Implementing Personalized Communication in Advising to Increase Retention of Doctoral Education Students

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Abstract

This research investigated the impact personalized communication between an advisor and advisee had on the (a) the advisor-advisee relationship and (b) student retention. This study is grounded in the *Disarm* phase of the Appreciative Advising Model (AAM), which encourages advisors to present a welcoming environment to advisees (Bloom et al., 2008). Pre- and post-survey data from the Mentorship Effectiveness Scale (Berk et al., 2005), as well as university retention data, were collected from 55 doctoral students over the duration of one spring semester to investigate feelings of safety and vulnerability during challenges experienced while progressing through a graduate education program. Although no significant differences in the advisor-advisee relationship were found between the experimental and control groups either before or after the implementation of personalized communication, student retention was significantly higher for the experimental group after personal communication was implemented by the advisor.

Keywords

Appreciative Advising, advising, advisor-advisee relationship, personalized communication, student retention

Pre-service educators working through a teacher education program and professionals in the field must deal with complex social-emotional trauma and challenges as well as work through stresses and strains that affect (a) their progress through an education program as well as (b) their performance in the classroom. Kerr and King (2005) noted that advising plays an important role in student retention and satisfaction within the teaching profession. Given the large number of teachers leaving the profession coupled with the lack of qualified teachers applying for teaching jobs (Sutcher et al., 2016), it is vital that universities retain as many education students as possible to fill vacant spots in the classroom. Light (2001) similarly stated that, "good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience" (p. 81). It is vital that strategies are explored to strengthen how advisors may better reach, develop, and train advisees for a successful future in education. More research is needed regarding how to strengthen the advisor-advisee relationship in order to maximize on the professional and personal strategies needed that might retain quality education students.

Unlike other aspects of higher education, academic advising has the opportunity to impact and integrate every individual student at some point during their course of study (King, 1993; White, 2015). Some current models of advising utilize centralized academic advisors outside of faculty ranks (Kot, 2014), but faculty tend to continue the overall tasks of academic advising at many institutions (White, 2015). The historical advising relationship

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between advisee and advisor was prescriptive in nature; that is, faculty acted as the authority and simply designated which course to take (Crookston, 1972; White, 2015). Although this prescriptive model was effective, it lacked in larger developmental and relational potential for student development.

The creation of a more symbiotic advisor-advisee relationship revolves around the core of academic advising as a developmental, and even instructional, task. Lowenstein (2005) advocated for the practice of *learning-centered advising*, in which advisors act as coaches to help students actively build their educational experience through a collaborative advising process. The idea of exploration and mutual agreement has grown more important as course catalogs and elective opportunities expand, allowing for a more varied and holistic learning environment (White, 2015). Through mutual work between the advisor and advisee, a relationship can be developed through steps to agree on goals, collaborative action steps, and shared responsibility for outcomes (Crookston, 1972). For pre-service educators, the development of a working relationship with their academic advisor is integral to persistence through their academic program and future success in the field.

Communication between the advisor and advisee is a key aspect of developing a more collaborative and beneficial relationship during the advising process. A lack of communication, or poor-quality communication, can cause fissures in the advisor-advisee relationship (Bloom et al., 2007). The sharing of information for prescriptive aspects of advising is often initiated by the advisor, but ongoing reciprocal communication in the advisor-advisee relationship can help build trust, support, and feedback to develop a learning process within the confines of advising (Bragg, 1976; Preisman, 2019; Schroder & Terras, 2015). In a study of online advising perceptions of graduate education students, Cross (2018) found that 49% of respondents expected formal or informal contact from their academic advisor 1-4 times per month, yet only 24% of respondents reported this interaction taking place during that timeframe. This finding indicates an expectation of advisees that is not being met by academic advisors. Advances in technology, such as email and text messaging, have changed advisees' perceptions of appropriate response time when communicating with advisors, and good advisors work towards frequent outreach and timely responses to advisees (Schroeder & Terras, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

Given that advising plays an important role in student retention and student satisfaction within the teaching profession (Kerr & King, 2005; King, 1993; White, 2015), the purpose of this study was to further explore factors that might increase the effectiveness of retaining and mentoring students. Particularly, this study sought to investigate the impact personalized communication had on the effectiveness of advising, specifically with regard to (a) the advisor-advisee relationship (mentorship) and (b) retention. This study was guided by two research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference in the perceptions of graduate students regarding the advisor-advisee relationship following the implementation of personalized communication?
2. Is there a significant difference in retention of graduate students in the experimental and control groups following the implementation of personalized communication?

Conceptual Framework

The Appreciative Advising Model (AAM) was selected as the conceptual model for which the study would be grounded. AAM is defined as the "intentional collaborative

practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials" (Appreciative Advising, n.d.). Bloom et al. (2008) described the model being comprised of six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. The *Disarm* phase in which this study is grounded, encourages advisors to purposely present themselves and their workspace in a welcoming manner to their students (Bloom et al., 2008). Because educators entering the field who lack adequate preparation during their training may be more vulnerable and lack self-efficacy, the goal is to help students feel comfortable, safe, and confident to address concerns about their profession during advising interactions. In working toward the goal of mutual confidence and openness, advisees and advisors can take steps towards building empathy (Albrecht, 2006).

In developing a positive advisor-advisee relationship, the *Disarm* phase of AAM is the cornerstone. Advisees may experience apprehension early in the advising process, and advisors and institutions can take proactive measures to promote a positive and empathetic environment. Cooney et al. (2016) noted that accessible and descriptive information regarding academic advisors on websites and other media can help to create a positive environment prior to the first advising meeting by providing students with background and context. The initial interactions between advisee and advisor often set the tone for the relationship moving forward. Based on the idea of "creative contact" in social intelligence, individuals tend to determine the potential nature and future of a relationship quickly, and subsequently, recapitulate that first meeting during future interactions (Albrecht, 2006; Cooney et al., 2016).

Because the *Disarm* phase serves as the catalyst toward other aspects of the AAM, it is important that advisors work to develop empathy through attention, appreciation, and affirmation with their advisees. *Attentiveness* involves intentional interest in others (Albrecht, 2006), and steps such as pre-advising questionnaires, surveys, or emails with advisees can help in this area (Butler et al., 2016). Information gleaned from pre-advising and early advising interactions help advisors and advisees find common ground on which to begin building the advising relationship. When attentiveness is a focal point, the relationship can then move toward appreciation by both parties. *Appreciation* is centered on acceptance, with advisors meeting advisees "where they are" and acting as counselors and coaches through recognition and support of the goals of their advisees (Albrecht, 2006; Lowenstein, 2005). *Affirmation* in empathy centers on the emotional input of worthiness (Albrecht, 2006), and if advisors have worked to develop a welcoming and safe environment for students to share information, affirmation is more likely to be an outcome (Cooney et al., 2016; Butler et al., 2016).

Methodology

This quantitative, experimental-design study occurred in 2019 during the 16-week spring semester of graduate school (approximately January–May) at a private university in the Mid-South. A convenience sample of 55 doctoral education students was utilized from one advisor. The advisor for this study has an earned doctorate and serves as the director of and professor in the doctoral program. All advisees were randomly placed into two groups (i.e., (a) an experimental group, $n = 24$, and (b) a control group, $n = 31$) and received the same pre- and post-survey in January and again in May. An adapted electronic version of the Mentorship Effectiveness Scale (Berk et al., 2005) was utilized to provide a standardized tool for rating the mentorship experience and effectiveness of an advisor with regard to the advisor-advisee relationship. The adapted version of the instrument is available in the Appendix.

The Mentorship Effectiveness Scale was chosen for use in this study based on the similarity of the definition of a mentoring relationship from Berk et al. (2005) and aspects of the NACADA Core Values of caring, commitment, inclusivity, and respect (NACADA, 2017). Berk et al. (2005) defined mentorship as the following:

> A *mentoring relationship* is one that may vary along a continuum from informal/short-term to formal/long-term in which faculty with useful experience, knowledge, skills, and/or wisdom offer advice, information, guidance, support, or opportunity to another faculty member or student for that individual's professional development. (p. 67)

Preisman (2019) advocated for communication of the advising process for doctoral students, specifically in relation to the NACADA Core Value of caring. Communication that goes beyond the prescriptive aspects of academic advising toward developing a deeper personal connection that can help advisors respond "in ways that challenge, support, nurture, and teach" (NACADA, 2017).

The Mentorship Effectiveness Scale consisted of the 12-item survey with a 6-point Likert-style item (1=Strongly Disagree, 6=Strongly Agree) and measured behavioral aspects of the advisor as perceived by the advisee. For the purpose of this study, the term "mentorship" was replaced in the survey with "advisor" and was used to measure the perceived feelings of the advisee toward the advisor, with higher scores representing more positive feelings. The items had a Cronbach's alpha coefficient greater than 0.9, indicating excellent reliability using the guidelines suggested by George and Mallery (2018) in which > .9 is excellent, > .8 is good, > .7 is acceptable, > .6 is questionable, > .5 is poor, and ≤ .5 is unacceptable. The questionnaire was developed on Google Forms and sent to participants through student emails.

At the beginning of each month, students from both groups received regular monthly email communication from the advisor, which included updates, program and university deadlines, important tips, and university links. However, students from the experimental group also received four personalized texts (one per month) from the advisor through the Reach app around the middle of each month. The advisor chose to utilize Reach for texting purposes because the app allows for individual personalized and private messages to be sent without exposing contact information for each recipient (Reach, 2022). The personalized texts always included the student's name and a personalized note (i.e., (a) "Hey [*Student's Name*]. How are you this week? As your semester begins, if you would like to schedule a meeting with me to discuss your classes and make sure you are on the right track, please let me know.", (b) "Hey [*Student's Name*], I hope your midterms go well this week. Let me know if I can assist you in any way." (c) "Hey [*Student's Name*]. As we wrap this semester up and we move into registration for next semester, let me know if you have any questions that I can answer for you.").

Results

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there were significant differences in the perceived advisor-advisee relationship (mentorship) by Group (experimental and control) and Time (pre-intervention and post-intervention). Personalized communication served as the intervention for the experimental group. ANOVA was examined based on an alpha value of .05. The results of the ANOVA were not significant, $F(2, 41) = 1.08$, $p = .348$, indicating the differences in the perceived advisor-advisee relationship (mentorship) among the groups by time were all similar (Table 1). The main effect, Group (experimental and control), was not significant, $F(1, 41) = 0.35$, $p = .559$,

indicating there were no significant differences between the two groups. The main effect, Time (pre-intervention and post-intervention), was not significant, $F(1, 41) = 1.58$, $p = .216$, indicating there were no significant differences before and after the intervention. Given there were no significant effects in the model, post hoc comparisons were not conducted. The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance Table for Mentorship by Group and Time

Term	*SS*	*df*	*F*	*p*	η_p^2
Group	0.08	1	0.35	.559	0.01
Time	0.37	1	1.58	.216	0.04
Residuals	9.66	41			

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation, and Sample Size for Mentorship by Group and Time

Combination	*M*	*SD*	*n*
Experimental : Pre-Intervention	5.48	0.63	11
Control : Pre-Intervention	5.69	0.58	11
Experimental : Post-Intervention	5.81	0.41	8
Control : Post-Intervention	5.77	0.28	14

Note. A '-' indicates the sample size was too small for the statistic to be calculated.

The result of the two proportions *z*-test was significant based on an alpha value of 0.05, $z = -3.23$, $p = .001$, CI = [-0.58, -0.14]. Following the use of personalized communication by the advisor to the advisees, the retention rate for students within the control group was significantly lower than the retention rate for students within the experimental group. The difference between the proportions for both groups was 36% with a 95% confidence interval. Table 3 presents the results of the two sample proportions z-test.

Table 3

Two Proportions z-Test for the Difference in Retention Rate for the Control and Experimental Groups.

Samples	Responses	*n*	Proportion	*SD*	*SE*
Control	16	31	0.52	0.50	0.09
Experimental	21	24	0.88	0.32	0.07

Note. $z = -3.23$, $p = .001$, CI for $\alpha = 0.05$: [-0.58, -0.14]

Discussion and Recommendations for Practice

Results of this study indicate that students receiving additional personalized interaction with advisors are potentially more likely to persist and be retained by the institution. In the AAM, the *Disarm* phase centers on creating a safe and welcoming environment for advisees (Bloom et al., 2008), and additional points of contact during the study may have helped to achieve this goal. The content of the additional contact measures

with the experimental group tended to be more informal and conversational in nature, which is aligned with building engagement and rapport (Cooney et al., 2016). Additionally, the increased retention of the experimental group points to a higher likelihood of an empathetic relationship between advisor and advisees, as the language of the additional contact measures displayed attentiveness and appreciation for the well-being of the advisees (Albrecht, 2006).

In practice, developing and implementing an intentional strategy for communication and building rapport is important for advisors to consider. As noted by Cooney et al. (2016) and Butler et al. (2016), communication in the advisor-advisee relationship promotes attentiveness in both parties and can be the building blocks for a beneficial partnership. The level of personal attention given by advisors to advisees may be impacted by their number of advisees, their advising training, and their access to various forms of communication. Advisors with a lower advising load may have more opportunity for frequent and personalized contact with advisees, while advisors with more advisees may not find this avenue as feasible. However, access to technology with capabilities for sending regular communication through email, text, or social media may bridge this gap for advisors with higher numbers of advisees.

Significance

Though Barry and Shields (2017) suggested that the declining interest in teaching and low teacher retention has much to do with negative components of the profession, Eren (2014) implied that these outcomes could also be due to the lack of assistance during a teacher's educational training to handle stress and pressure. Luschei and Navarro (2017) also proposed that this lack of support may result in isolation and a lack of collaborating with others, further reducing teachers' motivation, commitment, and effectiveness. Support counteracts isolation and builds an infrastructure for novice teachers to continue to grow and receive feedback (Eren, 2014). Teacher education programs should help prepare educators to become better adjusted to handle stress associated with the profession (Lia et al., 2017). Data from this study will help determine if, by using the Reach App or similar outreach tools, an advisor may better connect with and relate to education students in order to create an atmosphere of vulnerability and mutual respect which may allow students to feel safe and comfortable to address issues, concerns and fears throughout their programs.

Limitations and Future Research

A few limitations are noted as related to this study. First, data came from the perceptions of graduate education students from a private university. Prior to the intervention, it was noted that a strong relationship between the advisor and advisees already existed, which limited the degree to which the perceptions might increase following the intervention. Secondly, not all participants completed the survey both before and after the implementation of personalized communication, thus limiting the degree in which to determine the full impact of the intervention. A total of three participants from the experimental group and 15 from the control group did not complete both surveys. A third limitation centers on the experimental group only receiving four personalized texts throughout the semester. The amount of personalized communication and type of communication was not factored into the study. Lastly, given all data came from a convenient sample of graduate education students at a private university with only one advisor, the study results are not generalizable to students and advisors outside the target population.

Future research should replicate this study and explore data from a larger sample size that includes students from multiple majors, multiple advisors, and include both private and public universities. It would also be beneficial to explore whether the amount of personalized

communication or type of communication might impact perceptions of mentorship or retention. Additionally, future research in a related study could create additional experimental and control groups (personalized and non-personalized) using both email and text communication to explore the potential impact of personalization and/or additional communication. Though not a focus of the study, informal qualitative data voluntarily provided by some participants indicated that the personalized communication was appreciated, so further investigation of a qualitative component would serve to benefit future studies to provide additional data.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that both students in the control and experimental groups showed no mean differences in their perceptions of the mentor relationship at the end of the study, which may have been due to favorable perceptions of the mentor relationship at the beginning of the study (i.e., little room for quantitative growth). However, students within the experimental group did show significantly higher rates of retention (88% vs. 52%). As the results of this study did indicate that increased interaction between advisee and advisor can help with retention, these interactions could also be used to better prepare future educators for work in the field. More purposeful interaction may decrease feelings of isolation and show additional support from mentors, which assists in the growth of novice educators (Eren, 2014). A positive advisor-advisee relationship before entering the field sets a precedent for future collaboration in the field, which can help educators deal more effectively with negative aspects and stressors as they progress through the early portions of their career (Barry & Shields, 2017; Lia et al., 2017).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The second author for this study is currently employed by the institution at which the study was conducted.

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Appendix

Mentorship Effectiveness Scale Survey (Adapted)

1. My advisor is accessible.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

2. My advisor demonstrates professional integrity.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

3. My advisor demonstrates content expertise in my area of need.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

4. My advisor is approachable.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

5. My advisor is supportive and encouraging.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

6. My advisor provides constructive and useful critiques of my work.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

7. My advisor motivates me to improve my work product(s).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

8. My advisor is helpful in providing direction and guidance on professional issues.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

9. My advisor answers my questions satisfactorily (e.g., timely response, clear, comprehensive).

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

10. My advisor acknowledged my contributions appropriately.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

11. My advisor suggested appropriate resources.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree

12. My advisor challenged me to extend my abilities.

1	2	3	4	5	6
Strongly Disagree					Strongly Agree