

## **Disarming: Strategies to Build Rapport with All Students**

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Appreciative Advising teaches us that we must disarm students in order to delve into the subsequent phases of discovering, dreaming, designing, delivering, and not settling with them (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Part of this disarming phase is providing a safe and supportive environment for all students. Each student comes in with a unique perspective and idea of what an advisor does. Through building rapport with students advisors can clarify their role, helping to ease any tension that may keep students from opening up to them. This is especially important when working with timid, shy, or anxious students.

There are several reasons that advisors may need to focus on disarming students. First, some students may be apprehensive about the advising sessions. It can be intimidating for students to meet with advisors they know little about, especially if they are not familiar with what advisors do and/or how these meetings are conducted. This initial buildup of fear and apprehension can make it more challenging for advisors to disarm students during the first meeting. Second, some students might not feel comfortable voicing their concerns or need help, and they may be reluctant to open up at first until these fears subside. In order to disarm these students and make them aware that advising is a safe place, it is important that meetings provide a warm and predictable environment. By providing this consistency advisors can reduce the stress that may be brought on by new and unpredictable events (Grillon, Lissek, Rabin, McDowell, Dyr, & Pine, 2008). The purpose of this article is to provide advisors with tips for disarming students, before, during, and after advising appointments.

### **Disarming Students before the Meeting**

Advisors make an impression on students before they even meet with them, so they need to focus on ways to begin creating a positive and welcoming first impression to students before meeting with them in person. One way to accomplish this objective is for advisors to provide students with information about whom they are and what their role as advisors is before the advising session. It is much less scary for students to meet with someone that they know a little about before the meeting. By providing this information, advisors give students an idea of what to expect during the advising appointment. Some ways that advisors can acquaint students with what to expect include sending them an introductory email prior to the appointment that includes a link to the advisor's biography and picture on the campus website. Another way to disarm students, and provide a predictable environment is to have a video introducing what to expect during an advising meeting and/or even showing them what an advising session looks like. Rob Freidhoff (2012), advising director at Grand Valley State University, uses the video found at the following link to welcome students: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFmk4wbMTYo>. Videos like the one Rob Freidhoff has produced will help ease students' concerns by educating them about what they can expect during their advising appointment.

Another way to disarm students before an appointment is to provide them with a sheet explaining things to think about before the advising session and a list of topics that are typically

covered during the first advising meeting. This will allow students to think ahead of time about what questions they have, as well as to let them know that the purpose of the meeting is not limited to discussing classes. Having this prior knowledge will allow students to think about what they would like to talk about and prepare them for the types of questions they may be asked, allowing them to feel comfortable sharing information with an advisor.

### **Disarming Students during the Meeting**

Advisors need to make a good first impression with all students. This initial meeting allows students to see that advising sessions are a safe environment for them to share their concerns, hopes, and dreams. In order to prepare students, advisors can give them an overview of what will be covered during the meeting, while assuring them they will have the opportunity to add additional agenda items they would like to cover. By reiterating what will happen students can feel a little more at ease because they can mentally prepare for the meeting.

It is especially important for advisors to allow for awkward silences during the meeting and to simultaneously demonstrate to students they are comfortable waiting. This allows students to collect their thoughts and the courage to share those thoughts. Anxiety can often cause people to close up and be hesitant to share (Leary, 1991). Some students feel anxious about what to say, so advisors that are comfortable with silence help reduce students' anxiety about what will happen next. If there are long periods of silence, advisors can simply smile, maintain a relaxed physical demeanor, and let students know that they have plenty of time and space to talk. If students seems particularly uncomfortable by the situation asking an open-ended question may relieve tension. An example of this would be asking students how their feeling about current classes, or what their favorite thing about being a student is. It is also helpful for the advisor to model the type of response they are looking for through sharing a personal experience, or an experience of their role model. For example, an advisor might share what made them interested in becoming an advisor when asking a student what they are passionate about. This gives students an example to follow, and can help clarify what type of response the advisor is looking for.

Another strategy for getting to know students' thoughts is to have students fill out a survey at the end of the advising session. Not all students will be comfortable voicing their concerns and successes, so writing them down may come easier (Leary, 1991.). The exit survey should provide students with the opportunity to share any topics that they still have questions about, what they found helpful about the advising session, and what suggestions they have for improving the advising experience. This demonstrates to students that the advisor values students' feedback and it gives students an opportunity to ask questions they may not have been comfortable raising during the meeting itself.

### **Disarming Students after the Meeting**

Although the advising session may have gone well, it is important to continue to disarm students by letting them know that the advisor is there as a consistent and predictable resource. This demonstrates to students that their advisor really cares and genuinely wants to know how things are progressing for them. Some students may be afraid to initiate contact, so advisors that

reach out to their students let the advisee know that it is ok to contact them outside of scheduled meetings.

Another strategy that advisors can employ is to develop a planned schedule of communication with students. By providing this predictability in communication, advisors let students know they care about them and can provide additional opportunities to get their questions answered and their needs met. A follow up email is a perfect opportunity for advisors to start this communication outside of scheduled meetings. The email reiterates that students has been heard, as well as welcomed by the advisor.

### **Conclusion**

Each student comes into advising with a different set of hopes, dreams, and ideas of what they want for their future. It is the advisors responsibility to tap into these dreams in order to be a resource for achieving them. Advisors do this by disarming students in a warm predictable environment. Just as each student comes in with a different set of goals, they also come in with different expectations of what advising will be. Through disarming students before, during, and after the initial meeting advisors can address these different concerns and provide proper challenge and support to their students.

### References

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