

## Implementing Appreciative Education in On-Campus Student Employment

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### Abstract

Every administrator, faculty and staff member at a higher education institution must recognize the important part they play in impacting a student's ability to flourish on campus and beyond. Implementing appreciative education (AE) in areas across an institution, such as on-campus student employment programs, is one way to guarantee that lasting effect can be harnessed and benefited by all involved. Through the use of two professional narrative lenses, this article reveals multiple applications of AE that supervisors could use to be better equipped to build a flourishing workplace for their student employees.

### Keywords

on-campus student employment, appreciative education, appreciative advising, higher education

Every administrator, faculty and staff member at a higher education institution must recognize the important part they play in impacting a student's ability to flourish on campus and beyond. Implementing appreciative education in areas across an institution, such as on-campus student employment programs, is one way to guarantee that lasting effect can be harnessed and benefited by all involved. Through application of Appreciative Advising in individual supervision meetings and team engagement activities, student employee supervisors can be better equipped to build a flourishing workplace for their students and staff.

### Introduction of Two Perspectives

The authors of this paper are committed to offering diverse perspectives to allow the reader to engage from their own vantage point. They expect these perspectives will bring awareness of the importance and impact that appreciative education can have on student employment and ways to practically implement it for a new or seasoned supervisor. The two voices that are offered in this analysis come from a full-time higher education administrator and a new graduate assistant pursuing a doctoral degree in higher education.

Erin is a Student Affairs professional with over ten years of student employee supervision experience in higher education settings. Her current role includes direct supervision of two full time graduate assistants that manage a team of twelve undergraduate student employees. Through her experiences with graduate and undergraduate student supervision, Erin has been able to hone her skillset and engage her employees in positive and lasting personal and professional growth. However, she recognizes that there are always opportunities to improve in her role as a supervisor. She will discuss ways that she plans to implement appreciative education tactics in her individual supervision and team engagement with her direct supervisees and student employee team in her department.

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Sarah is a first-year doctoral student in Higher Education and Student Affairs. Additionally, she works as a graduate assistant in the Health Promotion office implementing alcohol programming and research. Her major responsibility includes issuing surveys related to alcohol and drug use, sexual activity and assault, and bystander intervention. After completing two full semesters of course work while being employed in this position, she has gained knowledge that will aid in her expression of ways to implement stronger supervision techniques and positive team dynamics that could have a holistic impact on student employees based on her own experiences.

### **A Supervisor's Perspective**

Lewis (2011) states that the best workplaces are defined as those that achieve exceptional organizational performance, that is, where outcomes dramatically exceed common or expected performance. In over ten years of experience in higher education, I (Erin) have witnessed moments of this type of workplace outside of my own immediate environment. Conversely, I have chosen to look at my own lack of workplace positivity as something to move away from and strive to implement positive strategies when working with student employees who work under my administrative sphere. After years of enhancing and adjusting my supervision approach with undergraduate and graduate student teams, I now know that I was always doing what my previous supervisors did when working with me. Though I know that I have been able to overcome difficult and demeaning supervisor experiences in my own professional world, I see that my experiences have only caused me to set my expectations too low as a supervisor for my own staff.

During a recent academic term, I came to learn the importance of taking control over my own supervisory style and implementing portions of empirically researched strategies that involve appreciative education and positive psychology. Since that time, I have been able to implement portions of Appreciative Advising (AA) techniques with undergraduate student staff and graduate assistants. I have already seen small improvements in resiliency, higher levels of goal setting and positive deviance since implementing some of these strategies, though I plan to intentionally apply more techniques as I grow this new supervisory style.

#### ***The 6-D Model and On-Boarding***

Within the AA framework, there is a six-phase model which incorporates stages of building rapport, uncovering strengths, understanding hopes and dreams, constructing plans to propel dreams to realistic goals, providing support for those goal pursuits, and challenging the goal setter to set high expectations for their own experiences (Bloom et al., 2013). Each of these phases are narrowed to a single 'D' word, which constitutes the 6-D Model of AA; disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver, and don't settle. The ideal first step when considering restructuring a student employment program using AA would be update the current on-boarding process that occurs in the first few weeks of a student employee joining an employment team.

In my experience supervising a student employment team, I have learned that setting expectations early is integral for a successful academic year. In the past, I have been the one to create and articulate these expectations and then turn to the team to also create expectations of me during our first staff meeting. This was the way I was taught to encourage student employees to create accountability for themselves and supervisor. However, a gap occurs when a supervisor ignores the underlying power differential that is at play in those first few meetings. The disarm phase recognizes that power differentials do exist on both individual and organizational levels, and though this was probably something I always knew, I did not respect the weight it could bring to my relationship with my student employees early

on. A way to combat this power differential is to first recognize it and then work towards creating a safe environment where student employees can feel that their voice is valued and respected. Something as simple as using positive language, non-verbal and verbal, when beginning discussions and asking questions about team expectations can generate this type of environment. Below is a list of example questions to use when setting expectations with a student employment team from a disarming perspective.

- Think about a time when you have worked on a positive team. What were all of the elements that made that team positive?
- What is a role you have played in a successful team?
- What does a positive work environment look for you?

By asking the individual student employees to write down their answers to these questions and use these answers to begin a group discussion about expectations, every voice can be heard, and the stage is set for a positive and disarming conversation to begin.

The disarming phase of AA can be easily implemented into the early stages of building a student employment team, as well as the other phases discover and dream. In a similar fashion, having questions to pose to the team during the first few staff meetings, or trainings, of the academic year can begin the discover and dream phases and create an atmosphere that encourages innovation and positive thinking. These phases can be implemented with student employment teams through group strengths discussions and sharing goal pursuits for the academic year.

Questions such as, what does it look like when you are at your best? and what are your hopes for this academic year?, can lead a student employee to begin the process of thinking through their personal strengths and hopes, which are part of the discover and dream phase of the 6-D Model. These questions can be asked to the whole team in order to start the dialogue about personal strengths and their hopes or expectations of self for the entire year. Discovering strengths and potential dreams can be “exposed through the seemingly tangential approach of asking people to give accounts, or tell stories, of when things have gone right or been at their best” or goals they hope will occur before the end of the academic year that will lead to a stronger sense of self (Lewis, 2018, p. 162).

When strengths are highlighted early in the forming of a student employee team, it can be a way to add storytelling to aid in building rapport among other team members and the supervisor. However, strengths discussions can also be implemented at other points in the academic year through exercising strengths spotting with a team (Linley, 2008). The impact that can come from having someone who has come to know you, over several weeks or months, identify strengths they see in you can be validating and perpetuate positivity and acknowledgment of another member’s value on the team. Similarly, when asking student employees to identify goals they hope to accomplish before the end of the academic year, they can begin to visualize and dream about their future in a positive way as a member of a team and university community.

### ***Supervision Techniques and Strengths Spotting***

In contemplation of a supervision structure that incorporates the 6-D Model throughout the on-boarding process with a team, it is important to also think through ways to support these steps in individual supervision meetings with a student employee. Starting initial supervision discussions with helping student employees identify their strengths (discover phase), even before they truly know their job duties, may seem counterintuitive. However, there is evidence to back up this less than traditional way to training a student

employee for the workplace. If we know that “positive emotions increase our creativity and capacity for learning” and starting a new relationship with a student employee from a positive perspective could create these desired emotions, it is safe to say that building strengths conversations into supervisions before training of general job duties begins makes logical sense (Linley, 2008). When a student employee is in the right emotional state to learn, they are more likely to engage in the process of understanding the tasks required to successfully engage in general job duties.

All phases of the 6-D Model can continue to be implemented into a supervision process throughout the academic year with a student employee. In each phase, a supervisor has the ability to create guiding themes that are connected to each D, develop agendas that help the student employee contemplate specific questions that will lead to each D’s integration and continue to build a stronger rapport with their student employee that could otherwise level out or stagnate without regular check-ins using the AA phases. In essence, if a supervisor can come to each meeting with their student supervisee prepared to go beyond surface level conversations related to job duties, it could encourage that student to holistically engage in making the most of their higher education experiences and feel more connected to their campus community.

### ***Final Thoughts on Compensation***

Utilizing the AA process to engage student employees in a deeper connection to their jobs, academics and university as a whole can be rewarding for the supervisor and student employee. However, it is important to think about the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards when considering implementation of any learning process for a student employee. Throughout any implementation phase of AA, there could be opportunities for a supervisor to request that a student employee work through self-reflective activities to be done outside of the work setting for deeper thinking and processing time.

Something that I have learned when requesting that my student employees work on projects or exercises outside of mandatory work meetings is to respect the compensation expectations of that student employee. If they are an hourly student employee, a supervisor should consider the importance of that employee being compensated for their time working on things outside of their daily job duties. Additionally, if the student employee is paid through stipend or other equally monetary valuation (e.g. discounts on room and board), supervisors should consider other incentives for work accomplished outside of job duties, such as flexible work hours or time off. Not only will this continue to build mutual respect among the supervisor and team, but it will perpetuate the importance of flexibility to help the student employee feel a sense of value and appreciation to invest in their team throughout their college experience (McClennan et al., 2018).

### **A Student Employee’s Perspective**

Looking at my (Sarah) experience from a positive psychology lens, I see my time in my office as a work in progress. Although my supervisor has spent many years in his role, I see that the supervision aspect of his job has significant opportunities for improvement. Many of my supervisions are less than ten minutes and give little opportunity to offer or receive feedback. I feel a lack of connection with my supervisor and office, which I know could be drastically improved with some of the AA techniques I will discuss. Additionally, I feel the lack of quality supervision can be improved and add a positive dimension to the entire office. Recently, the Health Promotion office has been in the process of moving under a new umbrella called Health and Wellness, which includes Campus Recreation and Counseling and

Psychological Services. I believe moving Health Promotion to a wellness-focused department will do great things for our office, but this will also bring about a new management style and supervision structure. My hope would be that the ideas I express will offer the potential for me to advocate for new ideas and growth in my experience as a student employee under new management.

### *Appreciative Advising*

Throughout my experience as a student employee, I have been challenged to reflect on ways my employment within the department could be improved. In critical analysis of my personal experience, I know that implementing parts of AA in supervision is one of those areas where I, as a student, could flourish in my role and feel a stronger sense of rapport with my supervisor, be more connected to my department and feel inherently valued. Through the techniques offered in AA, I believe a supervisor can improve the life of their student employee. AA is a framework for guiding advisors from delivering good service to great service (Bloom et al., 2013). Although AA is typically used with academic advisors in a higher education setting, it is fitting to transfer this same skillset to a supervisor of student employees. As discussed earlier with the 6-D Model, I can see how this would be an appropriate initiative to utilize in supervision. In my experience, I know having my supervisor implement AA at the beginning of our time working together would have a greater impact on our relationship and my work performance.

The idea of AA comes from Appreciative Inquiry (AI) which is described as searching for the positive in situations and using this positive to create change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Hutson et al. (2009) focus on AA in the realm of academic advising and found research to prove that AA creates change that increases academic performance, success, and retention. It seems the same could be true for AA if implemented in supervision with student employees. The idea of disarming during onboarding to make student employees feel welcome, comfortable, and included is important, and something I would have appreciated in my introduction to the Health Promotion office a year ago. Based on my experience, I know AA could make new employees excited to be at work, cultivate greater performance, and encourage them to return to their jobs on campus each year.

One of the strengths of AA, if implemented into supervision, is the idea of metacognition. Metacognition refers to an individuals' awareness and capability to reflect, monitor, and intentionally develop their cognitive processes (Hutson et al., 2009). The idea of reflecting on my work in the Health Promotion office could prove to be a strength that would allow me to understand where I came from, what I have been doing, and how I could improve in the future. Supervisors who could add metacognition into their supervision time with employees could aid in creating deep thinkers and encourage them to reflect and explore.

Another AA concept that is worth exploring to improve supervision with a student employee is self-efficacy. The idea of self-efficacy can be an important aspect of AA because nurturing it through goal setting processes could help a student employee overcome difficulties that may arise during their time in the workplace and help them learn how to remain resilient. In my current position, I face difficulties that would be worth setting goals to overcome with my supervisor. Whether it be collaborating with peer health educators, issues with collecting and analyzing surveys, or interpersonal relationships within the office, I would benefit from my supervisor encouraging me to set high goals and support me to achieve them to increase my own self-efficacy.

A final takeaway from Hutson et al. (2009) on the impact of AA is sense of belonging, which is crucial to onboarding a student employee. College students have a strong sense of belonging that is evident by the need to fit in through organizations such as sorority and fraternity life, learning communities, on campus clubs, honor societies, etc. There is no difference between that sense of belonging from out of class activities and the need to fit in at a place of work on campus. Student employees may feel out of their comfort zone at a job on campus and creating a space where they feel welcome and appreciated is vital to the success of the student and department.

When pitching the idea of AA to supervisors, it may be important to mention the strengths it provides to the supervisor, as well. AA can aid in fostering the supervisor's cognitive abilities through the facilitation of this student development practice. Supervisors can simultaneously reflect on their own experiences and understand their strengths and visions, as well as a metacognitive understanding of their own job (Hutson et al., 2009). In another study, Howell (2010) concluded that advisors, similar to supervisors, could enjoy better relationships with their students, friends, and family members by incorporating AA with their employees regularly.

In my experience as a student employee, I would be excited for the opportunity to work with a supervisor who employed AA into their supervision time with me. Through my own research, it appears AA could have many benefits for me as the student employee and my supervisor. Not only do the techniques infused in AA create a healthy, safe and welcoming space for student employees to work, it also gives them a sense of belonging and gives value to their voice in the department. AA could be the wave of the future for supervision in higher education for student employee supervisors. The benefits of AA are undeniable and could make student employees feel appreciated and more engaged in their respective departments.

### ***Coaching Techniques***

Besides AA, coaching could be another aspect of positive psychology that could be implemented to create a successful environment for student employees. Coaches help clients create resources and “overcome obstacles in the pursuit of mutually agreed upon goals” (Biswas-Diener, 2009, p. 545). A main element of coaching is active listening. I think that supervisors could take note of active listening and hear what their student employees are saying. Active listening also encourages the coach to summarize what the client has said, and I think that could be helpful in a supervision experience. I, as the student employee, could then reflect back on what I have said through my supervisor's summarization to help me in the reflective process.

Biswas-Diener (2009) suggests other coaching tools that could be beneficial for supervisors. The use of powerful questions, which are usually open-ended to help engage students in thoughtful self-exploration and self-reflection, can be used when meeting for individual supervisions. Additionally, he stated that reframing the negative and turning it into a positive can be helpful and a great tool that supervisors could use with student employees to create a more positive outlook on difficult situations that may arise. Another aspect of coaching is encouragement, such as cheering on the student, celebrating successes, and showing appreciation for their work in the office. Finally, he suggests using deadlines to set time-sensitive, achievable goals, which could benefit in aiding a student employee to create clear expectations for the effort and steps they should take to accomplish a work-related task.

### ***Implementing AA in a Workplace***

Going beyond supervision, AA could have implications for the way an entire department thrives. For instance, Tollefson (2017) wrote a brief article on an experience of AA being implemented at new student orientation at South Dakota State University (SDSU). Two advisors from SDSU who attended the Appreciative Advising Institute visited orientation leader training and presented on AA. After that presentation, it was determined that new student orientation would adopt AA and focus on disarming, discovering, and dreaming with incoming students during orientation. First, they implemented a “Dream Wall” where new students could write their dreams on a sticky note that would then be presented at their graduation in future years. Then, those same students were asked to complete a “Daring Dreams Delivered” activity. This activity asked what the biggest dream a student has for their future, if the dream was theirs or someone else’s, asked them to rate their passion about their dream, people who could help them reach their dream, roadblocks to their dream, and steps they could take to get closer to their dream. Tollefson (2017) discovered that after introducing AA into new student orientation at SDSU through these activities, there was an increase in students’ overall feelings of belonging from 92.42% in 2013 to 94.38% in 2016.

With the examples from SDSU in mind, the 6 D’s from AA can be similarly introduced into department and office initiatives. As stated earlier, AA may play a role in retention of student employees and increase their satisfaction with their time at work. In my current role, I would be excited and energized to create a “Dream Wall” for the Health Promotion office and see what everyone’s goals are for the year. Additionally, implementing a departmental “Daring Dreams Delivered” exercise could give others in the office the opportunity to see how we could all accomplish our dreams and identify who in the office can support us in achieving them.

With the essential elements of AA at play, supervisors could apply tools that would aid in advancing a student employee to a place of higher self-efficacy, confidence in their work and a positively connected feeling to their job and institution. I believe beginning the supervision process by implementing AA would have made my personal experience in the Health Promotion office more productive and positive because I would have the potential to thrive in my place of work, especially if being supported and encouraged by my supervisor. If supervisors start AA from the onboarding process through to setting goals with their student employees and office environment, there could be a lasting effect on the positive culture and thriving of any higher education department.

## Conclusion

Student employment on campus can create an atmosphere where a student can feel a deeper connection to their workplace, campus and community when appreciative education (AE) is at the forefront of a supervisor’s practice. “One of the most exciting aspects of AE is that it provides a flexible framework for delivering innovative practices that develop individuals and organizations and optimize performance” (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 9). By sharing two perspectives of on campus employment from a supervisor and student employee, our hope would be to offer insight into opportunities to enhance a student employment program. Using elements of AE, such as the 6-D Model of Appreciative Advising, strengths spotting and coaching techniques in supervision and on-boarding, on campus employers can offer their students opportunities to feel a stronger sense of self, commitment to their own growth and a feeling of belonging that will enhance any student’s connection to their institution.

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