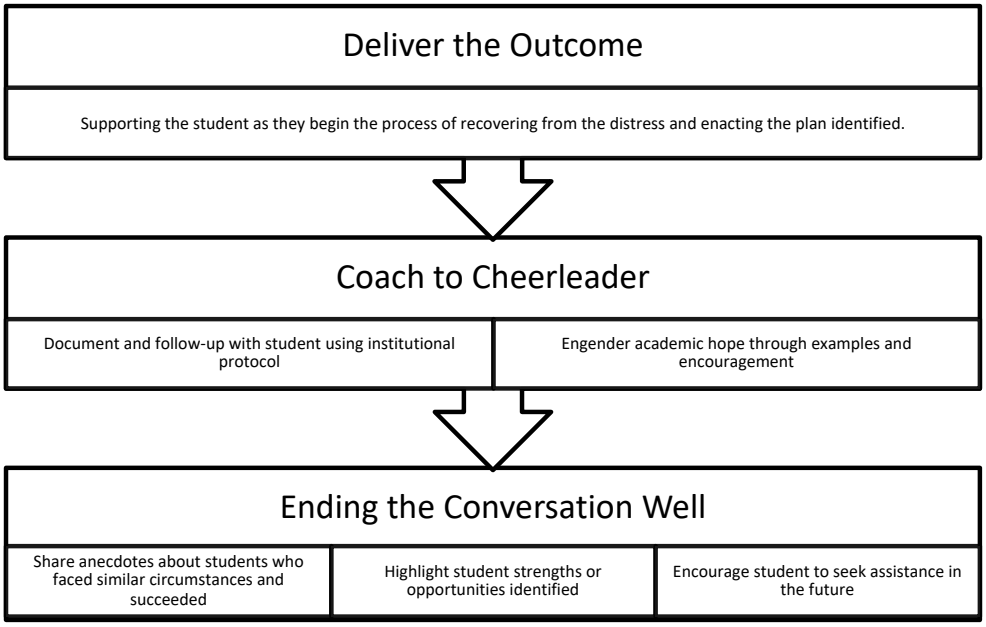
Faculty and staff who support students in distress should follow up directly with the student in addition to completing any required documentation or referral. Students experiencing distress may feel isolated, guilty, or conflicted. Having a faculty or staff member follow up with a brief statement of encouragement and reminders for action gives the student another lifeline of support in the future. Even if a faculty or staff member refers a student in distress to another department, sending a message of appreciation or encouragement demonstrates the institution's investment in student success.

Distress is often inherently negative. During the Deliver phase, faculty or staff members can help reframe the information from something terrible into an opportunity for change or growth. The Deliver phase can allow faculty and staff to assist a student in identifying academic hope by providing examples of other students who have overcome similar situations, identifying a challenge the student has already overcome, and highlighting the strengths the student possesses. Although the process of creating an attitude of academic hope does not dismiss the challenges faced by the student, it acknowledges that the story is not over and there is an opportunity for a positive outcome.

When working with a student experiencing distress, the situation may not have a neat resolution. The student may be frustrated or angry at the situation. Faculty and staff cannot always sit with a student until a resolution is achieved. There will come a time when the student needs to leave, and the faculty or staff member assisting will need to end the conversation. Even if the student does not receive the answer they want or receives bad news as part of the interaction, the faculty or staff member has a responsibility to summarize the interaction, focusing on identifying the student's strengths and ending the conversation well.

Figure 5

Case Study – Ending the Conversation and Follow-up



Don't Settle

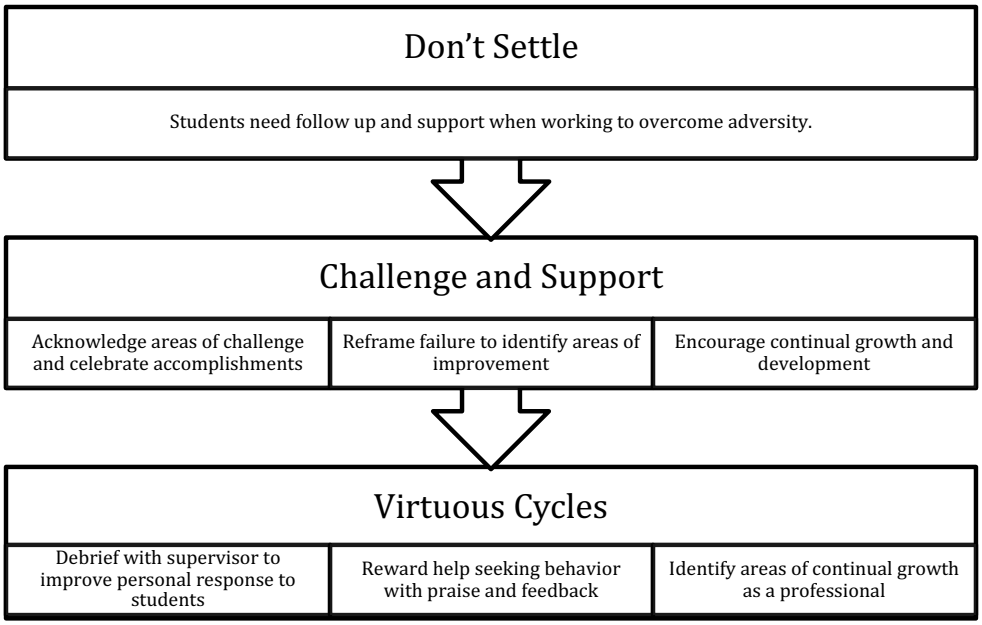
The final phase of the Appreciative Education framework is a call to action for both the student and the faculty or staff member supporting them. As students begin enacting their plan, there may be situations where things go wrong or do not go as planned. Faculty and staff members may respond to students who need help and identify ways to improve their practice. When individuals stop seeking opportunities for improvement, they stop doing their best in their roles. The Don't Settle phase (see Figure 6) challenges individuals to raise their internal bar of self-expectations (Bloom et al., 2008).

Sanford's theory of readiness, challenge, and support is a foundational framework that describes how students need support and challenge to achieve their academic and personal goals (Patton et al., 2016). Students need to be psychologically ready to develop new skills or overcome an obstacle. After determining whether a student is ready to develop, the student will need a balanced level of challenge and support to acquire new skills. Too much support can prevent students from developing new skills, and insufficient support can make challenges overwhelming. Faculty and staff must strike a balance between challenge and support to create environments where students can access resources that foster their development.

When faculty and staff have high expectations for students and provide both challenge and support to help them meet those expectations, students can reach their full potential. It may be easy to dismiss a student who has not performed well in a classroom or who has been dismissive of previous outreach attempts. That is where faculty and staff must be the ones to offer words of encouragement. Reminding students of all they have accomplished, even if they have fallen short in one area, they may have succeeded in another. In raising the bar of expectations for students, faculty and staff are also challenged to improve their performance, identify new strategies to support students, and brainstorm areas for growth. Rather than focus on all that goes wrong, faculty and staff should identify areas where success has been achieved.

Figure 6

Case Study – Action and Evaluation



Conclusion

Setting the tone for responding to a student in distress is critical to creating a pathway forward for the student. The Disarm, Discover, and Dream phases provide information-gathering opportunities for faculty and staff responding to a student in distress, allowing them to get to know the student and the situation. The Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle phases enable students to take charge of a plan, with support from faculty and staff as the plan is implemented.

At this specific institution, training on using Appreciative Education for students in distress was provided in person and recorded, and it was also made available as a tool for professional development and training of recently hired faculty and staff. Faculty and staff who attended the training reported that it was a helpful tool for working with students, especially those in distress. In particular, adjunct faculty who may not have had previous teaching experience appreciated having an outline to follow when engaging in difficult conversations. It has been the institution's goal to develop an appreciative approach to working with students at all times, and not only when they may be in distress. Additional training related to appreciative customer service and introductions to appreciative administration and advising have been planned.

The Appreciative Education framework (Bloom et al., 2013) provides a structured and adaptable approach for faculty and staff to support students in distress by breaking down the response process into manageable steps. Rather than attempting to address the entire situation at once, this model provides a flexible roadmap that encourages intentional, student-centered engagement. It serves as a foundational tool for developing training programs aimed at non-clinical faculty and staff, equipping them with strategies to recognize and respond effectively to student needs.

Notably, the Appreciative Education framework does not provide a one-size-fits-all solution. Rather, it emphasizes the importance of professional discretion and responsiveness within the context of institutional policies and procedures. Although faculty and staff are vital in supporting students, the framework affirms that decision-making ultimately rests with the student. The responsibility of faculty and staff is to refer, recommend, and facilitate access to appropriate resources—not to assume responsibility for students' personal choices or outcomes. For educators and staff members without clinical training, Appreciative Education provides a structured, strengths-based approach to effectively and compassionately respond to students who may be experiencing distress.

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