Pre-health students come to our offices with a variety of backgrounds, interests, and career aspirations. The diversity of the students and health fields we work with prevents our jobs from becoming boring. Given the range of students’ backgrounds and career interests, it has been difficult to identify an advising theory to help inform and guide our work with students. The good news is that a new advising theory called Appreciative Advising provides a broad, flexible theoretical framework as well as specific action steps that can enhance the effectiveness of our advising sessions. This article will demonstrate how Appreciative Advising can be used to help the pre-nursing students who are in danger of not meeting the required GPA to be admitted into the nursing program as well as stellar students who have outstanding grades in the sciences, but no desire (other than to fulfill their parents’ wishes for them) to pursue a career in medicine. Appreciative Advising can help health professions advisors empower all students to attain their highest potentials. The added benefit of this approach is that it is one that also positively impacts advisors (Howell, 2010). The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of Appreciative Advising and to share how the six phases of Appreciative Advising can be used by health professions advisors to optimize their relationships with their advisees.

Appreciative Advising Overview

Drawing upon the organizational development theory of Appreciative Inquiry, Bloom and Martin (2002) first introduced the theoretical framework that later became known as Appreciative Advising. Subsequently, the theory has been expanded and refined as it has been implemented at institutions throughout the country (Bloom, Hutson, and He, 2008; Bloom, Hutson, He et al., 2009). “Appreciative Advising is the intentional collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials. It is perhaps the best example of a fully student-centered approach to student development” (Appreciative Advising, 2009).

There are six phases of Appreciative Advising: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver and Don’t Settle (Bloom, Hutson, He, 2008). The following sections will describe the tenets of each phase as well as demonstrate concrete ways that health professions advisors can infuse these phases into their work with students.

Disarm

The Disarm phase focuses on creating a safe, welcoming environment for students by allaying any suspicions or fears they may have about meeting with the advisor.
Appreciative Advising for Pre-Health Students continued

(Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). We all know that our health professions advising colleagues are really nice people, but students are often intimidated by meeting with the health professions advisor, especially those who may have had prior interactions with other institutional representatives. Students need to be able to trust advisors in order to share their stories as well as their hopes and dreams for their futures, and thus the Disarm phase is crucial in terms of establishing a trusting relationship.

How can health professions advisors disarm students? Given today's Internet savvy generation, the first step to disarming students occurs even before students arrive for their appointments. Therefore, advisors should pay careful attention to their web presence and consider adding a smiling picture to the department's advising website and including some information about their backgrounds, hobbies, interests, and advising philosophy. Students who can look and see that their advisors are friendly people may feel a little less intimidated when meeting them in person.

Once the student arrives at the advising session, the health professions advisor should warmly greet their advisee in the lobby of the advising center instead of having a secretary give students directions about where to find their assigned advisor's office. In the lobby area, the advisor can disarm the student by making direct eye contact, shaking the student's hand, warmly welcoming the student, and engaging in small talk as they walk down the corridor to the office (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Advisors can further disarm students by ensuring that their offices have comfortable chairs for guests to sit in and are decorated appropriately with pictures, personal memorabilia, and inspiring quotes within the direct line of vision from where the advisee sits, to help make the advisee feel welcome and at home. For example, in Amanda's office, there is a bulletin board that is adjacent to the advising table where she meets with students. She has a section of the bulletin board closest to where the student sits that is titled "Live Inspired" where she posts encouraging quotes and poems that students can easily read while she looks up records or information. Further, behind where she sits and directly in the student's line of vision is a copy of Dr. Seuss' Oh, the Places You Will Go! She has received a lot of positive comments about that book and it usually serves as a great conversation starter as well helps to set a positive tone for the meeting. Mather (2010) discusses the importance of "nurturing positive emotions" as part of our work in facilitating student success. Amanda's photos of her family and Texas memorabilia throughout her office gives students a sense of who she is and what is important to her both inside and outside the office.

Another way to disarm students is to ensure that there are minimal distractions in the office (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). By keeping office space tidy and organized, and purposefully turning down or off the ringers on phones and email, the advisor sends important messages to the student that s/he has the advisor's undivided attention. Students should feel that they are your number one priority during the appointment.

Disarming also involves deciding in advance how to approach students, especially those who may be struggling academically. This plays into the concept of the Appreciative Mindset. The Appreciative Mindset involves looking for the best in students, rather than the worst (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008). It involves a commitment to helping students change their future behavior instead of punishing their past behavior. For example, if a student is coming in and knows they are struggling in coursework, they are more likely already going to be nervous and on edge. So, if a student arrives at your office and had the following grades from last semester:

- Algebra: B-
- History: A
- English: A+
- Chemistry: F

What do you notice first? What is your immediate reaction (i.e. judgment)? Of course, we probably all notice the F in Chemistry, and that the student’s performance in Algebra was solid, but perhaps a bit of a struggle, and that the student was doing a great job in English and History. Appreciative Advising does not advocate ignoring the “F” in Chemistry, but instead Appreciative Advisors would begin their conversation with student focusing on what they did right to achieve such high grades in History and English (Roth and Clifton, 2004). Marcus Buckingham says that, “The answers to the F lies in the A’s” (Buckingham, 2007). In the process of having students first go over the strategies they employed to do well in their History and English classes, they may identify some strategies that they can use in the future to perform better in Chemistry and Math. The idea is to keep the lines of trust and communication open so the student will be more inclined to address the issues in a non-defensive manner and remain open to developing and
following through on a course of action that is likely to lead to future success.

By intentionally disarming, we can strive to be the kind of advisor to whom pre-health students will want to return and build long-lasting relationships. Here are some Disarm reflection questions to consider:

1. Take a moment to look around your office. How comfortable and inviting is your office?
2. Do you greet students in the lobby? If not, give it a try and see how this may change the effectiveness of your advising appointments.
3. Sit in the chair that your students typically sit in. Is the chair comfortable? What are students looking at when seated in that chair? How does your office look from the vantage point of the students’ line of vision? Is there a large desk separating you and the student?
4. What are one or two things that you could do to make your office more inviting?

Discover

The purpose of the Discover phase is to begin identifying and understanding students’ strengths, stories, and passions. To achieve this goal, the key is for the advisor to ask positive, open-ended questions and then listen carefully to students’ answers. Here are some sample Discover phase questions:

- Tell me about a time when you have positively influenced someone else’s life.
- Tell me the last time that you completely lost track of time when you were doing an activity that you were really enjoying doing.
- What is the biggest challenge that you have overcome? What did you learn from overcoming that challenge?
- If I gave you a good sum of money and asked you to travel anywhere in the world to make a difference, where would you go and what would you do?
- What initially attracted you to the field of [fill in appropriate health profession]?
- In your volunteer/healthcare experience, what did you find most interesting? Least interesting?

The goal is to provide an entrée through which students can share their stories and in so doing, advisors can begin to better understand students’ motivations and values. For example, a common conversation usu-

ally goes something like this:

Advisor: Since you indicated an interest in medicine, tell me about a time while you were volunteering or working in a health related environment that had an impact on you.

Student: I did and it was a phenomenal experience. I volunteered at a cancer center. Although it broke my heart knowing that the patients are suffering and some are not long for this world, it absolutely convinced me that medicine is my calling.

OR

Advisor: Since you indicated an interest in medicine, tell me about a time while you were volunteering or working in a health related environment that had an impact on you.

Student: No, I really haven’t volunteered much. I tried a couple of places, but nothing that was interesting. Plus, my research has occupied so much of my time.

Advisor: What can you tell me about your research?

Student: Oh my gosh, it is so interesting! We are investigating [fill in the blank]. The collection of the [item] and organizing the data is absolutely fascinating.

Reviewing a student’s academic record also gives us a glimpse into his/her performance, but academic performance is only part of the student’s story. Discover phase questions allow us to get to know “the rest of the story” and it is often through students’ stories that advisors realize that the obstacles that students have overcome may help explain their academic performance. It is sometimes easy for us as advisors to get excited about working with a student who holds a 3.8 GPA and yet sometimes quickly rush to judgment about a student who has a 2.8 GPA. The Discover phase allows us to get to the heart of what is going on and helps us to start considering the best advice we might be able to offer the student given their particular situation.

Discover Reflection Questions:

1. Which of the Discover questions feels most natural to me?
2. Which Discover questions might be most appropriate for me to use with my students?
3. What is another Discover-type question that I could use to draw out my students’ stories?

Dream

Once the advisor has learned a little about the students’ story, they can then move onto the Dream phase. This phase involves the advisor learning about the student’s hopes and dreams. Taking the time to invest in the Disarm and Discover phases leaves the door open for advisors to learn about what students want to accomplish in their lives and careers.

Sample Dream questions include:

- If you could be anything you wanted to be, ignoring for the time being the amount of school, money, or time necessary, what would you want to be?
- Let’s fast forward 10-15 years and you are a successful [fill in health professional]. Paint a picture for me and tell me what you ideally see yourself doing.

Bloom, Huston & Hc (2008) note, “Creating a positive vision of the future is the first step in accomplishing dreams” (p. 55-56). Here is a sample scenario of a Dream phase conversation:

Advisor: If you could do anything in the world and time, money and education were not obstacles, what would you do and why?

Student: [Puzzled] Are you serious?!  

Advisor: Yes, just dream with me for a minute.

Student: Wow, that’s a great question. Hrm... let me see...

[Response A] I don’t really know what else I would do. I’ve always wanted to be a dentist. I loved going to the dentist when I was little. My dentist had a way of making the dental experience fun and I’ve always wanted to be able to reciprocate that for other children. I’ve also been very good with my eye-hand coordination and that is another component of the profession that intrigues me. In addition, it’s all I’ve always wanted to do.

[Response B] You really want to know?! Well, I’ve always wanted to become a rock star! [laughs] I actually play in my own band now, but what are the odds that I can make a living doing this? I figure becoming a physical therapist will be a better choice of profession and I can enjoy music on the side.

[Response C] I have a heart for working with the underserved around the world. I’ve traveled to Haiti and Uganda on missions trips and would love to work in development, but I also love the sciences. So, my plan for now is to combine my interests and get involved with Doctors without Borders or Partners in Health or a similar organization where I might be able to combine both of my interests.

[Response D]: Honestly, I’d love to open up my own dance studio in the inner city and keep the performing arts alive there (eyes sparkle), but my parents will have nothing to do with that (countenance downcast). They are demanding that I go to medical school and I hate science. (Breaks down crying)

Each of the above scenarios would lead the conversation in a different direction. Learning about students’ stories allows us to be more efficient during our appointments. Here are some Dream phase reflection questions for advisors:

1. What are my own strengths, skills, and abilities?
2. What were my hopes and dreams for my future when I was in college?
3. Who believed in my dreams when I was in college?

Design

The Discovery and Dream phases should provide enough information to enable the advisor to guide the student through the Design phase. The Design phase involves partnering with the student to identify a plan for accomplishing the student’s goals and dreams. As health professions advisors know, to gain admission into a health profession program there are multiple steps students must successfully navigate during their undergraduate careers such as: maintain strong grades, develop leadership skills, as well as seek out substantial volunteer, healthcare, and shadowing experiences. Many health professions advising offices have assembled handouts that are checklists of things that students should seek to accomplish during each year of their undergraduate education. Appreciative Advisors use these checklists, but not until after first brainstorming with the student about the things that students have heard they need to accomplish. For example, an Appreciative Advisor might ask: "As you probably have heard, there are multiple criteria that admissions offices for health professions use to evaluate your application. What are some of the things that you have heard you will need to accomplish in or-
der to be a competitive candidate for the professional school of your choice?” To get students started, the Appreciative Advisor may start with an example to give students a moment to process their thoughts and to give students an idea of what you are seeking. An Appreciative Advisor might say, “For example, one thing that many health professions admissions officers look for is involvement in a pre-health club on campus. We do have an excellent pre-health club here and here is a flyer that has information about their next meeting. I would definitely encourage you to attend because it will provide you valuable information on the admissions process as well as volunteer and shadowing opportunities. OK, what else do you think would enhance your application to professional school?”

One thing to keep in mind during the Design phase is that there are many acronyms that are affiliated with careers in the health professions. These acronyms can be very confusing to students. It is important in this phase to be careful not to lose the student in the “alphabet soup” such as: MCAT, AADSAS, OAT, LOR, etc… Often, students do not want to appear “stupid” yet they do not understand the acronyms. Appreciative Advisors need to remember to encourage students at the beginning of the meeting to stop them if they are using acronyms or words that the student does not understand. When students do ask questions, advisors can give positive feedback to students by saying, “That is a great question.” Advisors can also occasionally check in with the student to ensure that the student understands your message by asking, “We’ve covered a lot of territory so far, is there any information that you are unclear about at this point?”

Advisors want to work with students to ensure that students are not overwhelmed with their “To Do List.” Sometimes, when we help students come up with a large list of things to do they become overwhelmed and paralyzed at the thought that they will not be able to accomplish everything on the list. So, the advisor needs to work with the student to prioritize the list of things they need to accomplish and break down goals into manageable sub-goals (Bloom, Hutson, and He, 2008).

It is important for health professions advisors to realize that they do not have to be experts on everything. However, they do need to know where the appropriate information can be obtained and appropriately refer students to those resources. It is ideal if the advisor can refer the student to the resource by explicitly sharing with students whom they need to talk to, share that person’s contact information in writing, and then write down the questions the student has for that person. In essence, an effective referral involves pre-disarming students for the next person they will be meeting. If the advisor personally knows the referral, advisors should make it a point to let students know that the person is nice and will provide them with the specific information that they are seeking.

Design reflection question for advisors:
1. How can I avoid the temptation to simply tell students exactly what they need to do in order to be successful candidates for the health professional school of their choice?

Deliver

The Deliver phase involves students going out and executing the plan that was created together with their advisor (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The Deliver phase typically begins at the end of the appointment and involves the advisor going over what has been accomplished in the meeting and what items are highest on the priority list. However, the most important part of the Deliver phase involves the advisor conveying confidence in the students’ abilities to accomplish the goals that have been established. For example, an advisor can say, “I’m really excited by the plan we’ve come up with together today and I have every confidence that you can and will accomplish these goals.”

Another important component of the Deliver phase involves letting students know that they will likely face obstacles and roadblocks in pursuit of their goals. Advisors can specifically let students know that when they face these roadblocks that they are welcome to return to the office to come up with a revised plan for accomplishing their goals. For example an Appreciative Advisor might say:

“As with all plans in life, there will be obstacles that you will encounter. The important thing is to not panic when faced with these hurdles. Come back and see me when you are facing tough circumstances and we will work together to come up with a different way around the obstacles that you almost inevitably face.”

Deliver reflection question for the health professions advisor:
1. How can you motivate your students by expressing your confidence in their ability to accomplish their goals?
Don’t Settle

The Don’t Settle phase entails challenging and supporting students, raising the bar and perpetuating a virtuous cycle (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The Don’t Settle phase builds on the relationships that advisors have established with students during the previous five phases and allows them to appropriately “challenge” a student to “raise the bar” and reach a little higher while at the same time “supporting” students through care, concern and confidence in the student (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). When such a rapport has been cultivated, students usually appreciate an advisor’s supportive candor when it is with the purpose of helping a student become the best they can be. Once the student achieves success after raising the bar and achieving a goal, the student builds confidence and continues to improve. Orem, Binkert & Clancey (2007) define a virtuous cycle as “an improvement in one area leads to an improvement in another area, which leads to further improvement, and so on” (p. 53). Advisors play a critical role in supporting students emotionally and mentally through this process.

A couple of years ago, one of Amanda’s pre-medical student’s plans fell into disarray after giving birth to her daughter. After dropping down to part-time for one semester to care for her newborn, she was encouraged to take a full-credit load the next semester. The student was not performing that well as a part-time student and Amanda had a suspicion that her performance would improve with more credits because it would force her to activate her incredible time management skills and “raise the bar.” The student did take a full-credit load the following semester and earned a 4.0. The self-confidence that student experienced further inspired her to keep working toward her goals because if she could earn a 4.0 the semester after having a baby, then she can accomplish any of her goals.

The personal statement writing process also captures the “Don’t Settle” phase well. Even when students bring in an initially well-written draft, it often takes several more drafts before the statement is ready for submission. Most often when we have students reread their various drafts, they become excited about their progression and proud of their end result. The main concept of the Don’t Settle phase is “You’ve done great so far, but you can do even better.”

We also recognize that when working with high-achieving students that we sometimes have to help them lower the bar of their own unrealistic expectations. As part of the Don’t Settle phase, we then add the step of helping students readjust the barometer of their own expectations by helping them readjust their time-lines and refocus their purpose, priorities and plans all the while empowering them to listen to and trust their “internal voice” (Baxter-Madold, 2009).

In this phase, students should be challenged to explore, “What if I can become all that I set out to be?” “What if I can become my best ‘possible self?’” (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Don’t Settle is “not settling” — it is instead a continuous cycle of striving for and attaining excellence centered by one’s particular purpose or calling in life (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009; Palmer, 2000). It is ideally instilling a life principle that we would hope each of our students will carry with them into all aspects of their lives.

Sample Don’t Settle questions that can be asked of students:

- You have done great so far, but what is one thing that you could do even better?
- If you were going to raise your own internal bar of expectations, what would that mean?
- What would happen if I challenged you to become the best that you could possibly become?
- What would you need to do differently?

Don’t Settle questions for health professions advisors:

1. How can we walk our talk and always strive to improve our skills?
2. What type of personal professional development plan do you have to keep abreast of the latest news in the field?

Conclusion

Health professions advisors have a unique position in developing the future leaders of our health care industry. Appreciative Advising is an advising theory that has the potential to help enhance the effectiveness of our pre-health advising sessions and optimize our interactions with our pre-health students. By successfully implementing the six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver and Don’t Settle, we can help propel our students into new directions and in so doing, transform their communities, professions and world.
References


