Challenges and Opportunities: Reinventing Faculty Advising in the Era of COVID-19

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Abstract

This scholarship explores the lived experiences of three faculty advisors working at different institutions of higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying the Appreciative Advising framework, the authors adapted to rethink, reimagine, and reinvent faculty advising. The article provides inclusive strategies and practices in the development of faculty advisors as they support student learning and development.

Keywords

COVID-19, appreciative advising, faculty advising, faculty

The pandemic has turned the proverbial apple cart upside down for higher education institutions and the broad array of constituents they serve. The number of students enrolled in higher education institutions has significantly decreased (D'Amico et al., 2021) and the number of faculty and staff being laid off or furloughed has increased (D'Amico et al., 2021; Stevens et al., 2020). The decrease in revenue channels from athletics, student housing, and state support among others, along with the increase in expenses pertaining to the pandemic due to contact tracing, new campus safety protocols, and more, have forced institutions to adapt to stay financially afloat. Similarly, faculty members have also faced new challenges, such as converting in-person classes to online classes almost overnight, closing labs, and working from home while also homeschooling children (D'Amico et al., 2021; Johnson et al., 2020).

However, the pandemic has also provided faculty members with opportunities to develop new skills, including online teaching, advising, and engaging in virtual professional development events as they seek to re-invent their processes for carrying out their responsibilities. Faculty members play key roles on college campuses – including conducting research, teaching, service, and advising. This last role, *advising*, is the focus of this article because "faculty advising is a constant in the history of American higher education, that it is the predominant method for delivering advising services, and that it is a critical factor in both student success and in institutional effectiveness" (Habley, 2003, p. 25). Advising as a concept remains critical to student success and understanding the experiences of students yet is still a phenomenon that deserves increased attention in higher education. Contemporary literature provides insight into how academic advisors and student affairs staff are supporting and advising students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research creates a new space to analyze the context and implications of faculty advising during the global pandemic. Using the theory to practice framework of Appreciative Advising, the article shares the personal

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narratives of three faculty members at different institutions to highlight how the pandemic has impacted and provided an opportunity to reinvent their approach to advising. The goal of the research is to not only interrogate how the pandemic has demanded a reexamination of faculty advising, but also to provide rich examples and practices in the development of other faculty advisors as they support students.

Paper Organization & Positionality

This article examines the experiences of three faculty members advising students amid COVID-19 as we redefine and reinvent our advising practices. Applying personal narrative scholarship, similar to Perez-Felkner et al. (2020), we share our individual and collective understanding of advising using the Appreciative Advising framework. Through this lens, we pursue the development of faculty advisors as they support the success of their students. The following sections provide background on the authors and their connections, as well as various practices and themes for advising students during COVID-19.

Positionality Background & Relationship

Our approach to advising comes from our collective experiences at the University of the South Carolina - Columbia (USC). Jenny Bloom, a former faculty member and coordinator of the USC Higher Education Master's program and founder of *Appreciative Advising*, is well-known for her ability to cultivate strong relationships with students and help them identify their dreams and then co-create goals to turn their dreams into reality. During Jenny's time at University of the South, she exposed countless of her Higher Education Master's degree students to the framework of Appreciative Advising, including Jesse and Annie. Jesse and Annie, as Jenny's former students, began meeting with Jenny as new faculty members to discuss their socialization into faculty life. A common theme emerged that united us in our discussions: we recognized that we were using Appreciative Advising as a framework to engage with students, and that the framework provided an opportunity to reinvent, redefine, and rediscover faculty advising's implications during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Positionality Using Appreciative Advising

Appreciative Advising is defined as, "the intentional collaborative practice of asking generative, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2018, para. 2). Inspired by Appreciative Advising's mindset principles of caring and believing in the potential of students, being culturally responsive, and continually working to hone the craft of advising (Bloom et al., 2008), we use this framework as a lens to develop and empower students to recognize their assets and achieve their goals during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The framework allows us to share examples in the development of faculty advisors of how we have infused three of the six phases of Appreciative Advising found in Table A into our advising approach.

The first phase, Disarm, was used to analyze how we have pivoted and reinvented our online faculty advising conferences to create welcoming and inclusive spaces for our students. The second phase, Discover, was implemented in the pursuit of asking courageous and intentional questions to understand students' lived experience throughout the pandemic. The next phase we apply in this research is Appreciative Advising's last phase, Don't Settle. In this phase, we reflect on lessons learned and create actionable steps on how we want to move forward. The Appreciative Advising framework and mindset continues to connect and motivates us to put theory to practice and to create a strength-based, reimagined online

environment for our students during COVID-19.

Table 1. *Appreciative Advising Phases*

Appreciative Advising Phase	Definition
Disarm	Create a welcoming and inclusive environment for students.
Discover	Ask open-ended questions to elicit student stories, passions, and strengths.
Dream	Assist students in creating a powerful vision of yet.
Design	Co-create goals with students.
Deliver	Student follows-through on their goals, and their advisor is there to support in their goal achievement and refinement.
Don't Settle	Challenges advisors and students to raise their own bar of self-expectations.

Note. Adapted from Bloom et al., 2008.

Jesse: I graduated from the Higher Education PhD program at Florida State University in May 2020. Like many Spring 2020 graduates, my Commencement was reduced to a virtual ceremony due to the pandemic. Although not the graduation I had anticipated or expected, I was happy to graduate and accept a new tenure-track assistant professor position at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Beginning my role during the middle of a pandemic only added to the many challenges that face all new faculty members, such as learning a new campus culture, teaching a new course, and building relationships with my new faculty colleagues and students. Although I learned the norms, rules, and expectations of entering academic spaces as a graduate student, starting a faculty position without the safety net of the graduate student role is unsettling. Nonetheless, my doctoral journey consisted of strong mentorship and an advisor who expertly guided me throughout the process. These lessons I learned from my own advisor were critical in providing a strong foundation to my own approach in advising my students.

I have found advising to be one of the most rewarding yet daunting aspects of my socialization as a faculty member. Throughout my graduate training, advising had played a central role in my professional and personal development. My advisors valued collaborative teaching and learning methods focused on the construction of new knowledge or critical thinking about the graduate school process. As a student, my advisors took the time to understand my background, experiences, and values. Face-to-face meetings and informal conversations were vital to how I made meaning of graduate school, the educational environment, and the academy. As a Black man in a doctoral program, I quickly realized the importance of consistent interactions with caring faculty throughout my journey. Yet, the unprecedented nature of the pandemic made me realize that I needed to quickly adapt my advising style to meet the needs of my new students.

Jenny: The pandemic provided the abrupt jolt I needed to reinvent my process of advising my Higher Education Leadership Master's degree students at Florida Atlantic University. For the past 12 years, I have met with my M.Ed. students every fall and almost all of those meetings have been conducted in person, although occasionally I would conduct an advisory conference over the phone for someone who simply could not make it to campus. In fact, up until Fall 2019, students came to my office to sign up for their advisory conference on a sheet outside my office door. My rationale was that students often do not have occasion to come to the faculty suite of offices in the department and I wanted them to have an excuse to "see where we lived." However, in Fall 2019, I used the website Acuity to allow students to sign

up for advisory conference slots online. This move to online scheduling benefitted me and the students because the program automatically sent reminders 24 hours in advance of the advisory conference, and it was so simple to sign up for and change advisory conference slots. Little did I know that my move to online sign-ups would expand to include actual online advisory conferences due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020!

Annie: On a Friday in August 2020, I ended my position leading a Tutoring Center at Loyola University - Chicago, a mid-sized urban Catholic institution and the following Monday, I started a new role as a visiting assistant professor at the University of Cincinnati, a large public research university. I experienced a wide range of emotions beginning my first faculty position during the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racial injustice. These emotions included guilt for having a job when so many had lost theirs, fear given the visiting role I had accepted, insecurity about how I could make online connections with students and colleagues, and sadness that comes with saying goodbye to my former students and colleagues. Adding to the complexity was my transition from a staff to a faculty role. Having only ever worked in administrative positions, including academic advising and academic support, the move into serving as a faculty advisor was intimidating and daunting. In the first few months, I have learned invaluable lessons about serving as a faculty advisor during these parallel and intersecting pandemics.

Thoughtful Preparation Before Advising Appointments

One of the Appreciative Mindset principles is to "continually hone your craft" (Bloom, et al., 2008, p. 25). During the transition from in-person to online faculty advising appointments, we had to reinvent how we met and supported students. Each of us sought various methods to hold meetings, reach out to students, and create organizational systems for housing documents and information. As we prepared for our advising meetings, we recognized racial injustices were happening in our country and took proactive measures to create space and time to discuss students' lived experiences and how their identities impacted how they experience academia. Being prepared and challenging ourselves to center our students' voices and experiences at the forefront of our advising sessions, allowed us to use time for relationship-building versus technicalities.

Jenny: Having never conducted an advisory conference via a virtual platform, in April 2020, I first realized that I would likely not be able to conduct my Fall 2020 advisory conferences with my 67 Master's degree students in person. At first, I was unsure what platform (e.g., phone, Zoom, or some other format) I would use to conduct the advisory conferences, but I was determined to meet with my students, especially given the pandemic, the racial justice issues, and rising mental health concerns that students across the country were facing. I did not know what those advisory conferences would look like, but I was confident that I would figure it out.

Given the racial justice issues that were brought to the forefront during Summer 2020 and the fact that about half of my students were Black and Brown students, I knew that I would need to make the most of the 30 minutes I would spend in each individual advisory conference. So, one change that I made was that I looked up the transcripts for each of my students and converted the degree requirements list from a paper format to a fillable .pdf document. I filled in the degree requirements list with the courses that students had completed previously and were enrolled in currently for the fall semester so that I could minimize the time needed to discuss what classes the students need to complete their degree. Furthermore, I merged the degree requirements list with my advisory conference notes template so that I would not have to go back and forth between two different documents during my meetings with students. Next, I created a Padlet (padlet.com) that became a one-stop shop where the students could

access the documents that I normally gave them during in-person conferences. The columns I set up on the Padlet included: links to our program's website, petitions, scholarship information, professional organizations, summer internships information, and student organizations. In addition, I added in columns that had resources for helping them to be successful and engaged in the field, including tips for navigating online classes, summer internships, and links to sign-up for free daily newsletters from the Lumina Foundation, Inside Higher Ed, etc. Although I had originally created the Padlet to help my students, what I immediately found was how much time it saved for me! When I received email inquiries from prospective and current students instead of having to hunt through my computer to find the answers, the Padlet turned into a one-stop-shop for me, too.

Jesse: As an instructor and advisor, I am committed to being fully present with my students and have employed multiple methods for doing so. Knowing how easy it is to get distracted when meeting with students on virtual platforms such as Zoom or Google Hangouts, I start every student meeting by closing all other applications on my computer and silencing my cell phone. I share with students that I am taking these steps before the start of the meeting to convey that I am fully engaged in our conversation. In addition, I include my pronouns on my virtual platforms and emails. These collective gestures have been monumental in creating inclusive and welcoming spaces for all students.

Annie: In my previous roles, I have only ever met with students in person, and in fact, online advising appointments were discouraged due to lack of infrastructure and the ingrained belief that face-to-face advising was superior to online advising. As I transitioned into my new faculty advisor role, my new faculty colleagues were instrumental in generously sharing their strategies and tips on how to connect with students on virtual formats, including leveraging Microsoft Teams to build community, as well as how to hold webinars, panels, and other events to engage students. I cannot emphasize how helpful and critical my colleagues were during this time. Not only did they help to provide strategies for helping students, but also several of my peers would regularly check-in through Teams and phone, and one colleague scheduled weekly phone calls to make sure I felt supported in the transition. These small, yet significant examples of colleague support not only helped me in the transition into this new role, but they also indirectly helped my students. Through their assistance, I hit the send button on my first email to my advisees. It was important to include information on my background, why I am excited to join their community, purpose of our advising meetings, and how to schedule a meeting. Additionally, in the first class that I taught during Fall 2021, I sent out an introductory video giving a three-minute explanation of who I was, the purpose of our class, and what they could expect the first day. I also spent time updating my picture on various virtual interfaces since they had not met me in person. During my first month as a faculty advisor, I learned key lessons on soliciting and accepting help from colleagues and creating an introductory electronic communication plan to begin the process of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment.

Intentionally Greeting Students

The importance of establishing a warm and welcoming environment, eliminating distractions, and building rapport with students are key features of *Disarm*, which is the first phase of Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008). The Disarm phase is important as it sets the tone for the advising session and provides the foundation of trust building between the student and faculty advisor. We discovered that we must be more intentional, purposeful, and explicit when creating a disarming online environment.

Jenny: One of the most important things I learned from my first few virtual advisory conferences was how important it was to disarm students at the very beginning of the

advisory conference. Oprah Winfrey (2000) shared that one of the most important lessons she learned was the following from Toni Morrison during an interview about parenting "Your eyes should light up when your child enters the room." So, when I admitted each student from the Zoom waiting room, I made sure that each student saw it in my eyes that I was happy to see them. And the truth is that I really was happy to see them! One of the things about being in the middle of a pandemic where so many have been quarantining at home is that I have deeply missed seeing people in person. So, I was genuinely happy to see each student and I started each advisory conference looking directly into the camera and saying, "It is so good to see you – thank you so much for making time to meet with me today!"

Annie: When students first logged into our online advising meeting, there were a few who wanted to dive into the logistics of finding or debriefing their co-op experience. On more than one occasion I had to tell the student, "Hold on! Let's back up for just a second!" and would explain that I first wanted to learn more about them, what they are involved in at school, why they decided on their major, and more. Students shared critical stories about their lives, including passions, struggles, and dreams, which we connected back to impact on academics and career trajectory. By making the time to learn more about students' stories, it strengthened my ability to help co-develop plans for achieving their future academic and professional goals. My hope was for students to feel like their voice, positionality, and experiences mattered, and to build a strong foundation showing that I cared about them so they would feel comfortable coming to me with issues, triumphs, and questions that might arise in the future. Although these advising sessions happened online, it was critical that humanity and care for others was not lost in translation.

Jesse: Meeting with students has always been, and continues to be, the best part of my job. As virtual meetings have become increasing taxing on students, faculty, and staff, I have started each meeting with a question. The question is often something unrelated to the topic we are scheduled to discuss, but something I saw in popular media or culture, which allows for me to reset my thoughts and also for the student to engage with me beyond the task at hand. I also use this time as a space for students to share the latest news in their lives, and I also share details about my life which helps build and establish relationships. After we complete our meeting, I tend to leave a few minutes at the end for questions or to share something related to my initial question from the start of our session. Students have now started asking me, "What is the question of the week?"

Centering Student Identity and Live Experience

Asking purposeful questions to elicit student's stories and actively listening to their lived experiences is at the heart of the *Discover* phase, the second phase in Appreciative Advising framework (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 43). Each of us showed up and listened to our students' stories in our own authentic and unique ways. Authenticity as listeners is especially important when working with students from historically underrepresented identities in higher education who were being impacted by racial injustices as well as COVID-19 (Gates, Bennett, & Baines, 2021). We recognize that supporting students in unpacking trauma is an individualized process.

Jesse: My salient identities of being Black and a man, often led to informal conversations both inside and outside of advising sessions. Particularly for students of color, these conversations include a variety of topics including shared cultural understandings, barriers to advancement, and questions related to advising and coursework. Advising students of color during a pandemic is challenging due to the uncertainties they are facing. The knapsack of emotions students are carrying during the pandemic is overflowing with a host of feelings, including uncertainty about schoolwork, fear about the future, and loneliness. Furthermore,

students of color are also often weighed down by issues related to race and gender. I learned from my own graduate mentors the importance of creating a space where it is okay for students to share their stories and experiences without fear of judgment.

Annie: Within an online context, creating space and engaging in discussions with my new students about critical events outside of academics and experiential learning did not happen organically, which was a different experience than my previous student interactions within a social justice-focused mission institution. COVID-19 implications, the murder of George Floyd and other Black folx, a polarized political environment in the U.S., and the disproportionately harmful disparities that these events have highlighted among historically marginalized communities, were rarely brought up by my students. Takacs (2002) encourages educators to ask students to also consider their positionality and their biases to cultivate asset-based multiculturalism in education. I continued to analyze how to create authentic dialogue around social justice issues in my faculty advising appointments, while understanding that not everyone experiences oppression or privilege in the same way because of their identities, social location, and other experiences. Intersecting with the goals of the Discover phase of Appreciative Advising, I adopted Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) concept of counter-storytelling to articulate an asset-based approach that counters the dominant narrative of racial privilege. While attending to the pain students were experiencing, asking questions to my students of color, especially Black students during this time, to elicit counter-storytelling was a form of processing and creating space.

Jenny*:* Although I expected that my students would need space to talk about how they were doing given everything that was happening – a pandemic, racial justice issues, the economic recession brought on by the pandemic, etc. I frankly was initially unprepared for how much students, particularly my Black students, were hurting. I could hear the weight of the world in their words, see the tiredness in their eyes, and feel the multiple layers of hurt…even through Zoom. I listened with humility and then listened some more. Although I could not fix what they had experienced or were experiencing, including they and/or loved ones getting COVID-19 and/or losing jobs, I could bear witness to their lived realities. I also found that I needed to be even more explicit with what I have termed "caring out loud." When I conduct training on Appreciative Advising for faculty and professional advisors, I explain how important is to both say and live out how much we care about our students. They simply cannot read our minds. But, in this new virtual context, especially with students that were experiencing academic and other challenges, I quickly found that I needed to be more explicit. The phrase that I found to get through particularly to my Black students was, "I'm here for you and I just want you to know that I actually give a damn about you." Although perhaps not the most professional phrasing, it nonetheless was heartfelt and I could see that, in general, when students heard me say I gave a damn about them, it elicited a quick smile and it felt like it opened up space for them to realize that I was going to be an ally in their efforts to deal with the complex issues that they were facing. Of course, it is one thing to make a statement like that and it is another to follow-up and live it out. And, I will say that I have spent more time than I have ever spent in the past following up with students who simply had not done any work in their online academic classes. Their plates were simply too full dealing with the other issues in their lives that they just were not producing any academic work. Thankfully, I did the advisory conferences early in the semester and was able to help coach students about how to design a plan in coordination with their professors to make up the work they missed.

Lessons Learned

The final phase of Appreciative Advising, the *Don't Settle* phase, is applied in this context to

analyze what we have learned and raise our own internal bar of expectations (Bloom et al., 2008). In this section, we consider what we have achieved during the pandemic and discuss how we intend to keep improving our advising skills. We each had different takeaways and future goals, and yet, the common theme remained the same of being in service with and for our students.

Jenny: Completing 67 advisory conferences in about three weeks taught me many important lessons. One, I have never been so inspired by my students. The obstacles they have overcome, the courage they display day in and day out, and their hope for a better tomorrow have energized me to do more, be better, and keep going. Two, I now realize that online formats like Zoom do allow for relationships built on trust to be developed, but I also know that it is more important than ever in the digital environment to be authentic and real with students. Three, I am more determined than ever to have my voice heard in the battle for racial equity and inclusion – silence is no longer an option. Four, these advisory conferences have reinforced for me how much I learn from my students and how they make me a better person.

Annie: As a new faculty advisor, online advising has provided both opportunities and challenges. Through the pursuit of integrating social justice dialogue within my advising appointments, especially online, I have joined my Division's Equity and Inclusion committee to analyze the classes we teach and identify opportunities for how we can be more explicit and intentional in diversity and inclusion conversations. Another opportunity is the ability to easily communicate with students, share resources, and create an open and accessible online environment. However, I continue to lean into the challenge of individualizing my appointments to student experience, identities, and processing local and global events as I have had to work harder to make disarming connections stronger in an online advising context. Moving forward, I commit to showing up, continuing to be involved in community with colleagues around this work, doing my own identity development, and creating a plan of how to integrate issues of injustice into my advising appointments.

Jesse: There is something to be said about being Black (Brooms, 2017; Ford, 2021). More specifically, the challenges facing Black faculty members on college campuses are significant and well-documented in the research literature. The tenure and promotion process with academia is challenging for new faculty, but scholars of color are often asked to take on unpaid additional duties to support students, peers, and institutional practices around diversity and equity (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2008).

As a new faculty member, self-care has becoming increasingly important priority as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to be a factor in our daily lives. Although my department has been supportive in protecting my time as a junior faculty member, I have also taken additional personal measures to ensure my own well-being. For instance, I am an early riser and I try not to schedule meetings before 2 p.m. so that I can focus on my writing, which is a critical component for tenure and promotion. In addition, I have committed to engaging in physical activity each day. Although this activity looks different depending on the day, it allows for me to improve my physical and mental health while also clearing my head and recentering my priorities. These two steps have been critical to my development and work as a new junior faulty member navigating a global pandemic.

Implications for Practice

Our goal as educators is to build connections with students. As such, we used the Appreciative Advising framework to reinvent and recommit ourselves to our faculty advising responsibilities. Through discussing how we applied the phases of Disarm, Discover, and Don't Settle, our goal is to provide scholarship with practical implications for faculty. We

offer the following suggestions for faculty advisors on for applying Appreciative Advising to an online context caused by COVID-19 using the Appreciative Mindset Principles (Bloom et al., 2008). The Appreciative Mindset Principles are guiding tenants when implementing the Appreciative Advising framework into practice. We use select principles below that connect with our common themes to discuss implications. The Appreciative Mindset Principles are introduced in Table B. Furthermore, we invite readers to consider these recommendations in the context of Appreciative Advising and how these techniques might aid in their work.

Table 2. *Appreciative Mindset Principles*

	Appreciative Mindset Principles
1.	Care about and believe in the potential of each student
2.	Possess an attitude of gratefulness
3.	Continually hone your craft
4.	Remember your power
5.	Be insatiably curious about students' stories
6.	Be culturally aware and responsive.

Note. Adapted from Bloom, et al., 2008.

Principle 1: Care About and Believe in the Potential of Each Student

COVID-19 made virtual environments a real reality for many faculty. However, virtual spaces such as Zoom, make it challenge to connect with students. Jenny expressed the importance of "caring out loud" which reminds us that students are facing so many challenges in their daily lives. Our job is to assist, support, and motivate so they can navigate our ever-changing global society. Jesse's infusion of popular culture allows for student to feel connected and also allowed Jesse to remain true to self in academic spaces. We encourage faculty and administrators to generate authentic care and connection as they work with students in virtual environments.

Principle 2: Continually Hone Your Craft

The shift to online engagement requires us to consider how we redefine our faculty advising practices. Although the educational system has altered dramatically because of COVID-19, faculty advisors must also adapt. Each of us had to quickly find new paths and resources to connect with students. Jenny provided the example of learning how to use and implement Padlet and virtual sign-ups for advising conferences. Redefining and recreating where and how advising takes places are critical for faculty advisors as we hone our advising craft.

Principle 6: Be Culturally Aware and Responsive

The Discover phases encourages advisors to ask purposeful questions to elicit student stories (Bloom et al., 2008). We responded to events related to racial injustice by creating spaces for students of color, particularly our Black students, to process and share their stories. Jesse discussed students' knapsack of emotions and learning from graduate mentors on avenues to process with students. Annie discussed implementing Solórzano and Yosso (2002) concept of counter-storytelling to resist the dominant racial narrative. Culturally responsive faculty advising practices were a critical component to our virtual advising meetings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, although two of us embarked upon our career as faculty members during the pandemic and one of us has over 12 years of experience as a faculty member, the pandemic has in many ways been the great equalizer because there are no best practices to fall back on as there has not been a global pandemic in our lifetimes. The pandemic has

forced all of us to innovate our advising practices to meet the ever-evolving needs of our students and our institutions. Sharing our successes and our struggles in this article both has been therapeutic for us and has inspired us to learn from and with each other and our students. We are committed to being the best advisors we can be today and being even better tomorrow.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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