

## Navigating Uncharted Waters: Appreciative Advising for Masters Students

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The percentage of students enrolled in graduate study has risen 57% from 1988 to 2008, making graduate education one of the fastest growing segments of higher education. Of the approximately 2.7 million students pursuing post-baccalaureate degrees, most are students in master's degree programs (Choy & Cataladi, July, 2011). While some master's students may pursue careers in research, many are interested in career advancement, professional exploration, or switching fields altogether. Typical master's degrees may be earned in as little as 18 months as full-time or part-time students, in a traditional classroom setting, via online instruction, or a hybrid of both modalities. Because of the variety of master's programs and the general trend toward a desire for post-graduate education, the popularity of master's programs is likely to continue.

Despite the growing number of master's students in colleges and universities in the US, only three studies (Kolbert, Morgan, & Brendal, 2002; Rossiter, 1999; Schwartz & Holloway, 2012) have been published exploring the advising process and mentoring relationships of master's students. Faculty members often serve as students' primary advisors and/or mentors in graduate school. Most literature on post-baccalaureate advising has tended to focus on managing and mentoring doctoral students (See Barnes, Williams, & Stassen, 2012). Research has shown the benefits of having a strong faculty-doctoral student relationship, the importance of both parties choosing to enter the relationship, and the perceived availability of the advisor (Schlosser, Lyons, Talleyrand, Kim, & Johnson, 2012). Early research specifically examining the relationship between master's students and their faculty advisors by Rossiter (1999) suggested that a caring relationship created a space for the student to explore new possibilities and in turn fostered an environment wherein students were motivated to meet expectations posed by advisors. A more recent study of the relationship between master's students and advisors found two dominant beneficial characteristics among the participants in the study: reconstructing (student achieving greater understanding of self) and regenerating (faculty advisor feeling renewed by giving back through teaching and advising students) (Schwartz & Holloway, 2012).

Implementing Appreciative Advising (AA) may be a useful framework for advising and working with master's students. AA includes six main constructs, Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. In AA, advisors practice positive questioning and active listening to make students comfortable (disarm), learn about the abilities and strengths of the students (discover), encourage students' dreams (dream), collaborate on a strategy to actualize dreams (design), back students as they implement their plan (deliver), and to push students and themselves to continue doing and improving (Bloom, Hutson, & Ye, 2008). In terms of the specific use of AA in graduate advising, the Higher Education and Student Affairs graduate program at the University of South Carolina - Columbia practices it to learn more about the student's life experience and aspirations as the foundation for a plan to help them move through the program (Bloom, Hutson, He, Amundson, Buyarski, Christman, ...Kucharczyk, 2009). AA is flexible to

meet the individual needs of students with multiple starting points, paths, and professional goals. Plus, using AA requires relatively fewer resources because multiple check-ins and short meetings replace the longer and more intensive discussions that usually occur only when the student is in crisis. Above all else, the relationships begun by using AA may be the most important and enduring legacy of its application for master's students.

At the University of South Florida (USF), in the fall semester, 2012, an Appreciative Advising component was added to new student orientation for Masters of Arts (MA) students in Gerontology in the School of Aging Studies. Established in 1967, the MA Program in Gerontology is among the oldest programs in the US offering graduate coursework in aging (Haley & Zelinski, 2007). In the fall, 2012 semester, a diverse group of 25 students, who had various professional goals, and who were at different stages of their careers and lives, enrolled in the program. Many had just completed a bachelor degree, while others had been working in human services and related fields for several years. Students in the program may take courses in classrooms and/or online. Upon graduation, alumni of the MA program work in a variety of settings, including service agencies throughout the aging network, the long term care industry, and research centers (Haley & Zelinski, 2007). Most of the current group will likely use their degree to work in the field, with a few opting for further study and research in doctoral programs.

### **Advising MA Students in Gerontology at USF**

Although the MA Program Director has typically led advising for MA students in Gerontology, over the last year, it was noted that more students were interested in completing field placements in lieu of a traditional course during their program of study. In response to the demand, the Internship Program Director was charged with designing and developing more project-based opportunities for MA field placements in the five-county-region served by USF.

Over the past six months, working with various site supervisors (many of whom are alumni of the MA program), at least five project-based field placements (i.e., placements where the MA students dedicate their time to a specific project like a health fair for the public, working as a victim advocate for elders, or designing a social marketing plan for a local organization serving older adults) have been developed. Project-based field placements offer students the opportunity to have tangible experience for their resume and job interviews, as well as a clear role during their time with the participating agency.

Matching a student with an appropriate site and project is a process that requires careful planning. To prepare for this new role, the Internship Program Director sought campus resources to learn more about academic advising. Part of this learning process included attendance at a presentation on Appreciative Advising (AA) in March, 2012. Convinced that incorporating elements of AA would enhance the field placement process, the Internship Program Director attended the 2012 Appreciative Advising Institute to continue to learn about AA for a trial implementation with the incoming MA students. The result is that for the 2012 cohort, the MA Program Director is handling academic advising. The Internship Program Director is responsible for advising as it relates to

students' professional development and career planning, meeting at least monthly to discuss progress.

### **Disarm Phase**

The Disarm phase included a group information session for all new students admitted in the program for the fall, 2012, semester. This annual event is led by the MA Program Director. This year, however, emphasis was on field placement and the participation of the Internship Program Director. The new students were invited to participate in an orientation session that provided an overview of the program, the curriculum, and other opportunities offered in the program, specifically field placements among local agencies. After reviewing the basic elements of the program, students were introduced to all the ways they could be connected to research labs, volunteer opportunities in the community, and potentially to a formal project-based field placement near the completion of their coursework. Exchanging information and answering questions represented one aspect of Disarm.

### **Discover and Dream Phases**

During orientation, students were asked to complete a brief, strengths-based questionnaire (See Appendix) designed to initiate the Discover phase and foreshadow the Dream phase. Students were asked to provide information about their lives, academic experiences, strengths and values, and current short and long-term goals. Students were given the option of completing the questionnaire that day or to spend more on it at home. Eight new students attended the orientation, and the response rate was 100%, with six students completing during the orientation and two others finishing them at home.

Survey results indicated that students perceived they possessed a wide variety of strengths, values, and reasons for pursuing a master's degree. Students had short-term goals that included high performance in their first graduate classes and learning more about the Tampa Bay area, and long-term goals that included earning placement into clinical or doctoral programs, working in the field, or starting their own businesses. At least one student commented on how helpful it was to complete the questionnaire and begin thinking positively as they started graduate school. Another student, in person, thought it was great to think through their strengths at the start of the program. The comments from students are anecdotal, though encouraging. For faculty, the AA-grounded questionnaire provided truly helpful information about the entering class and served as a foundation for creating the caring learning environment that previous literature found to be important (Rossiter, 1999).

### **Additional Phases**

All phases of the AA model are important, though one of the most significant parts of AA is what happens with the stories and details students share. The MA Program Director or the Internship Program Director has, or will soon have, follow-up meetings of about 30 minutes in duration with the students, to expand upon their goals and strengths and identify complimentary curricular activities. These meetings were

scheduled between 10 and 16 weeks after the initial orientation, and all of the students will be seen by the 16<sup>th</sup> week. Some students, particularly those planning a research career and applying for doctoral programs, are already engaged in research with a faculty member. In the Design phase, a growing contingent of the new MA students, at least 50%, are collaboratively working on an action plan that involves orienting themselves to the area, discovering opportunities in the aspect of aging that interests them, and developing volunteer activities. Using data from orientation and subsequent individual meeting(s), as the Deliver Phase unfolds, the MA program director matches students with classes that relate to their interests and strengths. They will then be connected with summer field placements by the Internship Program Director. With advising from the Internship Program Director, approximately half of the new MA students will have an individualized, professionally meaningful summer internship that will allow for networking, work in the student's area of interest, and additional skill-building. During the student's final semester, both the MA Program and Internship Program Directors will be responsible for the Don't Settle Phase, which may include applying for jobs, doctoral programs, and other professional opportunities.

### Conclusion

The MA program in gerontology at USF has a long history of producing graduates who go on to successfully serve older adults in Florida and beyond. The emphasis on creating a program of tailored study, which may now commonly include a field placement, and the shift in advising, has been an exciting time for our students and the program. Although this semester was a trial, we plan to build on what has begun and to collect data to continue to refine, and eventually to disseminate, our practice as we strive to meet - and hopefully surpass - the students' expectations.

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## Appendix

### MA Orientation

Anticipated Semester of Graduation:

Please describe your best academic experience to date. What was happening? What did you do that made it so great? Who was involved? Please describe it in as much detail as possible.

Please list 3 of your greatest strengths. Strengths in this context means activities and attributes that make you feel strong and make you feel energized, which may be different than simply what you may excel at doing.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Please list the 2 things you value most whether they are about career, yourself, family, or a community.

- 1.
- 2.

Reason for pursuing a master's degree in Gerontology:

Please discuss your goals...

...for the fall semester.

...for the year.

...five years from now.