

## The Interconnectivity of Trust and Appreciative Advising

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### Abstract

Academic advisors can harness the interconnectivity of trust-building frameworks and Appreciative Advising to build relationships with students. This article proposes the integration of two trust-building frameworks within the Appreciative Advising Theory-to-Practice Framework (Bloom et al., 2008). Utilizing findings and insights from Frei and Morriss' (2020) research on trust, the authors discuss ways that authenticity, logic, and empathy support the practice of Appreciative Advising. Exploring research from Brown (2019), the article reviews the roles of boundaries, reliability, accountability, the vault, integrity, non-judgment, and generosity in each of the six phases of Appreciative Advising. A matrix displays the intersections of trust-building actions and the Appreciative Advising phases, and the article presents examples of the impact of trust in an advising context.

### Keywords

Appreciative Advising, trust, academic advisors

We believe studying trust-building and Appreciative Advising strategies is critical to supporting student success. Tinto (2010) explained that without support, “many students struggle to meet institutional expectations and succeed in college” (p. 60). Academic advisors can and should build relationships with their students to provide support. Developing a strong relationship is key to future success in the helping professions (Richardson, 2009), which includes academic advising. Advisors can harness the interconnectivity of trust and Appreciative Advising to build bonds with students. Utilizing the existing Appreciative Advising Framework can provide advisors with context to adapt new trust frameworks to strengthen their advising practice and develop more meaningful relationships with students. This article seeks to offer trust-building strategies within the context of Appreciative Advising as a bridge between the two bodies of knowledge.

This article will examine the interrelationship between two trust frameworks and Appreciative Advising. First, scholars Frei and Morriss (2020) shared a formula for trust based on authenticity, logic, and empathy. Second, researcher Brown (2019) described trust through the acronym BRAVING, using each letter to outline a specific task needed to build a trusting relationship with another individual. BRAVING and authenticity, logic, and empathy can bolster advisors' abilities to leverage the Appreciative Advising approach. Finally, we will illustrate how advisors can integrate trust-building within the Appreciative Advising framework. Before we delve into this content, we first desire to share our positionality when engaging in this scholarship.

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## Positionality Statement

Like qualitative research, this article takes the authors' experiences working with the subject matter as two advising professionals in university settings and translates them into our perspectives. Positionality sheds light on the worldview, experiences, and identities (Holmes, 2020), and we subsequently acknowledge the lenses that impact our positionality.

Tyler Hall (he/him) identifies as a White settler living and benefiting on Mi'kma'ki, the unceded and ancestral territory of the Mi'kmaq. Hall is an able-bodied, cis-gendered gay male, a dancer, a baker, and a partner, who works in academic advising at a four-year public medical doctoral university. Hall is a Certified Appreciative Adviser through the Office of Appreciative Education at Florida Atlantic University and has been practicing and teaching this subject for over five years. Roberta Rea (she/her) identifies as a White, female, cisgender, straight, married, working parent, able-bodied, with a doctoral degree in education. Rea works in academic advising at a four-year public doctoral university in the United States. Although she is not a Certified Appreciative Adviser, Rea has read the hallmark book *The Appreciative Advising Revolution*. Its concepts have guided her advising practice and advising leadership roles over the past 11 years. Rea is a licensed counselor in Michigan. She presents on Appreciative Advising locally and through the NACADA Appreciative Advising community and teaches part-time in the graduate counseling program at her institution.

We encourage readers to keep our identities and experiences in mind throughout the article as they shape our work. Although we apply a critical lens and examine unconscious biases when possible, complete objectivity is never possible.

## The Importance of Building Trust in Advising

Academic advisors help students plan and understand how to succeed in college (Kuh, 2010). Advisors connect students to educational support resources, teach them to solve problems, and help them make academic decisions (Folsom, 2010). Additionally, Barnett et al. (2006) explained that the functions of an academic advisor are to "help students with academic, social, and personal issues" (p. 11). Academic advising tasks often include hosting appointments, answering emails, initiating communication with at-risk students, processing and maintaining student records, and supporting the university's mission. Although an advisor's role is multifaceted, an advisor's aim is singular: to support students. Building trust helps advisors support students and their success in college. Results from the 2005 National Survey of Student Engagement highlighted that students who have better relationships with advisors often have higher levels of satisfaction with their experience at college (NSSE, 2005). The findings suggest that students with a positive advising experience have a more positive experience in higher education. Consequently, given that trust is a bedrock of advising, we posit that students who trust their academic advisor will likely have a more positive advising experience.

Trust can be difficult to define. Wilkins (2018) explained that even though the word trust is common, people find defining it difficult due to the multidimensional nature of the construct. For this article, we will rely on a similar definition as Wilkins (2018), who stated, "in general, trust refers to a firm belief in the reliability, truth, and ability or strength of someone or something" (p. S6). To position trust in the context of advising, we suggest that students who trust their advisors believe that their advisors are reliable, honest, and capable of helping them succeed.

Students' ability to trust their academic advisors may vary based on their personalities, experiences, and previous interactions with educators. For example, the 2020

NSSE findings show that some students of color exhibit less trust in their college than White students (NSSE, 2020). Advisors cannot assume that all students will inherently trust them based on their role. We suggest that trust is built and earned over time through consistently putting students' best interests first and being reliable and honest. Kimball and Campbell (2013) explained that to support student success, "academic advisors must work in a highly intentional manner" (p. 3). An advisor can build trustworthiness by intentionally showing students that they are reliable and honest.

Heartening results from the 2020 NSSE show that academic advisors are among the most trusted personnel on campus. Trust increases advisors' abilities to better connect with and support their students. Therefore, we turn to Frei and Morriss' (2021) and Brown's (2019) work on trust-building to teach advisors about their strengths and potential areas of weakness to help them develop lasting and more successful relationships with their students.

### **Connecting Trust-Building Frameworks with Appreciative Advising**

One influential framework used in academic advising is Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008, 2014), which is rooted in strength-based practices and Appreciative Inquiry and, at its core, is intended to build stronger relationships with students and encourage their success. 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" (Appreciative Advising, n.d.). Appreciative Advising gives practitioners a framework to center their work with students providing an accessible way to use research-based practice. We then will draw connections between these trust-building models and the six phases of Appreciative Advising: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle. The parallels provide a research-based practice for advisors to grow their skills and abilities and foster more significant relationships with students. We next present an overview of each of these trust-building models.

### **Frei and Morriss' (2021) Framework**

Frei and Morriss (2021) described a three-fold formula for trust: "People tend to trust you when they think they are interacting with the real you (authenticity), when they have faith in your judgment and competence (logic), and when they believe that you care about them (empathy)" (p. 20). Authenticity, logic, and empathy are three elements that advisors can consider when hosting academic advising appointments or communicating with students, as each interaction is an opportunity for the advisor to demonstrate trust-building behaviors. We will explore each component next.

#### ***Authenticity***

*Authenticity* happens when people believe they are interacting with the real you (Frei & Morriss, 2021). Students can discern whether or not advisors believe in the advice they are giving. For example, if advisors encourage students to use tutoring, but do not believe it will be helpful to them, students may perceive inauthenticity. Therefore, advisors should work to be intentional in sharing suggestions and advice authentically.

Frei and Morriss (2020) suggested the following strategy, "pay less attention to what you think people want to hear from you and more to what you authentically want to say" (p. 120). Advisors can practice authenticity by asking students questions. For example, if a student is struggling with a class, ask, "What do you think would help you be successful in this class?" By asking open-ended questions, advisors are less likely to dispense one-size-fits-all advice.

Another way to stay authentic with students is by maintaining a passion for supporting students and the field of advising by cultivating an Appreciative Advising mindset (Bloom et al., 2008). Among the six ingredients of the Appreciative Mindset Bloom et al. (2008) emphasized, we highlight three beginning with the following: “*caring about and believing in each student’s potential*” (p. 27). They also detailed “*an attitude of gratefulness*” (p. 27). When advisors approach their advising practice with an attitude of gratefulness, students will feel advisors’ authentic appreciation for the opportunity to help them. Another ingredient is “*honoring one’s craft*” (p. 29), meaning one can always improve. Taking the time to focus on the authentic messages that advisors communicate to students is one way to strive to improve continually.

### **Logic**

*Logic* is communicating reasonably and in an easy-to-follow manner (Frei & Morriss, 2020). According to Frei and Morris (2020), substance and style are two elements that help speakers communicate logically. They suggested stating one’s main point in a crisp, clear half-sentence and then providing evidence to support one’s point afterward, which may be a helpful strategy for academic advisors. Often, advisors convey complex information about their institutions’ academic programs and policies. Advisors can boost logic and build trust by following the recommended formula, starting with the main point and then providing evidence. The ability to clearly communicate the main point will help students latch onto the highlights of an advising interaction. Logic is helpful when the student and the advisor co-create a plan to help the student reach their goals.

Practicing logic encourages the advisor to speak in short sentences and provide clear action steps. For example, suppose a student wants to become more involved on campus. The advisor could list ten different ways the student could get involved. Alternatively, using logic, the advisor might slow down and provide one tangible example of how a student could get involved and then explain that there are several other ways to get involved and involve the student in brainstorming ideas.

### **Empathy**

*Empathy*, the third element of trust, happens when people believe that one cares about them and wants them to succeed (Frei & Morriss, 2020). For students to feel that their advisor cares about them and wants them to succeed, advisors must view empathy as more than a feeling. Rather, advisors must demonstrate empathy through behaviors and actions. For example, Frei and Morriss (2020) suggested that putting away a cell phone is a powerful act of showing empathy as notifications are less likely to distract one from the conversation. The same is true about closing one’s email browser while in an advising appointment: being focused and present is vital. Bloom et al. (2008) provided a similar suggestion, “cell phones and the audio cue that announces new email should be turned off” (p. 37).

However, email can be another way to demonstrate empathy. One student shared, “My advisor emails me back quickly and sometimes will reach out to check in on me” (C. Kramer, personal communication, October 4, 2020). The student felt that the advisor demonstrated empathy and subsequently believed that through their email exchange, their advisor cared about them.

Another student shared this example, “When I did poorly in my math class, my advisor asked what happened this semester because I normally do so well in math” (student interview, January 2020). The student expressed that their advisor took the time to see their pattern and cared enough to ask what went differently. Quick response times, reaching out to

students to check in, and noticing a student's academic patterns, are three examples of empathy in practice.

Another strategy to promote empathy in academic advisors is to consider every minute of an advising appointment as the student's time. Focus on the student and be fully present during the meeting instead of thinking of everything else that is building up on a to-do list.

Advisors must create and make space for students. If students feel rushed in and out of appointments, a student may think advisors do not have the time and attention needed to invest in their success. Although advisors may feel empathy, advisors who feel overwhelmed, overworked, or distracted may appear to their students as uncaring. Bloom et al. (2008) encouraged that "Appreciative Advisors also pay attention to nonverbal signals to maximize the chances of creating long-term, meaningful relationships with students" (p. 41). Advisors can demonstrate empathy for students through their words and actions that they support students and care about the success of each student.

Covey (2018) explained that people judge themselves by their own intentions and others by their behavior. It is not enough to have a feeling of goodwill toward our students. Although one may intend to be authentic, logical, and empathetic, do one's actions align with one's intentions? Academic advisors must demonstrate care and state belief in students' ability to succeed. By incorporating authenticity, logic, and empathy, advisors can build more trusting relationships with those they serve.

### **Brown's (2019) Framework**

Renowned researcher and scholar Brené Brown (2021) approached trust work from both a research perspective and a storyteller lens in her podcast episode entitled, *Brené on the Anatomy of Trust*. Brown combined learnings from both her research and her lived experiences to create a framework centered around the acronym BRAVING:

B - Boundaries

R - Reliability

A - Accountability

V - Vault

I - Integrity

N - Non-Judgment

G - Generosity (Brown, 2021, 21:06)

Each component of the BRAVING acronym refers to a different aspect of trust development, which we will review next.

For trust to form, both parties must acknowledge the *boundaries* of the relationship. In the advising context, first appointments are generally opportunities to have a boundary conversation during which both the advisor and the student create the expectations of the relationship. Advisors can formally address boundaries through intake forms or advising syllabi that outline the roles and responsibilities of both the student and advisor or informally through conversations about email response times and contact methods. Developing these expectations early on allows for a mutually understood foundation for the relationship.

The advisor must be both *reliable* and *accountable* in the communication style and the accuracy of the information given. For trust to develop, both parties must rely on each

other and hold each other up to the agreed-upon tasks. It is not only the advisor who must be reliable to the student; for genuine trust to form, both parties must be reliable and accountable to each other. Because advisors are in a position of power, they are responsible for staying abreast of policies, procedures, and information to ensure that the information they give students is both accurate and reliable. Advisors must be accountable for the information they share with a student. Suppose an advisor provides a student with incorrect information. In that case, it could lead the student to make changes or decisions that could negatively affect their success, such as extending their time to a degree or spending money on courses that are not required. Errors and lapses in judgment can break a student's trust in an advisor and the institution's advising system.

Conversely, students must also be reliable with attendance and follow through on the tasks discussed in the advising appointment. It is always important to remember that unexpected barriers often arise and to have conversations about what happens if a student cannot complete a given task. Such conversations provide room for error and course correction, and help to preserve the relationship should either party not fully deliver on their actions.

Brown described creating a *vault* where information can be safely stored and discussed. In advising relationships, a conversation about confidentiality, including its importance and limitations to it based on the center in which one works, is essential in starting a relationship. Although the formal, written office policy typically addresses the advisor's ability to maintain confidentiality, advisors can discuss informally by telling students how information is collected and shared.

The last three components, *integrity*, *non-judgment*, and *generosity*, refer to how both parties should act and work together. By acting with these three facets in mind, a genuine trust-filled relationship can grow, leading to deeper and more meaningful discussions. Because students often enter advising spaces with myriad problems, acting with the three elements above ensures they are coming into an area where they can open up about the issues. Only when a student feels comfortable in the advising space can the advisor fully support their success.

Brown (2022) referred to trust as a renewable resource. It is something that can be built upon, restored, and maintained. Through the proposed tenants of BRAVING, one can help grow and ensure that trust is something core to the advising practice.

Maintaining trust is imperative to any successful relationship, including the ones built through academic advising. The following section will focus on the intersections of Frei and Morriss' (2021) and Brown's (2019) trust models with the six phases of Appreciative Advising. The goal is to integrate these frameworks to strengthen advising practice and connect more deeply and intentionally with students.

## **Trust and Appreciative Advising Frameworks Matrix**

Through discussions and work experience observations, we believe advisors can intentionally integrate two trust frameworks (Brown, 2019; Frei & Morriss, 2021) and Appreciative Advising (Bloom et al., 2008). By further examining the trust frameworks alongside the six phases of Appreciative Advising (i.e., Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, Don't Settle), clear connections emerge, which we illustrate in this section. The matrix in Table 1 displays aspects of the trust frameworks and how they align with each phase of the Appreciative Advising Framework.

**Table 1***Trust and Appreciative Advising Frameworks Matrix*

<b>Appreciative Advising</b> (Bloom et al., 2008)	<b>Begin with Trust</b> (Frei & Morriss, 2021)	<b>The Anatomy of Trust</b> (Brown, 2019)
Disarm	Empathy	Boundaries
Discover	Authenticity	Vault
Dream	Authenticity	Non-Judgment
Design	Logic	Integrity
Deliver	Logic	Reliability and Accountability
Don't Settle	Empathy	Generosity

## Disarm

Within the Disarm phase (Bloom et al., 2008), the very first stage of the relationship, empathy (Frei & Morriss, 2021) and boundaries (Brown, 2019) stand out as the most connected. When meeting students for the first time, it is helpful to start the relationship with expectations and boundaries. By pairing boundaries with empathy and understanding, a practitioner can move forward knowing they are creating a solid foundation of trust. Advisors can incorporate conversations about boundaries in a way that is authentic to oneself and empathetic to the student. For example, an advisor may say:

It was great meeting with you today. Please feel free to contact me at any time by email at name@school.edu. I check email during office hours which are Monday to Friday, 9:00 am to 5:00 pm. I try to respond to all emails within 24 hours of getting them, except on weekends, so if you don't hear back right away, do not worry. Your email is important to me, and I will get to it as soon as possible.

The advisor in the example shows empathy by expressing appreciation for the meeting and inviting the student to reach out again. However, the advisor also sets the expectation for boundaries that describe when and how they will answer emails. Clarity of what the student can expect helps to pave the way for the student and advisor relationship.

## Discover

The Discover phase centers on asking generative, open-ended questions to invite students' stories, lived experiences, strengths, and goals to the advising conversation (Bloom et al., 2008, 2014). It is essential to come into the Discover phase with authenticity. Advisor soft skills such as attending behavior and summarizing help the student to feel safe to discover and be authentic in their reflection and insight. Bloom et al. (2008) explained that "attention to details of nonverbal behavior will translate into quicker attainment of comfort levels" (p. 38). Advisors are encouraged to ask open-ended questions that feel authentic to them and experiment with rewording questions they feel uncomfortable asking. Importantly, asking these types of questions needs to work for the advisor. If the advisor feels uncomfortable asking a student to "describe a peak experience when you felt really good about yourself or what you accomplished" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 44), they could reword the question to the following instead, "What accomplishment are you most proud of since coming to college?" as an example.

The Discover phase can also be when students share challenges or personal information. Before a Discover conversation commences, it might be helpful to outline one's office or department confidentiality process so that students have informed consent with what they share. Therefore, developing the *vault* and describing what can stay in the *vault* and what cannot helps define the boundary and let the student know that confidentiality in advising has limits.

## **Dream**

Like the Discover phase, the Dream phase incorporates stories and best relates to authenticity (Frei & Morriss, 2021) and non-judgment (Brown, 2019). Maintaining an authentic self is of utmost importance. During the Dream phase, students may share intimate hopes and wishes. Bloom et al. (2008) explained that students who do not trust their questioner enough might not share their true vision of their futures. Therefore, advisors can aim to shed biases and listen from a place of non-judgment. Advisors listen and help students create goals around students' wants and needs. By keeping a non-judgmental mind, advisors can best support that endeavor. One example of a Dream question is, "Twenty years from now, what will your ideal workday be like?" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 57). Practitioners must look at their unconscious biases and definitions of realistic dreams and goals for students. To maintain a non-judgmental space, advisors need to be open to different concepts of dreams that may not align with what they think. Creating a space for a student to dream freely is paramount to Appreciative Advising.

## **Design**

In the Design phase, an advisor leverages institutional knowledge and resource connections (Bloom et al., 2018) and this phase best aligns with logic (Frei & Morriss, 2021) and integrity (Brown, 2010). While designing a plan, it is beneficial for advisors to think logically and ensure that the information given to students is accurate. Additionally, the Design phase should follow a logical process connecting what advisors learn in the Discover and Dream phases to the actions laid out in Design. Bloom et al. (2014) explained that advisors "show students ways to break down large dreams into manageable goals" (p. 51). Showing the student how one logically got from point A to point B shows them the process and models a framework to help them in future decision-making and planning. Decision-making approaches such as pros and cons, backward planning, and SMART goals (Bloom et al., 2014) are logic-based approaches to design work. In addition to logic, the advisor's integrity is critical and builds upon the established foundation. The previous phases can easily fall apart without integrity in the planning process.

## **Deliver**

During the Deliver phase, the student takes the plan developed with the advisor's support during the Design phase and begins to enact it (Bloom et al., 2008, 2014). Logic (Frei & Morriss, 2021) and reliability and accountability (Brown, 2019) are critical during the Deliver phase. Deliver is where the action begins, and logic, reliability, and accountability help motivate students to stick to their goals. Being a motivator is a significant role of the advisor (Bloom et al., 2008). Logic promotes motivation; short sentences and clear steps are hallmarks of logic (Frei & Morris, 2020). By using logical communication, the work is more easily understood and achieved. Logic may also help students build self-efficacy by anticipating and discussing barriers that may arise. The advisor works to build academic hope with the student by discussing that there is not only one right way to reach one's goals (Bloom et al., 2008). Furthermore, accountability and reliability help students to overcome such barriers. One strategy for accountability is ending the conversation well by sharing "a

reminder of the student's and the advisor's responsibilities and co-established deadlines" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 90). Accountability assists in the Deliver phase of Appreciative Advising.

### **Don't Settle**

The Don't Settle phase is when celebration and rewards occur. This phase is the culmination of the previous phases, and empathy and generosity allow advisors to connect more fully with students. Appreciative Advising "demands that advisors work hard to understand human behavior and to use both theory and stories of students" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 97). Hard work on behalf of the student is one way to work with generosity. Being generous with one's time and self solidifies the relationship and helps when future goals need to be made and delivered.

When Appreciative Advisers take time to recognize and share in the success of students, it contributes to a virtuous cycle where, "an improvement in one area leads to improvement in another area, which then leads to further improvement" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 99). Success in one area can also be harnessed and applied to new areas. Tapping into the students' feelings and stories helps advisors connect more meaningfully and encourage students not to settle and push on to bigger and better things. Empathy supports advisors during the Don't Settle phase because, as Bloom et al. (2008) explained, "students who feel more comfortable sharing their hopes and dreams will more likely follow through on the plan" (p. 97). Empathy invites the advisor to share the students' success and bolster the advising relationship.

Comparing the Appreciative Advising Model to the trust frameworks shared by Frei and Morriss (2021) and Brown (2019) gives advisors additional tools to connect with students and help encourage their success. Using trust framework models deepens the strengths of Appreciative Advising as they allow advisors to consider the work from a new angle, reinvigorating the model, and allowing practitioners to go through their own Don't Settle phase in their work.

### **Conclusion**

By explicitly integrating trust-building concepts of authenticity, logic, and empathy within the heart of Appreciative Advising, academic advisors can more successfully develop lasting relationships with their students. Advising with boundaries, reliability, accountability, the vault, integrity, non-judgment, and generosity builds trust between the student and the advisor and supports student success. Trust is foundational to Appreciative Advising and combining these trust-building approaches with Appreciative Advising will strengthen the framework and yield exponentially better results.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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

### **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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