

## The Happiness Magnet: Cultivating Positivity in Students and Ourselves

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### Abstract

Appreciative Advisors cultivate positivity in themselves and others through an attitude of gratitude (Bloom et al., 2008). Positivity is not only correlated with improved student satisfaction with the college experience, but improved health outcomes also (Cameron et al., 2015; Schreiner, 2010). Students experience high rates of stress, which can stem from a wide variety of socio-cultural, environmental, psychological, and academic factors (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Paralkar & Knutson, 2023). Appreciative advisors can teach students healthy behaviors like cultivating positivity, to help them cope with stressors, build resilience, and ultimately foster students' dream achievement and success. *Cultivating Positivity* is a dynamic process where an individual chooses to intentionally develop a positive mindset and outlook on life for themselves and encourages others to do the same, through sustaining practices including gratitude, reframing, and consciously choosing to focus on the good. This article will explore the concept of positivity and strategies for cultivating a healthy positive mindset in students and advisors.

### Keywords

Appreciative Education Conference, positive student development, strengths-based practice, advisor well-being

A positive perspective is beneficial to student well-being and success and therefore positivity must be cultivated in students and the advisors who support students. American Psychological Association (APA) President Martin Seligman introduced the concept of Positive Psychology in the 1990s to serve as a strengths-based promotion model of improving mental health (Feig, 2022). Seligman (2019) defined Positive Psychology as the study of valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, satisfaction; hope and optimism; and flow and happiness. Appreciative Advising is situated within the Positive Psychology movement (Bloom et al., 2008). Academic advisors support students in optimizing their educational experiences by helping them identify, develop, and apply their strengths (Bloom et al., 2008). The approach offers the six-phase actionable framework supported by the Appreciative Mindset, which includes principles rooted in Positive Psychology, such as caring about and believing in the potential of each student.

A hallmark feature of Appreciative Advising is how the philosophy intersects with and is informed by “a diverse range of theories and wealth of research” (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 11). One such intersection is with the research on student thriving (Schreiner, 2010), also situated within Positive Psychology. Five factors that strongly influence student thriving include engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness (Schreiner, 2010). Regarding positive perspective, Schreiner (2010) elucidated, “An optimistic way of viewing the world...enables [students] to experience more positive emotions on a regular basis, which leads to higher levels of satisfaction with the

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college experience” (p. 5). Students with a positive perspective tend to be more satisfied, enjoy the college experience more, can proactively cope with reality, have a broader and more long-term view of events, can handle stress better, and can put things in perspective and reframe negative events (Schreiner, 2010).

Appreciative advisors can draw inspiration from Schreiner’s work on the positive perspective to cultivate positivity in their students and facilitate success outcomes. Schreiner (2010) defined a positive perspective as a way of proactively coping with reality by “reframing negative events to find some positive benefit or learning opportunity” (p. 5). Cultivating positivity therefore is a dynamic process where an individual chooses to intentionally develop a positive mindset and outlook on life for themselves and encourages others to do the same. Schreiner (2010) offered three strategies for cultivating positivity in students: equipping them with an optimistic explanatory style, helping students envision future success, and teaching students to develop and apply their strengths. These strategies align with other positivity cultivating practices, including gratitude, reframing, and consciously choosing to focus on the good. Additionally, microaffirmations (Demetriou et al., 2023) offer actionable positivity cultivating practices. This article will explore the impact of positivity on student well-being and success, elucidate barriers to student success, and expand upon identified strategies for cultivating positivity in students. Finally, the article will present strategies for cultivating positivity in advisors.

### **The Impact of Positivity on Student Success and Well-Being**

Positivity correlates with improved health outcomes and student satisfaction with the college experience (Cameron et al., 2015; Schreiner, 2010). Positive affect involves both pleasant feelings and good moods, and are represented by emotions including joy, gratitude, sincerity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love (Cameron et al., 2015). Positive emotions improve healthy behaviors, such as self-efficacy, goal setting, motivation, and self-regulation (Cameron et al., 2015). They improve focus, making it easier to notice the benefits of healthy behaviors, and boost confidence in one’s ability to succeed; they encourage goal setting and increase motivation to pursue goals, especially if those goals help maintain good mood; they also improve self-control, making it easier to stick with healthy habits and cope with challenges (Cameron et al., 2015). These interrelated elements, improved focus, goal setting and attainment, and self-control, all influence healthy decision making, and the combination of good mood and positive outcomes increase satisfaction.

Additionally, positivity influences success predictors like quality of involvement, spirituality, experiences with faculty, psychological sense of community, mindset, satisfaction, persistence and completion (Schreiner et al., 2018). These findings are consistent across a diverse array of student populations, including first-year, sophomore, and senior year students, students of color on predominantly white campuses, students in academic recovery, and transfer students (Schreiner et al., 2018). Students experiencing a positive perspective are more involved on campus and in their community/communities. They have a greater sense of purpose, more frequent and meaningful interactions with faculty, a healthier mindset, and their sense of community facilitates social support. They also experience greater success outcomes, like satisfaction, persistence, and completion (Schreiner, 2017; Schreiner et al., 2018).

### **Barriers to Student Success**

The correlation of positivity and improved health outcomes is particularly prudent considering the lamentable health indicators in college student populations. College students experience high rates of stress, stemming from a wide variety of socio-cultural,

environmental, psychological, and academic factors (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015; Paralkar & Knutson, 2023). According to the National College Health Assessment, students identified several health factors that served as impediments to their academic performance (American College Health Association, 2024). Stress topped the list, followed by anxiety, sleep difficulties, depression, with other reported challenges including physical and sexual assault, eating disorders, and injuries and short-term illnesses (American College Health Association, 2024). Furthermore, academic stressors identified in the literature include workload (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015), academic self-perceptions, test difficulty, academic expectations, pressure to perform (Bedewy & Gabriel, 2015), classroom competition, academic course load, financial concerns, substantial studying, familiar pressures, time management (Barbayannis et al., 2022), and adapting to new environments (Barbayannis et al., 2022; Paralkar & Knutson, 2023). In addition to these health factors and academic factors, students experiencing marginalized identities also contend with stressors like discrimination, macroaggressions, microaggressions, and intragroup marginalization, which compound the effects of stress (Coleman et al., 2025; Frost & Meyer, 2023; Manzo et al., 2024).

To help students cope with stressors, build resilience, and ultimately foster students' dream achievement and individualized definitions of success, appreciative advisors can teach students healthy behaviors like cultivating positivity. Cultivating positivity serves as a powerful way to counter the everyday stressors of college life (Cameron et al., 2015). Academic advisors are uniquely positioned to teach students about cultivating positivity. The Concept, Core Values, and Core Competencies of Academic Advising (NACADA, 2006; NACADA, 2017; NACADA, 2022) all motivate advisors to contribute to student learning, engage students in the process of growing and becoming, and be responsive and encouraging in the face of student challenges. The Appreciative Mindset (Bloom et al., 2008), already grounded in positive principles such as a gratefulness, call on advisors to care about and believe in the potential of students, including students' capacity to know and be better. Through engagement of the relational competencies, including articulating an advising philosophy, creating rapport, building relationships, facilitating problem solving and meaning-making, etc., advisors can support students in coping with and rising above barriers such as stress by cultivating positivity in their students.

### **Cultivating Positivity in Students**

As previously noted, Schreiner (2010) offered three strategies for cultivating positivity in students: equipping them with an optimistic explanatory style, helping students envision future success, and teaching students to develop and apply their strengths. Additionally, microaffirmations (Demetriou et al., 2023) offer actionable positivity cultivating practices. Each of these will be explored in more detail.

#### **Equipping Students with an Optimistic Explanatory Style**

Equipping students with an optimistic explanatory style refers to explaining life happenings in a way that emphasizes the temporal nature of negative occurrences and permanence of positive occurrences (Gordeeva et al., 2019). There are several tactics advisors can employ when equipping students with this way of being, including fostering a growth mindset, engaging cognitive reframing, and encouraging help seeking behavior.

Growth mindset is a belief that abilities and intelligence can be developed through effort, experience, and persistence (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). Growth mindset is commonly contrasted with a fixed mindset, which assumes intelligence is finite with limited opportunities for change. In an academic advising setting, an example of growth mindset

could occur when, during an appointment, the advisor asks a student about their most challenging class in the semester, and the student shares their experience with a writing class, stating their beliefs that they are a bad writer, had always been terrible at writing, never earn good grades on writing, and never will. The advisor can invoke a growth mindset, reminding the student that writing is a skill that can be developed through practice and suggesting campus resources that will help the student practice their writing skill. The advisor can then appreciatively ask the student about a time in their life where the student learned or refined a skill, then engage in strengths-based story reconstruction to show the student their growth narrative from a previous experience to reinforce the point that the student can improve their skills through effort.

Cognitive reframing is the intentional act of discovering, challenging, and modifying or replacing negative, irrational thoughts (Ackerman, 2018). In an academic advising setting, an example of cognitive reframing could occur when a student failed college algebra for the second time, which is a prerequisite for critical courses in the student's degree progression. When the student meets with their advisor, they may feel defeated and not smart enough for college level learning, expressing intentions of transferring. The advisor can engage the student in cognitive reframing by reminding the student that there are multiple intelligences and suggesting additional pathways that can allow the student to achieve the same goal, such as changing to a major that does not require college algebra and showing the student how they can still reach their career goal with a different major.

Encouraging help seeking behavior involves determining that there is a problem and that help is needed, deciding to seek help and identifying a source of help, obtaining the help needed, and then reflecting on the help received (Prochaska et al., 2009). In an academic advising setting, help seeking behaviors can be found in the application of growth mindset and cognitive reframing to academic advising settings, with the advisor recommending campus resources to strengthen writing skills and the student seeking out their advisor when they did not do well in the college algebra class the second time. A further example could be a student mentioning a challenge with their chemistry class, but asserting they can figure it out on their own. The advisor could respond to that assertion with reframing help seeking as a strengths-based behavior to counter any deficit notions of help seeking, and reminding students of the different resources to help with chemistry and institutional data that shows that students who utilize those resources do better than students who do not.

## **Helping Students Envision Future Success**

Helping students envision future success harkens to the Dream phase of Appreciative Advising, defined as "uncovering students' hopes and dreams for their futures" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 26). *The Appreciative Advising Revolution* characterizes the true honor it is to serve as dream keepers for students:

Hopes and dreams are precious possessions. In fact, they are so special that people do not readily share them. Some may fear that their dreams will be ridiculed or discouraged...perhaps many students answer the question, "What career do you want to pursue?" with a simple "I don't know," because they do not trust the questioner enough to share their true vision of their futures....Advisors need to establish trustworthiness so that students will reveal their wildest hopes and dreams for their lives (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 55).

Envisioning future success is inherently tied to students' hopes and dreams. There are several Appreciative Advising practices that facilitate student dreaming within an academic advising session, including visualization, encouraging students to dream big, and connecting student

dreams with their strengths (Soto & Rea, 2024). Furthermore, the Appreciative Mindset calls on advisors to care about and believe in the potential of each student, which can serve as an empowering force when advisors actively communicate to their students that they believe in them and their ability to be successful.

In helping students dream and envision future success, advisors can find inspiration and action from Snyder's *Hope Theory* (Colla et al., 2022). Hope Theory predates the coining of Positive Psychology, although examination of the two reveal the shared values of both concepts (Colla et al., 2022). The field of Positive Psychology examines a broad range of positive experiences, to include hope. Hope is a positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of *goals* (future directions), *agency* (belief in one's ability to accomplish their goals), and *pathways* (planning to meet goals; Colla et al., 2022). Those who are hopeful, anchor their thinking about the future to specific goals, believe in their own agency to pursue their goals, and plan pathways to achieve their goals step-by-step (Colla et al., 2022). Researchers have found correlations between hopeful thinking and positive student success outcomes, including GPA, graduation rates, and reduced dismissal rates (Farnsworth et al., 2022). This quote illustrates Hope Theory: "Hope lies in dreams, in imagination, and in the courage of those who dare to make dreams into reality" (Salk Institute, n.d.). Dreaming, imagining, and practicing courage, align with the tenets of goals, pathways, and agency.

The tenets of Hope Theory also align with the phases of Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008), specifically the Discover, Dream, and Design phases. As asserted, the Dream phase centers students' goals. One of the key features of the Discover phase is strengths-based story reconstruction, actively listening to students' stories, and identifying observable strengths demonstrated through students' lived experiences. Engaging in strengths-based story reconstruction can help facilitate students' sense of agency in being able to accomplish their goals. Finally, the Design phase, which is about co-creating plans to make dreams come true, can help students realize the pathways available to accomplish their goals.

Because helping students envision future success is so essential to cultivating positive psychology, appreciative advisors must carefully draw attention to the Dream, Discover, and Design phases in their practice. Several hopeful open-ended questions support the strategy (Morris, 2025) as illustrated in Table 1 below.

**Table 1***Helping Students Envision Future Success*

| Dream Questions   | Discover Questions  | Design Questions  |
|---|---|---|
| What does success look like to you? Why?                                | What is your proudest accomplishment? What was your role in making that happen? | What is one thing you can do this week to move toward a goal?                       |
| What are 3-5 things that would make this year a great year for you?     | What is a struggle you've overcome and how did you do so?                       | Who are the people in your life who can help you stay motivated towards your goals? |
| What areas of your life do you feel strongest in right now? Weakest in? | Think about a time where you were at your best. What were you doing?            | What campus resources do you think can help you accomplish your goal?               |
| If you had nine lives, what would you choose to do in each life?        | What do you like the most about yourself?                                       | What will you do if you encounter roadblocks?                                       |

**Teaching Students to Develop and Apply Their Strengths**

Teaching students to develop and apply their strengths invokes a core tenet of Appreciative Inquiry, which holds harnessing asset-based curiosity to fund improvement rather than engaging deficit-based thinking as a fundamental idea (Cooperrider Center, n.d.). This shift mirrors the origins of Positive Psychology, moving toward asset-based rather than deficit-based conceptions of mental health. Although Appreciative Inquiry originated as an organizational development approach, the same idea can be applied to student development, that students can improve by focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses (Bloom et al., 2008; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Yosso (2005) called attention to the deficit-based narratives that harm marginalized communities and introduced cultural wealth as an uplifting framework, identifying funds including aspirational, linguistic, familial, resilient, navigational, and social strengths.

Strengths-based advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005; Schreiner, 2013) is a sibling approach to Appreciative Advising and offers a five-step strengths development process:

1. Identify Students' Talents
2. Affirm Students' Talents and Increase Awareness of Strengths
3. Envision the Future
4. Plan Specific Steps for Students to Reach Goals
5. Apply Students' Strengths to Challenges.

The five steps align well with the Discover, Dream, Design and Deliver phases of Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008). Identifying and affirming students' strengths connect with the Discover phase and strengths-based story reconstruction. As advisors listen to their students' lived experiences, advisors can implement the first two steps by identifying and affirming the strengths they notice in students. Envisioning the future aligns with the

Dream phase, engaging in hopeful thinking about students' strengths and aspirations. Planning specific steps align with the Design phase, where students and advisors co-create plans in line with the students' dreams and visions. Finally, apply students' strengths aligns with the Deliver phase, where students implement the plan they have designed with advisor support.

## **Microaffirmations**

Connection, defined as “the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued, when they can give and receive without judgment, and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (Brown, 2010, p. 19), has been offered as a powerful antidote to the loneliness epidemic that has swept the United States (Brown & Murphy, 2020; Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Microaffirmations, “brief communications encouraging belonging, care, listening, and support,” fuel student development and thriving, and positively influence persistence and completion rates and student satisfaction (Demetriou et al., 2023, p. 101). Microaffirmations relevant for academic advisors include:

- Practicing active listening
- Recognizing and validating every student experience
- Affirming student feelings
- Helping students optimally process academic experiences
- Encouraging healthy student behaviors (Demetriou et al., 2023).

Actionable practices and inclusive language facilitate each microaffirmation as illustrated in Table 2 below.

**Table 2***Micro-Affirmative Practices*

| Micro-affirmation  | Practices  |
|--|--|
| <b>Practice active listening</b>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lean forward when talking with a student,</li> <li>• Focus on the student, repeat what the student said to show you are listening,</li> <li>• Follow-up with questions that show your interest,</li> <li>• Introduce opportunities that fit their interests / strengths</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Recognize and validate every student experience</b>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer verbal and non-verbal language that demonstrate you are interested and care about what the student is sharing;<br/> <i>"I see that you feel good about this, you should be really proud of what you've accomplished!"</i><br/> <i>"I can tell you are [strength]; have you considered participating in this program?"</i></li> <li>• Recognizing all the experiences, big and small<br/> <i>"I see you making progress in this area....good work!"</i></li> </ul> |
| <b>Affirm student feelings</b>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Validate students' feelings</li> <li>• Steer students toward developing productive perspectives on experiences<br/> <i>"I know this is difficult news"</i><br/> <i>"I understand you are frustrated"</i></li> <li>• Identify resources and options available to them</li> <li>• Acknowledge that challenge presents an opportunity for growth, healing, and empowerment<br/> <i>"I am concerned about you. How can I support?"</i></li> </ul>                           |
| <b>Help student optimally process academic experiences</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask students questions that will help them reflect on their academic experiences and decision-making<br/> <i>"What led to that decision?"</i><br/> <i>"Tell me why you think this happened."</i><br/> <i>"What will you do differently next time?"</i></li> </ul>   |
| <b>Encourage healthy student behaviors</b>                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize student's use of campus resources<br/> <i>"Thank you for coming in today to see me today"</i></li> <li>• Help students engage in opportunities that match and will develop their strengths<br/> <i>"Many successful students use this resource. What do you think about using this resource?"</i></li> </ul>  |

These practices all enhance the relational component of academic advising (NACADA, 2022) and serve to build the relationship between students and advisors. Active listening is an opportunity for advisors to demonstrate active engagement when students are sharing their lived experiences and aspirations (Jordan, 2015). Confirming behaviors like validating and affirming student experiences and feelings has been shown to foster understanding, success and student development, particularly for first generation students with limited income backgrounds (Pitts & Myers, 2023; Rendon & Munoz, 2011). For students who have experienced invalidating racial marginalization, affirmation and validation can improve advising interactions and foster trust (Lee, 2018). Academic advising offers a brave space for



students to make meaning of their experiences, developing their academic identity. Reflective conversations in advising contexts are often key to that meaning making and identity development (McGill, 2021). Finally, encouraging healthy behaviors is another way advisors can empower students. Advisor empowerment has been shown to significantly relate academic advising to student success (Young-Jones et al., 2013), so empowering students to be healthy will help them succeed holistically. Microaffirmations can be used across all of Schreiner's (2010) strategies and the Appreciative Advising phases (Bloom et al., 2008), offering flexible opportunities to positively engage students at multiple points of the advising experience.

### **Cultivating Positivity in Advisors**

At the end of every episode of the Emmy Award-winning reality competition show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, RuPaul says, "If you can't love yourself, how in the hell are you gonna love somebody else?" (Charles et al., 2009-present). This mantra can be applied to cultivating positivity in students: *If you can't be positive to yourself, how in the heck are you going to be positive to somebody else?* In addition to utilizing the same strategies used to cultivate positivity in students, advisors can engage in further cultivation strategies (Towle, 2016) to include:

- Being compassionate towards oneself
- Designing a personal board of directors (Bloom, 2008)
- Knowing one's own level of exhaustion
- Connecting with nature
- Setting and keeping boundaries
- Developing a self-care plan
- Seeking external support

These healthy practices ensure that advisors model the way for students (Kousez & Posner, 2023). Being vulnerable, self-compassionate, and authentic are all behaviors that cultivate a sense of worthiness and avert the crushing pressures of perfection (Brown, 2010). Seeking external support, including designing a personal board of directors (Bloom, 2008), ensures advisors have access to the funds of knowledge and experience from trusted mentors and colleagues and are utilizing primary care and mental health resources to remain physically and mentally capable of doing the hard work of advising (He et al., 2020). Knowing one's own level of exhaustion, setting boundaries, and connecting with nature ensure advisors are being mindful of their energy levels, so they can keep their bucket full to pour into students.

Bloom et al. (2008) described the joy of advising: "high impact advisors realize that the positive outcomes of advising sessions are not just limited to students; in fact, the real joy of advising occurs when advisors understand how fulfilling it is to really impact other peoples' lives and how much they can learn from their students" (p. 5). If advisors are not mindful of their energy, they can quickly lose sight of the joy that comes with serving as an academic advisor. They will experience burnout, which could lead to resentment, disconnection and inability to feel the joy of advising (Bloom et al., 2008; Soria, 2023). Finally, developing a self-care plan ensures advisors are caring for their own basic needs, so that they in turn can partake in the honor of supporting others at their best. Self-care strategies can include exercise, reflection, mindfulness, and making use of employee wellness programs (Wilcox, n.d.).

## Conclusion

This article explored the impact of positivity on student well-being and success and expanded upon identified strategies for cultivating positivity in students. Positivity correlates with improved health behaviors and student success outcomes (Cameron et al., 2015; Schreiner et al., 2018). Advisors can harness Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008) and a positive perspective (Schreiner, 2010) to cultivate positivity in their students. Tactics to cultivate positivity include fostering a growth mindset, engaging cognitive reframing, encouraging help seeking behavior, intentionally incorporating hope into the Discover, Dream, and Design phases, and spending time identifying, affirming, and applying student strengths to their collegiate experiences (Ackerman, 2018; Dweck & Yeager, 2019; Prochaska et al., 2009; Schreiner, 2013). Microaffirmations offer actionable positivity cultivating practices as well, to include: practicing active listening, recognizing and validating every student experience, affirming student feelings, helping students optimally process academic experiences, encouraging healthy student behaviors (Demetriou et al., 2023). If advisors are to be effective in cultivating positivity in students, they must cultivate positivity in themselves, which can be accomplished by being compassionate towards oneself, designing a board of directors for oneself, knowing one's own level of exhaustion, connecting with nature, setting and keeping boundaries, developing a self-care plan, and seeking external support (Bloom, 2008; Brown, 2010; He et al., 2020; Towle, 2016; Wilcox, n.d.). Given that positive perspective is beneficial to student well-being and success, cultivating positivity in students and the advisors who support students is recommended.

Advisors are key to encouraging a positive way of being in students. Notably, advisors serve not only as institutional navigators, but also as magnets for hope, strength, and joy in the lives of the students they serve. As stressors compound and students encounter complex challenges in settings within and beyond the classroom, advisors have the opportunity to model a positive outlook, which includes affirming experiences, nurturing resilience, reframing setbacks, and sustaining advisor well-being and encourage their students to do the same.

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