

## Enhancing the Online Student Experience through Appreciative Advising

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### Abstract

Student demographics within higher education have undergone significant shifts in the last decade, marked by a surge in enrollment at online institutions and an increasing number of students pursuing degrees later in life. This shift presents unique challenges and opportunities for universities seeking to support diverse student populations in virtual settings. In this article, we will describe how Empire State University, an online university, effectively incorporates Appreciative Advising into its advising and teaching practices, fostering student success and engagement. We will also explore specific strategies and provide resources to guide other institutions in implementing these valuable practices.

### Keywords

Appreciative Advising, advising strategies, online, virtual advising, student engagement, student success

Over the past decade, higher education has experienced a significant increase in students enrolling in online courses. In March of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced nearly every U.S. institution to go fully remote. Although many faculty and staff struggled with this immediate pedagogical change, for Empire State University, this was not a change at all.

Empire State, a University within the New York State public higher education system (SUNY), was founded in 1971 as a non-campus, distance-learning institution. In the 1970s and 1980s, students could complete their coursework at home, mailing in their assignments, dropping papers off at a local campus, or connecting with instructors via phone. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Internet allowed these students to complete their coursework 100% at a distance, through email, video conferencing, and learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle, and Brightspace.

As technology evolved, so too have the tools and strategies for academic advisement, especially when working with students at a distance. Like many innovative institutions around the country, academic advisors at SUNY Empire choose to utilize the Appreciative Advising framework when working with students due to its strength-based approach and proven track record of increasing retention and persistence (Miller et al., 2019). However, we also found that the vision behind Appreciative Advising provided a seamless and cohesive fit with the mission of SUNY Empire which focuses primarily on creating individualized degree plans and supporting non-traditional students who must balance multiple professional, personal, and familial obligations.

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The idea of SUNY Empire originated with Ernest Boyer, an individual who had enormous influence on the landscape of higher education through positions such as Chancellor to the New York State University system and advisor to former presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter. One of Boyer's lasting impacts was his argument for redefining the scope and role of the professor to move beyond the foundational pillars of teaching, research, and service and to expand them into "four separate, yet overlapping, functions: the scholarship of discovery (research), the scholarship of integration (connections), the scholarship of application (engagement), and the scholarship of teaching (pedagogy)" (Bucher & Patton, 2004, p. 4). Boyer believed that "by having a closer and more continuous interaction between [faculty] and the student, the integrity of the process of learning can be strengthened, not diminished" (Bonnabeau, 2000, para. 60).

With support from SUNY's Board of Trustees and New York State's Governor, Boyer developed a blueprint for a free-standing, distance-learning college in his proposal, *Prospectus for the New University College* in 1971 (Bonnabeau, 1996). Collaborating with individuals such as Jim Hall, Arthur Chickering, and Loren Baritz, Boyer helped create a culture of faculty mentoring at Empire State College, where education was highly individualized according to the student's goals and guided by a faculty expert. A core vision of this new faculty role at SUNY Empire, then, was to view the student as a co-collaborator in research and learning, similar to how Appreciative Advising encourages collaboration between student and advisor (Bloom et al., 2008).

### **Appreciative Advising & the Educational Planning Course**

Appreciative Advising is a strengths-based approach that focuses on building on a student's existing skills, interests, and aspirations (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). There are six key phases of Appreciative Advising that provide a framework for advisement: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver and Don't Settle (Bloom et al., 2008). By focusing on these six phases, Appreciative Advising can help students develop a deeper understanding of themselves, support them in setting meaningful goals, and aid them in achieving their full potential.

It is important to note that these phases are not strictly sequential in practice. In the actual advising process, we apply the phases in a flexible, non-linear manner. For instance, students may move from Disarm into Dream, then return to Discover before moving on to Deliver. Appreciative Advising is also incorporated into our online teaching practices at SUNY Empire through a required degree and career exploration course called Educational Planning, which is taught by the student's advisor. Educational Planning offers a personalized and exploratory process for students pursuing an individualized degree (i.e., a degree designed by the student themselves) to guide them toward meeting their academic, personal, and professional goals. The Appreciative Advising phases, discussed throughout this article, are also embedded into the online Educational Planning course through specific, reflective, and thoughtful course assignments.

#### **Disarm Phase**

The first phase in Appreciative Advising is Disarm, which is crucial for establishing a strong foundation between online students and advisors. Its core focus lies in creating a safe and welcoming environment for the student while simultaneously building rapport and trust between the advisor and the student (Bloom et al., 2014). This phase involves greeting students with a warm welcome, engaging in active listening that considers both verbal and nonverbal cues, and demonstrating empathy by acknowledging and validating the student's feelings and experiences. Building rapport can be facilitated by sharing personal anecdotes or

identifying shared interests. Furthermore, ensuring a comfortable and conducive physical environment is essential, even when working in virtual settings. Some things that advisors can do in the Disarm phase when working with online students are:

- Include a picture in their email signature
- Respond to student correspondence within 24-48 hours
- Decorate their office in a personal way, such as adding welcoming pictures, artwork, or displays of hobbies (Figure 1)
- Use fun or inspiring backgrounds in virtual meeting software (Zoom, Teams). For those who are not comfortable using a personal background like a home office, advisors can choose a virtual background instead that is personal to them, such as a picture of a place they have traveled, a favorite locale, or a seasonal image
- Create a website to welcome students and/or to feature their scholarship so students can learn more about the advisor on their own time

The Disarm phase in the Appreciative Advising process is vital as it reduces student anxiety, encourages open and honest communication, and fosters a trusting relationship; all of which are crucial for successful advising. Essentially, the Disarm phase sets the stage for the entire advising process by creating a positive and supportive atmosphere that empowers students to explore their potential and achieve their goals.

### Figure 1

*Advisor with a unique, personalized background, 2024*



*Note. Advisor with drawing of the school mascot riding a horse. Own work.*

### Discover Phase

The Discover phase marks the beginning of exploration in Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008) By promoting exploration, the online Discover phase cultivates students' existing strengths, including uncovering the student's unique strengths, talents, and positive experiences, while simultaneously identifying their values, interests, and passions. This phase involves employing open-ended questions such as "Tell me about a time you felt most successful" or "What are your proudest accomplishments?" while actively listening to both verbal and non-verbal cues. By carefully observing the student's responses, advisors can identify recurring themes and patterns in their experiences and interests.

Celebrating past (and future!) achievements and successes foster a positive and encouraging environment. This phase is crucial as it enhances student self-awareness by prompting reflection on past experiences, helps uncover hidden talents and interests, and provides valuable direction by enabling students to explore potential career paths and academic majors aligned with their strengths and passions. Some examples of processes that are reflective of the Discover phase are:

- Reviewing transcripts ahead of time to discuss accomplishments and areas of growth at their first meeting
- Using an intake form (Figure 2) before or during the first advising meeting to draw out information and focus on open-ended questions
- Follow up the appointment with an email that reviews the discussion, covers next steps, and provides specific action prompts for the student to follow through on
- Sending automated “kudos” emails based on student performance and GPA milestones

**Figure 2**

*Intake form for new student meetings*

Area of Focus	Example Questions
Determine if selected degree matches student's professional and educational goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I see that you applied for _____ degree. Can you tell me more about your goals and interests with this degree?</li></ul>
Verify if all prior college transcripts have been received to provide an accurate overview of credits earned and timeline for degree completion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I see transcripts from _____. Are there any other colleges you've attended in the past?</li></ul>
Determine if specific pre-reqs must be met for advanced level education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Are you planning to pursue an advanced degree after graduation?</li></ul>
Determine recommendation for how many classes/credits for student to pursue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When thinking about balancing work, life, and school, how many hours per week do you think you could dedicate to homework?</li><li>• What type of support systems do you have in your life to assist you while in school?</li></ul>
Determine if student qualifies for credit for prior life experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell me more about career and work responsibilities.</li><li>• Do you hold any certifications or licenses?</li></ul>
Verify if FAFSA has been received and if not, discuss alternative options for paying tuition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What questions do you have about paying for college? Are you familiar with our payment plan options?</li></ul>

Discuss and determine which mode of study the student would be most successful in.

- Are you familiar with our various modes of study: online, independent studies, study groups, and residencies. What mode do you prefer to take courses in?

Provide an opportunity for the student to ask questions or address concerns.

- What questions do you have for me?

*Note.* Example intake form developed by authors for student meetings. Own work.

## Dream Phase

Within the online Educational Planning course, we have incorporated the Dream phase into several assignments to help students identify their academic, personal, and professional goals. Personality and career assessments help the student identify their strengths, values, and opportunities for various jobs. Through assignments such as exploring the difference between structured and individualized degrees, students can consider degrees with specific and sequential coursework requirements or build their own set of course requirements following guidelines set for individualized programs. At SUNY Empire, we utilize the metaphor of choosing between a make-your-own sundae versus a traditional ice cream sundae to help students understand the difference between individualized and structured degree programs.

In addition to these assignments, advisors can help their students explore the Dream phase through:

- Assigning a writing exercise where the student creates their ideal job position
- Having students create a vision board or dream board and check in with them on their progress each semester as they proceed through their degree
- Encouraging students to utilize the Career Center to explore majors, careers, jobs, and more

## Deliver Phase

Students have the ability to determine whether they pursue a structured degree program (with a set list of required courses) or an individualized degree program that they will co-create with their advisor. If they choose the individualized degree program option, they are required to enroll in an Educational Planning course. The purpose of this course is to understand the stages of building their degree, map out a working timeline, and determine a potential graduation date to deliver these dreams and designs, thus beginning the Deliver phase.

In this course, students will finalize which courses they plan to take at SUNY Empire, including which classes will satisfy General Education requirements, and which classes count toward concentration requirements. When a student is building an individualized degree, they must also write a rationale essay to submit to an academic review committee to justify the reasons why they selected their courses, degree, and concentration. An academic review committee is comprised of a Director (administrator) and three faculty members who review each individualized degree program to ensure it meets all institutional and state education requirements. A rationale essay is a way to show the research that went into selecting specific courses and demonstrate to faculty and administrators how a student is meeting university-wide and state-wide educational learning outcomes.

Important best practices to incorporate from this phase as developed by Bloom et al. (2008) are:

- Motivating and energizing students through frequent check-ins
- Offering support and proactive advice and reiterating confidence in the advisee and their ability to succeed
- Utilizing intentional communication plans during critical points throughout the student's academic timeline, and encouraging students to keep an open, robust channel of communication with their advisors

To assist advisors with implementing the Deliver phase, we recommend developing and utilizing pre-made email templates with embedded links for students to easily schedule appointments, follow-through with directions, and access important, time-sensitive material. Figure 3 shows an example email from one advisor to their caseload of students sent at the beginning of the semester.

### Figure 3

*Image of an email with specific calls to action to support online students*

**From:** Jaclyn Kulls <jaclyn.kulls@sunyempire.edu>

**Subject:** Reminders about the Fall Term!

**Importance:** High

**Are you ready for fall classes to start?**

Now that you are registered for the fall term, review the following steps to ensure you are ready to begin!

1. Visit the SUNY Empire Online [Bookstore](#) and order your books. If you do not see your textbooks listed, check your [Learning Contract](#) in the Student Portal for more information or email me directly.

2. Check your [Account Statement](#). **Tuition is due no later than Friday, September 5.**

- If you are using Financial Aid, be sure to [view and accept any financial aid awards](#).
- If you have a balance larger than \$1000, [follow these directions](#) to enroll in a time payment plan to avoid having your registration [cancelled](#) for non-payment.

3. Attend [JumpStart Online](#), a multi-day virtual program between August 26 – 28<sup>th</sup> for new and returning students. All sessions are open to you, and you are free to pick and choose as many as fit your schedule. If you are unable to attend a live session, recordings are available at the bottom of the page.

4. Need help **navigating Brightspace** for your online courses? Attend our [Drop-in Help Sessions](#) on the following days:

- Thursday, August 21 – 7:30 p.m.
- Monday, August 25<sup>th</sup> – 7:30 p.m.
- Thursday, August 28<sup>th</sup> – 7:30 p.m.

5. **Add/Drop ends Monday, August 8<sup>th</sup>.** If you need to adjust your fall courses for any reason, please be sure to check with me first.

*Note.* Example template email sent from advisor to enrolled online students. Own work.

### Don't Settle Phase

During the Don't Settle phase, advisors challenge students to elevate their expectations. As a virtual institution with predominantly non-traditional students, we encourage our students to ask questions early and often. As previously noted, the Appreciative Advising framework is not a linear process. Throughout the advising process, we incorporate constructive and proactive inquiries to establish positive relationships. Technology is leveraged to conduct virtual conversations and disseminate written resources. Personalized signature emails reduce workload, answer common questions, and enhance response rates, which support the advising process.

Professional experience suggests that students equate the time devoted to academic advising with the quality of the guidance they receive and the level of care they feel.

Allocating 45 minutes to an hour for virtual meetings allows for meaningful interactions, shifting relationships from transactional to transformative. This intentional investment of time communicates genuine care, builds trust in our expertise, and supports students' development of a growth mindset, self-esteem, and self-advocacy skills.

Lastly, collaboration involves applying time and guidance to connect students with faculty, staff, organizations, and graduate institutions. This collaboration can take many forms, including introductory emails, virtual meetings, and/or nominations. Through these varied interactions, students build meaningful connections that support successful transitions. As a result, they gain confidence and take greater ownership of their future, entering the next stage of their journey with higher expectations and a stronger sense of purpose.

## Opportunity Programs

In this article, Opportunity Programs (OP) at SUNY Empire is used as an applied example of how Appreciative Advising has been adopted. Empire's OP holistic model of student services addresses the unique needs of underrecognized, historically underserved, and underrepresented students. Students self-select into this program and are accepted based on specific risk-identified categories, including, but not limited to, family income, first-generation college student status, education history, and academic potential. Once accepted into OP, students remain in the program from matriculation through graduation. This model allows OP to track outcomes over time. There is considerable pre- and post-programming data on retention, persistence, and success, indicating OP students, despite their risk factors, place at or above their general population peer group.

The success of OP students is the result of our holistic approach to serving students. The OP model aligns well with the Appreciative Advising tenets, emphasizing the closing of the equity gap through intentional relationship-building, proactive support, and collaborative partnerships.

The foundational pillars of OP's holistic mode are Intentional Support and Compassionate Advising. These pillars align closely with the "Disarm," "Discover," and "Dream" phases of Appreciative Advising. Establishing trust and rapport at the outset is critical in fostering meaningful advisor-student relationships. Advisors work to create a welcoming environment where students feel seen and valued, encouraging them to share their aspirations, strengths, and challenges. Intentionally designed advising sessions guide students in reflecting on their goals and uncovering their potential, enabling a thoughtful exploration of both academic and personal paths.

In the virtual environment, where physical cues may be absent, advisors must rely on nuanced listening and active observation of verbal inflections or written communication to identify shifts in students' needs. Technology also plays a vital role in effective engagement. Advisors utilize tools like pre-drafted, yet personalized, signature emails to maintain regular communication with students. These emails not only address common queries but also strengthen the advisor-student bond, fostering a sense of care and belonging.

The South Carolina University Advising Center found that students who spent 30 minutes or more in advising sessions were more satisfied overall than those whose meetings were shorter (University Advising Center, 2019). Consequently, advisors can confidently consider time as a resource, dedicating meaningful blocks of interaction to demonstrate their commitment, thereby enhancing students' overall advising satisfaction.

## Collaborative Partnerships and Resource Navigation

The third and fourth pillars of SUNY Empire's OP framework for working with Opportunity Program Students (Figure 4) prioritizes partnerships, resource navigation, and faculty engagement. In a virtual advising environment, connecting students to faculty members, support staff, and external resources requires intentional effort. Students must trust their advisors' referrals, as these recommendations often become the bridge to critical resources. Collaboration within this framework ensures students are equipped with the tools necessary to thrive academically and personally.

For example, through proactive outreach from OP, we engage faculty in our students' academic success and work alongside them to foster a supportive educational environment conducive to personal and professional growth. This collaborative effort enables us to work together to provide intentional support tailored to each student's unique needs.

Additionally, advisors guide students to financial literacy programs, academic support personnel, mental health resources, and career services. These intentional partnerships create a holistic support network for students. They come to know and trust our partners as they do us. Together, we all collaborate in the creation of Academic Success Plans. Recognizing the constraints faced by non-traditional students, such as full-time employment or family responsibilities, these efforts are tailored to accommodate virtual access and flexible scheduling. Cultivating individualized, intentional support ensures that no student falls through the cracks.

**Figure 4**

*SUNY Empire's Opportunity Programs 5 Pillars of Excellence in Holistic Student Services*



*Note. 5 Pillars of Excellence in Holistic Student Services. From *SUNY Empire Opportunity Program's Strategic Plan*. Brown, D. M. (2024)*

## High-Impact Practices for Professional Growth

The final pillar from Figure 4 focuses on high-impact practices, which are reimagined for non-traditional students in virtual environments. While traditional opportunities, such as study abroad, may not be feasible for many non-traditional students, OP's holistic approach, that incorporates an appreciative approach, emphasizes professional development, networking, and communication skills. We offer ways to enrich the academic experience through our virtual OP Student Community Hub—a place where students find a sense of belonging. Through our Enrichment Speaker Series, workshops, and monthly meetings, we aim to provide meaningful experiences that promote both personal and professional growth. These transformative practices help students navigate their journey, equipping them to achieve their goals and transition to the next phase of their lives with confidence.

The Opportunity Program at SUNY Empire illustrates how aligning with the Appreciative Advising framework can elevate advising into a truly comprehensive support experience. Through intentional support, compassionate engagement, collaborative partnerships, and high-impact practices, the program helps non-traditional students navigate challenges and realize their potential. This holistic approach is more than a model; it is a philosophy grounded in equity, growth, and the belief that every student can succeed.

## Summary of SUNY Empire Student Services

SUNY Empire offers a robust suite of student services tailored to support non-traditional and virtual learners. These include a laptop loaner program, a virtual food pantry for emergency aid, mental health resources through free technological apps, and access to local support networks. Academic tutoring is provided by professional learning coaches and supplemented with 24-hour third-party tutoring services. Career services are expanding with new positions and an enhanced internship program, while student success coaches collaborate with academic advisors to ensure personalized academic guidance. Additionally, a dynamic student government fosters community engagement through clubs and an annual student conference co-hosted with faculty and staff, reflecting the institution's commitment to holistic student success.

The development of SUNY Empire's student services is driven by a system-wide commitment from the State University of New York (SUNY) and supported by internal data tracking. Since SUNY Empire is an online institution, it adapted these efforts by establishing resources such as a Virtual Food Pantry and partnering with organizations like Single Stop to connect students with existing federal and local benefits. By data and tracking, including the internal monitoring of student requests and utilization rates—such as applications for the Virtual Food Pantry and Emergency Grants—the university can regularly assess need, allocate resources, and ensure students receive timely support.

This section highlights the transformative role of Appreciative Advising in supporting non-traditional students in a virtual learning environment. This approach equips students with the tools, confidence, and guidance necessary to successfully navigate flexible degree plans.

A compelling student testimonial underscores the effectiveness of this method:

I found the best aspect of this learning experience was the knowledge, support and encouragement provided by my mentor. My mentor consistently dedicated time and energy to making sure I understood the assignments, degree plan, as well as the college's expectations. I feel confident moving forward with my degree plan, knowing that I have an educated, caring and supportive mentor in my corner.

This testimonial reflects the unique blend of educational planning and compassionate engagement that appreciative advising fosters, ensuring students feel empowered to achieve their academic and personal goals despite the challenges of a virtual setting.

## Conclusion

Appreciative Advising promotes a positive lens to examine and cultivate holistic student development, fostering a culture of thriving across every corner of a distributed institution. The six phases of Appreciative Advising—Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle—offer a powerful framework for fostering meaningful connections and guiding students towards academic success. By intentionally cultivating positive relationships and focusing on students' strengths and aspirations, advisors can bridge geographical divides and create a unified advising experience.

The resources provided throughout this article are meant merely as a starting point for student relationship building; the sky is truly the limit when creating advising tools that not only empower individual learners to navigate their academic and personal journeys with greater confidence but also help students to contribute to a more engaged and supportive overall educational experience. We encourage you to not only utilize these resources but also make them your own. Academic advisement is not a one-size-fits-all approach; it's an ever-evolving partnership that is tailored to each student.

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