

Caring Through the Screen: Advising Techniques for Success in the Virtual World

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Abstract

The world was catapulted into an online environment when COVID-19 changed our lives in 2020, and higher education was no exception. Through Appreciative Advising and the Appreciative Mindset, academic advisors can promote positive change in student success, retention, and personal well-being in this new and ever-changing digital landscape. In this article, three advising professionals across Canada and the United States examine the ways in which an Appreciative Mindset can deepen connections and provide support to students, even in a virtual environment. From advising session preparation, to intentional follow-up with students, Appreciative Advising is not only a methodology, but also a lens in which to see advising work. This article seeks to provide tools and strategies to advising professionals in this virtual world to connect with students, to create a welcoming and safe space, and to show care and support through the screen.

Keywords

appreciative advising, COVID-19, appreciative mindset, virtual advising, advising strategies

Aside from parental education level and income, a personal connection to one's institution of higher education is the largest predictor of graduation (Astin, 1984). The Appreciative Advising framework, which is rooted in Positive Psychology (Seligman, 2002) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 1990), focuses on building these vital connections from the onset (Bloom et al., 2008). Since its inception, Appreciative Advising has provided higher education practitioners with tangible practices to building meaningful relationships with students. Many of the practices focus on visible and in-person tactics. Similar to nearly all other industries, COVID-19 changed the way higher education conducted business and advising was no exception. Many realized that technology did not replace advising efforts, but served as the medium through which we advise. Consequently, we must focus on what academic advising means and realize that Appreciative Advising is not something advisors do *to* students, but rather something we experience *with* students, colleagues, as well as within ourselves.

Each author of this article has a unique experience and application of Appreciative Advising, and offers a positionality statement to share their lived experiences (see Table 1). In this article, the authors first discuss applying the Appreciative Mindset. Ben discusses utilizing this mindset with students, Leticia shares the application of the mindset through interactions with colleagues, and Tyler explores how this mindset can be employed towards oneself. Following the discussions regarding the Appreciative Mindset, Tyler provides specific tactics to disarm before the appointment with students and to set goals with students in a pandemic. Leticia offers advice in utilizing videos in an appreciative style in the workplace. Finally, Ben provides insights into gathering student voices to inform advising office practices.

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Table 1. *Positionality Statement*

	Leticia (38)	Tyler (32)	Ben (35)
States & Countries lived in	Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Kentucky, Germany, Nigeria	Ontario and Nova Scotia Canada, New York, France	Ohio, South Carolina
Additional salient identity characteristics	Christian (AME), Aunt, cis-gender heterosexual female, Able-bodied, road cyclist, doctoral student, HBCU Grad, HSI Employee, third generation Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc.	White settler living and benefiting on Mi'kma'ki, the unceded ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq. Able-bodied, cis-gendered gay male, dancer, baker, partner	Able-bodied, first-generation student, doctoral student, athlete, father, husband
Institution Types	2-year comprehensive community college, Hispanic Serving Institution, Face-to-Face & Online Modality	4 year public medical-doctoral university	2-year public community college and 4-year private university
Education: Bachelor's (B) Masters (M) Doctorate (D)	B- Biology M- Educational Leadership D- Leadership in academic advising (expected: 2024)	B- Management M-Education (Counselling)	B- Visual Communication Technology M- Higher Education and Student Affairs D- Higher Education (expected May 2022)

The Six Phases of Appreciative Advising

Although this article does not seek to explore and examine the six phases of Appreciative Advising per se, it is important to provide a brief overview of them for context. As outlined in *The Appreciative Advising Revolution* (Bloom et al., 2008), the six phases of Appreciative Advising flow together to create a framework for doing the advising. The following outline can be found on appreciativeadvising.net:

Disarm – Make a positive first impression with the student, build rapport, and create a safe and welcoming space.

Discover- Ask positive open-ended questions that help advisers learn about students' strengths, skills and abilities.

Dream- Inquire about students' hopes and dreams for their futures.

Design- Co-create a plan for making their dreams a reality.

Deliver- The student delivers on the plan created during the Design phase and the adviser is available to encourage and support students.

Don't Settle- Advisers and students alike need to set their own internal bars of expectations high.

Appreciative Mindset

In order to successfully implement appreciative advising with students, it is important that advisors shift their way of thinking to one that focuses more on strengths and opportunities as opposed to challenges and barriers. One learns to appreciate the skills and uniqueness of the student, which is referred to as the *Appreciative Mindset* and is the foundation of Appreciative Advising (Bloom, 2013). Without this core mindset shift, advisors will find it difficult to properly enact the 6 phases of appreciative advising.

This section will focus on adopting and using an Appreciative Mindset toward the three main players in an advising relationship. First, we will look at our interactions with students, followed by our colleagues, and most importantly, ourselves.

Appreciative Mindset Toward Students

Advising through the computer screen took many advisors into a new experience. Many were content with the daily advising practices of students coming in person to the office for guidance. COVID-19 forced advising to take place entirely in the digital environment and created an equal space between student and advisor.

The first phase of Appreciative Advising, *Disarm*, emphasizes creating a welcoming atmosphere in our offices to build rapport with students (Bloom et al., 2008). For the first time, advising is taking place in a truly shared environment and often where the student is more comfortable than the advisor. In the initial interactions with a student, advisors utilize non-verbal and observation skills to understand who the student is. Advisors often notice tone expression, vocalized experiences, and physical presentation. Through digital interactions using platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Skype, advisors join students in their private spaces including dorm rooms, bedrooms, parents' homes, etc. Advisors began getting to know students faster and more detailed than ever before. Consequently, advisors were able to ask students so many more questions based on what was visible on camera to get to know students through the Disarm and Discover phases.

Although advisors may feel awkward because of what they may now see in advising appointments, this feeling of uncertainty about what to share is not too different from what students often experience in our advising offices. Students meet with higher education professionals, who care immensely and holistically about them, but are often unsure of what they should tell their advisor. Now, the experience for both students and advisors within the virtual space seems more mutual, and effectively disarming starts with a genuine "Hello!"

Appreciative Mindset Toward Colleagues

In addition to adjusting the ways in which we approach our students, our interactions with colleagues have also shifted as a result of COVID-19. In 2020, we may find ourselves in deeper silos than we have ever imagined. The silo of "working from home" (WFH) for some has not been all bad. For example, many of us quickly adapted to being the champions of our schedule, cooking in a slow cooker, taking breaks to say hello to the mail carrier, increased productivity, and became experts in digital competency across many platforms (i.e., Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Voice, One Drive, fillable PDF documents, etc.) We often utilized the technology tools we already had available and learned new ones as needed.

Although the online environment has had opportunities to thrive, the virtual environment also has challenges to overcome. The challenge becomes intentionally

transcending the Positive Psychology aspect of Appreciative Education in our seemingly lost connections with colleagues. Positive Psychology, focuses on helping human beings lead happy, healthy, and prosperous lives (Seligman, 2011). Consequently, applying *relational authority* and the principles within the Discover phase of Appreciative Education become critical. As Siddiqee (2021) noted:

Relational Authority is a practice. It is not a singular set of rules and actions, it is an invitation of being that opens the opportunity for deeper connection. The five dimensions of Relational Authority are: listening, transparency, integrity, care, and expertise. While each of these are integral components on their own, the more they are used in conjunction with one another, the more powerful and transformational. (para. 6)

Although these are unprecedented times, we can use a variety of strategies and tools to build and maintain connections, not only with the students whom we serve but also with our teams. For example, to build connections with team members, *walking meetings*, had been used prior to COVID-19. Featured in a 2015 Harvard Business Review article, Dr. Ted Eytan Medical Director of the Kaiser Permanente Center for Total Health and a vocal advocate of walking meetings stated, "our brains are more relaxed during walks due to the release of certain chemicals... This aids executive function, which governs how we focus on tasks and deal with unforeseen events" (Clayton et al., 2017, para.6). Although this walking meeting strategy was implemented pre-COVID-19 the continued practice of connecting in this virtual environment was essential to cultivate. The continued practice of connecting on a personal level was welcomed going from phone and virtual conference appointments as was going from walking and talking.

Furthermore, as we transitioned to the 100% work from home environment, the amount of time spent behind a computer or on the phone for many became overwhelming and a new term, *Zoom Fatigue*, emerged among the global community, which "describes the tiredness, worry, or burnout associated with overusing virtual platforms of communication" (Wolfe, 2020, para 2). Many advising professionals were no exception to this phenomenon. To remain connected to colleagues, while reducing the amount of Zoom fatigue, *virtual walking meetings* may be a viable strategy. Following the Bloom et al.'s (2008) approach to enhancing advising interactions based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, here are several suggestions on how to engage colleagues through a virtual walking meeting:

1. **Reach out to colleagues to schedule the "Pause on Purpose Meeting" (Disarm)** – When setting up the meeting, provide details regarding the intent of the meeting and format. See an example email in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. *Sample Email*

Subject: Let's Connect – Virtual Walking – Pause on Purpose – Advisor Name Your Name

Body:

Hello Juanita, Good Morning!

I hope you're doing well. Let's connect "Pause on Purpose" meeting (Summer 2021), but this time it will be a virtual walking meeting. Use your earbuds and get walking and talking. Please use the following link to schedule our Virtual Pause on Purpose Walking Meeting (audio only).

Look forward to connecting with you,
Leticia Wilson, Director of Advising Initiatives

2. **Connect with colleagues and prepare questions to start the conversation (Disarm)** – Greet colleagues by name, and a smile, because even over the phone the smile transcends across the line. Share where the walking environment is located and background sounds. Consider asking Appreciative questions to make connections with colleagues. For example, “What has been the highlight of your day or week?” or “What is your favorite spot to walk on campus?”
3. **The Walk & Talk – (Discover)** – Through this format, we are no longer watching each other over the virtual conference call, but rather intentionally focusing on what is being said using audio only. This set-up provides an uninterrupted opportunity to connect with one another. We can focus on asking open-ended questions to draw out interests, strengths and passions.
4. **Connect with colleagues by asking about the future (Dream)** – Draw out insights of what our colleagues have learned about themselves during the pandemic and what they hope for themselves, students and the institution in the future.
5. **Determine what plan is needed to support advisors reach personal and professional goals (Design)** – This conversation is not a performance review, but an intentional way to connect with the individual.
6. **Make it count (Deliver)** – Recall what we have learned about each other and the amount of walking that has been accomplished.
7. **Challenge and Support (Don't Settle)** – Emphasize the importance of holistic health, mind, body, and spirit. Challenge our colleague to pursue new goals and engage in continuous communication.

Appreciative Mindset Toward Ourselves

Appreciative Advising practices with roots in Positive Psychology can change the very way in which we interact with students and colleagues. Working through the six phases of Appreciative Advising in an intentional way can build rapport and trust in the office space. Although these techniques may appear seemingly easy to put into practice, they do require practice, patience, and most of all, self-compassion. As important as it is to apply an Appreciative Mindset with others, in order to be fully engaged in the process, it is important also to view ourselves from an appreciative perspective. As Stratton-Berkessel (2020) emphasized, “[a]s a life-centric change process, Appreciative Inquiry pays attention to the best in us, not the worst; to our strengths, not our weaknesses; to possibility thinking, not problem thinking” (para. 11).

All of us face challenges to overcome within both our professional and personal lives. By adopting an Appreciative Mindset, not only does it allow us to be more successful advisors, but it also allows us to appreciate the work we do and give space to care for ourselves. Self-care is one of the key factors of success for advisors (Towle, 2016). An Appreciative Mindset cultivates mental space for these healing moments. Without adopting an Appreciative Mindset toward ourselves, we can never fully engage with the Appreciative Advising framework, be it in person, or online.

Appreciative Advising Strategies

In this section, we outline best practices from the field to assist in creating meaningful and productive sessions even in a virtual environment. We explore starting the disarm phase before the appointment begins, the importance of goal setting, sharing

advising updates in a video format, and collecting student voices. Utilizing these techniques can assist advisors in maximizing their impact with students from a remote working model.

Disarm Before the Appointment

The Disarm phase is arguably one of the most critical phases in Appreciative Advising. It helps form the relationship and create a foundation for all work going forward (Bloom et al., 2008). The Disarm phase begins as soon as a student considers an advising appointment. Thinking through how a student navigates services needs to be considered to work effectively.

In a typical world, a student has the option to come right to an advisor's office to ask questions or schedule an appointment. However, in a virtual world, extra steps must be taken during the Disarm phase. When thinking through this process consider:

- How prominent is the advising office website on the university website?
- How can students access appointments and advising services virtually? Are these options explained?
- Is the booking software easy to use?
- How can students get to know the advisors before visiting their offices?

One small change that has made a big difference is the inclusion of staff biographies on the booking website. These include a short description of how each advisor works, a list of hobbies, and how they identify (gender, race, ability, etc.). We have found that students tend to choose advisors based on these biographies and these biographies allow the disarm connection to form even before an appointment. In a virtual world, the ability to create connections is so important and this is a simple and cost-effective way to do so.

Email is another area that can be used to help disarm. Including pronouns in an email signature as well as a land acknowledgement for the campus shows students that we are aware of systemic barriers that may exist for certain students. By showing understanding, there is a greater likelihood of that student feeling more comfortable accessing advising services thus disarming them to the advising process.

By taking time to understand the students' journey to access services, advisors can look critically at the process and make changes to create a smoother intake. Look at how students access your services through their eyes. Try logging in as a student, look critically at the website and document how many clicks, or searches it takes to book an appointment. The more concluded or time-consuming it takes; the higher the chance students will not be disarmed when and if they arrive in your virtual office environment. The tips are cost-effective and simple to adapt to any practice that can really make a big impact on student success.

Set Goals with Students

Showing support and leading students through a virtual reality is challenging for both the student and the advisor. A lack of motivation can be major challenges to success. Applying the Appreciative Advising framework, specifically the Design and Deliver phases, can support students in achieving success virtually.

Goal setting can be directly linked to increased motivation and is used as a strategy to support individual's personal and professional development (Lunenburg, 2011). By engaging in goal setting practices and applying the Appreciative Advising

framework, advisors can support their students to enact change in a very turbulent work.

Goal setting lies firmly in the Design and Deliver phases. Notably, before moving forward with goal setting, it is important that the other phases have been engaged properly, and specifically the Discover phase. Goal setting can only be effective if the student understands what they need and where their abilities lie. If the goals are not clear to either the advisor or the student, these goals may need to be revisited through additional open-ended questions to discover what best supports the student (Bloom et al., 2008). Meeting the student where they are at is a crucial component of goal setting and it becomes increasingly important in virtual advising settings where subtle clues based on body language may be missed. Goal setting with the students can be more effective once advisors understand what the student needs and what the students are capable of achieving.

When students experience success, it is important to celebrate their successes to bolster their self-efficacy and to create a feeling of achievement. This feeling can then lead to more and more examples of success, which is referred to as a *virtuous cycle* during the Don't Settle phase (Bloom et al., 2008).

Advisors can challenge students through the creation of the virtuous cycle. When attempting to make progress toward their goals, challenges and lack of perceived success can lead students to feel discouraged and severely impact motivation (Said et al., 2017). By using manageable goals that the student can succeed in accomplishing, advisors can support students' growth along the virtuous cycle.

The use of goal setting has been used in advising widely but in a virtual landscape, this practice can make an immeasurable difference in the lives of students and their success in college. By sticking with them and providing regular check-in points, advisors can demonstrate care and support students in attaining their desired results.

Share Advising Video Updates

There is a new reality for advisors to jump from one virtual meeting to another and to attend endless virtual committee meetings. In an effort for advisors to use their time more efficiently, staff updates can be recorded and compiled into brief 5-minute videos, so that advisors can review the material during times in which they are more dedicated. Advisors may consider first creating a PowerPoint presentation including information pertaining to upcoming advising training, data analytics, and services the advising office provides. Then, this presentation can be narrated and converted into a short video. During the video, it is vital to encourage the viewers to a call to action, register, attend, and participate. Encouraging statements such as "If you go you will be in the know" and "It takes our collective advising community to make an impact with our students" can be used in the video. These statements are catchy phrases that can also be used as hashtags in a social media post. They call the viewers into action and invite them to stay connected to the campus community. Through these types of videos, the human connection is not lost but rather recaptured through the screen.

Having a recorded video also allows advisors to share the same information with various audience groups, even when they cannot participate in meetings during scheduling conflicts. Advisors can also consider using videos to share scholarship and practices within the advising community.

Gather Student Voices

Most higher education practitioners recognize the importance of assessment. In

addition to working with assessment data, we need to do a better job at listening to our students. Assessment is an art that can provide rich feedback for us to know how we are doing and what we can do better. A mixed-methods and multimodal approach should be utilized to gather feedback from diverse groups of students (Hutson & He, 2016).

To augment different student perspectives through assessment data collection, we need to involve a diverse representation of students, faculty, and staff on a committee to review. Including students in the assessment process assists the advising office in translating goals of advising services into student-friendly language and gain a better understanding of how to accomplish these goals. Student participation in this process should comprise a wide representation of the student population. In addition to student leaders and students who are more actively engaged in various campus activities such as student organization presidents, resident assistants, or traditional-aged college students, representatives from other student groups also need to be considered. Ideally, the student representation on the assessment committee should reflect the overall demographic of the student population on campus.

When an assessment instrument is being developed, the assessment committee also needs to begin the conversation of assessment delivery. When and what method would be the most appropriate to elicit student voices? Although in most cases a digital survey can be used, alternative forms of data collection approaches such as focus groups or paper-pencil surveys may also need to be considered. Timing of the data collection is also critical. Most students do not operate on the same 8:00am to 5:00pm schedule as faculty and staff. Where possible, it can be helpful to seek student support to distribute the assessment instruments and to support assessment data collection.

Finally, student voices need to be integrated into assessment data analysis and interpretation. Student diversity needs to be taken into consideration when disaggregating the data for analysis and interpretation. In some cases, what may work for one population, may not work for another. Knowing that advising services cannot be delivered in a one-size-fits-all manner, understanding the nuanced differences across student groups on our respective campuses will allow us to strategically enhance our services to better meet the needs of the targeted student population. Student representatives can be encouraged to take the lead on interpreting and writing up the assessment findings. Students' different perspectives often can bring new insights for advisors. Engaging students throughout the assessment process would allow us to truly value and integrate.

Conclusion

Appreciative Advising is a framework that is both flexible and dynamic. The phases outlined at the beginning of this article provide the structure to build meaningful and productive advising relationships with students. This framework, as shown above, can transcend methods of delivery and is able to be effective not only in face-to-face environments but also in the virtual world. By maintaining an Appreciative Mindset towards students, colleagues, and yourself, and keeping in mind the strategies outlines, offices can adapt to changing demands of advising. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, many advising centers were forced to adapt quickly and the techniques and methods presented here are examples of ways to move forward and intentionally work in a virtual world and still show your concern, attention, and most of all care, even though a screen.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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