# Advising Black Graduate Students' Academic Persistence through the Phases of Appreciative Advising

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## Abstract

This article explores the implementation of the Appreciative Advising framework's phases toward promoting academic persistence among Black graduate students. Systemic challenges and inequities have hampered the academic persistence of Black graduate students in higher education. To address barriers such as tokenism, socioeconomic hardships, microaggressions, and racial battle fatigue that impact Black graduate student populations, advisors must employ effective strategies that support this student population's specific needs and experiences. This conceptual manuscript provides an overview of each phase of Appreciative Advising, exploring implications for advising Black graduate students, and recommendations for future research on Appreciative Advising Black graduate students.

## Keywords

Black graduate students, Appreciative Advising, academic persistence, academic advising

Statistically, Black graduate students made up 13% of all graduate students in the United States for the 2018-2019 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). According to the Council of Graduate Schools (2018), 43% of Black students enrolled in doctoral programs within the United States earned their doctorate within six years compared to 66% of their White counterparts. In addition to being a marginalized population systematically throughout graduate programs, Black graduate students thematically face a lack of academic and social integration due to a lack of resources, socialization, and social support (Ross et al., 2016).

Mentorship is crucial for the academic persistence of Black graduate students in higher education (Smith et al., 2021). For many, the impact of strong mentorship often leads to increased participant and graduation rates (Alston et al., 2017). However, existing literature indicates that Black graduate students often lack the mentorship necessary for success (Brunsma et al., 2017). Although previous research has highlighted the policies and institutional environments that influence the academic experiences of Black graduate students (Brunsma et al., 2017; Ford & Bertrand Jones, 2023; Ross et al., 2016), further research is needed on mentoring Black graduate students through student-advisor relations. Therefore, this conceptual manuscript provides higher education practitioners with effective advising practices for Black graduate students by incorporating effective Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008) practices to support Black graduate students' academic persistence.

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## Literature Review

Research suggests that effective mentorship relations, specifically student-advisor relationships, directly influence academic outcomes (Lew et al., 2020). This literature review highlights components within previous research that synthesize relational themes in the literature regarding academic advising and academic persistence among graduate student populations, as well as the experiences of Black graduate students with academic advising and persistence.

## Academic Persistence within Higher Education

Tinto (1975, 1993) broadly defined *academic persistence* as the ability of students to persevere in their academic pursuits despite facing challenges, setbacks, or obstacles. Scholars argue that within graduate populations, social integration, academic integration, and students' socioeconomic conditions serve as critical factors that influence academic persistence (Lew et al., 2020; Tinto, 1975). Additionally, King and Chepyator-Thomson (1996) found that student-advisor relationships, institutional support, and academic engagement are key factors influencing academic inclusion among graduate populations (King & Chepyator-Thomson, 1996). Pascarella and Terenzi (2005) also argued that the attributes of academic advising relationships influence the academic persistence of graduate student populations. As such, Pascarella and Terenzi noted that the nature of the relationship in graduate education is critical as it not only motivates the student for academic success, but also strengthens their connection beyond academics. Although Tinto's (1975, 1993) broad definition of academic persistence applies to Black graduate student populations, socioeconomic and psychosocial dimensions, such as tokenism, lack of financial support, and racialized microaggressions, have uniquely impacted Black graduate students' experiences with academic persistence within higher education (Brunsma et al., 2017, King & Chepyator-Thompson, 1996; Sue et al., 2007).

## Black Graduate Students' Experiences with Racial Microaggressions

Racial microaggressions are frequently described throughout scholarly research as the covert or overt remarks or actions, marginalization, micromanaging, and acts of hostility (often psychological) influenced by race that impact Black graduate students' academic persistence (Sue et al., 2007). Microaggressions are implemented to invalidate, insult, or "other" individuals who do not share similar psychosocial variables as the person(s) who perform microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007). Mainstream literature acknowledges the impacts of racialized microaggressions on academic trajectories and their links to the rise in scholarly literature regarding the urgency of investigating coping mechanism trends within minoritized student communities, which are used to resist and psychosocially assist individuals dealing with racialized microaggressions (Burt et al., 2018; Ford, 2025; Henry, 2021). Recent research suggests that Black graduate student populations face systemic inequalities, which impact their academic experiences and psychosocial health (Ford et al., 2025; Ford et al., 2021; Henry, 2021). For example, systematic inequities often include a disproportionate lack of access to institutional funding and exclusion from academic networks (Burt et al., 2018). Scholars categorized tokenism, sexism, and institutional racism as racialized microaggressions that Black graduate student populations often experience within Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), which influences their academic outcomes, including persistence to degree (Walkington, 2017).

## Academic Advising

Academic advising practices provide graduate students guidance, support, and mentorship in their academic and professional pursuits (Kuh et al., 2001). The term "adviser" was first used on Johns Hopkins University's campus in the 1880s, during the second advising era following the resurgence of elective courses within higher education across the United States, which expanded the curricula of educational majors (Kuhn, 2008, pp. 5-6). Grites (2013) suggested that impactful academic advising "enables the academic advisor to take a holistic view of each student to maximize that student's educational experiences to foster his or her current academic, personal, and career goals toward future success" (p. 45). Although scholars argue that mentorship, coaching, counseling, and teaching are core attributes of academic advising, academia struggles to incorporate a uniform model of academic advising that can be practiced throughout all institutions (Barnes, 2010; Gordon, 1984; White, 2015).

Scholars, like Watson and Dawson (2007), defined the role of an advisor as a practitioner who:

> Helps students select classes, informs them about performance expectations, guides them in research topics, and suggests conferences for initial submissions. The advisor also provides the student with honest feedback on their performance, enabling them to develop as a scholar. (p. 6)

Regarding graduate student populations, scholars suggest that accessibility, the ability to tailor advisor practices for students' academic endeavors based on their individual needs, and incorporating students into their professions in a timely manner are positive characteristics that graduate students attribute to an outstanding graduate advisor (Bloom et al., 2007). Jones and Wilder (2013) explored advising Black women in doctoral programs and have positively attributed the advisor's ability to assist students with navigating through "hidden curricula" as a practical skill set to support the underrepresented student populations' experiences with academic persistence and a sense of belonging.

## Black Graduate Students' Experiences with Academic Advising

Scholars argued that advisors must consider external socioeconomic factors, such as marriage, career, and long-term financial obligations, when effectively advising Black graduate students (Burt et al., 2021). Black graduate students often highlight their scholarly values as priorities in productive advising relationships, which motivates them to graduate (Felder et al., 2014; Perez et al., 2019). These effective advising relationships contribute to research that connects inclusive and encouraging advising practices to academic success within Black graduate student populations (Felder, 2010; Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Ross et al., 2016). Researchers (Wiley, 1989; Wood & Williams, 2013) argued that academic advising Black graduate students directly impacts academic and social integration outcomes . Research also highlights adverse academic outcomes within Black graduate populations because of prejudicial encounters that involved microaggressions, racism, and other discriminatory acts within Black graduate student populations in juxtaposition with a lack of advising (Barker, 2011; Felder & Barker, 2013).

### Appreciative Advising Framework

Bloom et al. (2013) defined Appreciative Advising as the "...intentional, collaborative practice of asking positive-open ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (p. 83). Deriving from Cooperider's (1990) organizational theory of Appreciative Inquiry, Bloom and Martin (2002)

developed the Appreciative Advising framework, which Bloom et al. (2008) later expanded to support students' academic trajectories by practicing positive, reaffirming engagements within advisor-student relationships. The Appreciative Advising framework comprises six phases that advisors can apply to support student success: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle (Bloom et al., 2008). Appreciative Advising is a framework for advising Black graduate students through student-advisor relations and supportive dialogue, with a focus on considerations for academic persistence among Black graduate students (Isreal, 2013).

## Disarm

The "Disarm" phase emphasizes creating a positive and welcoming advising environment by allaying any negative assumptions, attitudes, or biases advisors may hold about students (Bloom et al., 2008). Disarming students in advising appointments involves creating a safe space for students to express themselves and fostering a non-judgmental and supportive advising relationship. Advisors can initiate open-ended introductory questions to welcome Black graduate students into the advising discourse and gather critical information that supports students' academic persistence. For instance, advisors can inquire about the student's academic background and their decision-making process when choosing their institution, department, and academic major. Another consideration within the Disarm phase that advisors can implement in their advising practice for Black graduate students is sharing their own academic experiences as graduate students, providing opportunities for students to ask questions about their academic goals and potential barriers they may face. For advisors with different racial backgrounds, this approach may require intentional effort to acknowledge differences in lived experiences. In a recent study on Black undergraduate men, Ford et al. (2023) discovered that Black students may perceive a disconnect from advisors who do not share a similar cultural or racial background, especially when facing challenges of racial microaggressions or tokenism, primary when working with White advisors.

The Disarm phase presents an opportunity to mitigate these challenges by encouraging advisors to center students' narratives and lived experiences. Examples of questions that advisors can implement within the Disarm phase include:

- What was something today that you weren't expecting but was a happy surprise?

- What has helped you feel most comfortable since starting this program?

- What is something you are looking forward to outside of your graduate program this year?

## Discover

The "Discover" phase focuses on helping students explore their strengths, values, interests, and goals to support their academic journeys (Bloom et al., 2008). Advisors use open-ended questions and active listening techniques to uncover students' unique talents and aspirations. By focusing on students' attributes and experiences, advisors help them gain self-awareness and clarify their academic and personal goals. Advisors of Black graduate students can initiate open-ended questions within student advising appointments to unveil unique attributes that support their academic persistence. Examples of questions that advisors can implement within the Discover phase include:

- Have you found any strategies or techniques that helped you maintain focus and determination during challenging academic periods?

- Can you talk about the support systems, mentors, or resources that have played a crucial role in your academic perseverance?
    - How have they helped you overcome obstacles and achieve success?
- Can you reflect on how your cultural background and identity have influenced your academic perseverance?
    - Are there any unique strengths or perspectives that have helped you overcome barriers in your academic journey?

## Dream

The "Dream" phase involves advisors supporting students to visualize their goals, tasks, and aspirations that impact their academic trajectories (Bloom et al., 2008). This phase helps advisors draw congruencies between the strengths, values, interests, and goals Black graduate students noted in the Discover phase and their dreams for the future (Bloom & Martin, 2002). By helping students identify their goals during the Dream phase, advisors can interpret the students' academic objectives and develop a personalized plan to support their academic persistence. The Dream phase is a precursor to establishing an outline for students' academic trajectories within the "Design" phase. Examples of questions that advisors can implement in the Dream phase include:

- By the time you graduate, what would you like to accomplish academically?
- What skills would you like to learn to strengthen your academic performance as a graduate student?
- Paint me a picture of you thriving after graduation. What do you think that would look like for you?

## Design

The "Design" phase involves advisors collaborating with students to develop a roadmap or action plan that helps students achieve their goals (Bloom et al., 2008). Advisors help students identify resources, opportunities, and strategies to overcome challenges and successfully navigate their academic journey. This principle of co-creating with students emphasizes the importance of personalized and proactive advising that empowers students to take ownership of their educational experience. Advisors should recapitulate assets, values, and attributes that their students have expressed in developing objectives to support academic persistence. Questions that advisors can implement within the Design phase include:

- How can we leverage your strengths and interests to create a personalized academic plan that fosters your motivation and academic persistence?
- How would you like me, as your advisor, to hold you accountable and support you as you work towards your goals?
- What milestones or checkpoints would feel you would want to reach in your doctoral student journey?

## Deliver

The "Deliver" phase emphasizes the importance of follow-through and accountability. Advisors help students implement action plans, monitor their progress, and provide ongoing support and guidance through the Deliver phase as students accomplish what they have set out to do in the Design phase (Bloom et al., 2008). By fostering a culture of accountability,

advisors ensure that Black graduate student populations academically persist and progress toward their goals. Questions that advisors can implement within the Deliver phase include:

- As you make positive progress in your goals, how will you self-evaluate your academic performance and ways you can strengthen your academic persistence?

- What programs, strategies, and goals should we implement to support your academic persistence effectively?

- How can we continue to collaborate as you work on accomplishing your academic goals and dreams?
    - How can I support you in your journey?
    - What are ways we can communicate so that I can stay updated on your academic progress within the program?

## Don't Settle

Bloom et al.'s (2008) "Don't Settle" phase encourages advisors to challenge students to push beyond their comfort zones and strive for a higher level of excellence. In the Don't Settle phase, advisors help students recognize their unlimited potential and resist settling for mediocrity. Advisors support students by providing guidance and resources to help Black graduate students explore new opportunities, take calculated risks, and push their boundaries. The Don't Settle phase also encourages advisors to help students develop personalized objectives and co-create them together. Questions that advisors can implement within the Don't Settle phase include:

- What can I do to help you build upon the success you have already experienced?

- What academic standard are you placing upon yourself throughout your graduate studies?
    - What would it take to raise those standards a bit higher than what you already have them at?

- You will accomplish many great things in this program. What are the ways you are going to pause to celebrate your accomplishments?

## Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Implementing the phases of the Appreciative Advising model (Bloom et al., 2008) effectively allows academic advisors to integrate students' identities and experiences into their advising practices. Additionally, it allows educators to create a supportive and empowering environment for their diverse student populations. The Appreciative Advising model (Bloom et al., 2008) offers a valuable framework for academic advisors to address and combat microaggressions that Black graduate students may encounter, particularly within Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). During the "Disarm" phase, it is recommended that advisors focus on creating a safe and empathetic space that encourages open dialogue about the lived experiences of Black graduate students and acknowledges the presence of microaggressions within higher education settings. This phase serves as a foundation for trust-building and rapport, enabling advisors to better understand the unique challenges faced by Black graduate students. During the "Discover" phase, advisors must tailor their advising procedures to help Black graduate students explore their strengths, cultural assets, and resilience. This focus on uncovering and elevating the strengths of Black graduate students fosters a sense of empowerment and self-awareness that will be used to positively impact students' academic persistence. By amplifying the voices and achievements of these students,

advisors implement a resistance method to the adverse effects of microaggressions on their self-esteem and academic motivation. In the "Dream" phase, advisors should help Black graduate students envision their future and collaboratively develop strategies to navigate challenges, such as racialized microaggressions, often experienced by Black graduate students at PWIs. Advisors can assist students of color in navigating their academic and personal goals by providing tailor-made advising strategies that target potential development areas and promote academic persistence. It is recommended that advisors utilize the "Design" phase to co-create tailored support systems that are sensitive to the needs and experiences of Black graduate students, thereby reinforcing their sense of belonging and connection within their institutions. Next, in the "Deliver" phase, advisors can provide guidance, advocacy, and validation, ensuring that students of color feel supported and affirmed throughout their academic journey. Lastly, in the "Don't Settle" phase, advisors continue to follow up with students to keep them motivated and on track to reach their goal. By utilizing Appreciative Advising, academic advisors can actively combat microaggressions, tokenism, and alienation by promoting a more inclusive and equitable environment within PWIs and fostering the academic success and well-being of students of color.

## Considerations for Future Research

Future research using the Appreciative Advising model (Bloom et al., 2008) should explore its impact on student retention, experiences with academic persistence, academic advising, academic achievement, and student identity development at other institution types, including HBCUs, community colleges, and tribal colleges, for Black graduate students. It should also explore the role of cultural responsiveness and how this framework fosters a sense of community and success among Black graduate students. Additionally, future research can explore the effectiveness of Appreciative Advising in mitigating the impact of microaggressions, examining its long-term effects on student retention, academic achievement, and overall campus climate. Although these are two important areas of research, we also suggest future work explore the impact of Appreciative Advising on Black men and Black women in doctoral education. This manuscript specifically explored the experiences of Black graduate students, but it is widely known, understood, and researched that there are different institutional norms and experiences based on degree, field and major. Although master's degrees are graduate degrees, research shows that both degree types are different.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this conceptual manuscript's emphasis on advising Black graduate students through Appreciative Advising underscores the potential of a strengths-based advising approach in understanding and navigating their experiences and achievements. This manuscript highlights the value of strength-based advising strategies, support systems, and resilience that contribute to academic persistence within Black graduate student populations by shifting the focus from deficits to strengths. Advisors must implement the Appreciative Advising framework's phases to support Black graduate students' academic persistence in addressing achievement gaps, promoting equity, and fostering integrative practices in higher education. By centering the voices and experiences of this underrepresented population, this manuscript contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Black graduate student experiences. Advising Black graduate students' experiences through the Appreciative Advising framework benefits this population, and furthermore, it enriches the field of higher education by offering valuable insights that enhance advising practices and create more inclusive and equitable academic environments for all students.

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