

Engaging Families in Supporting their Students: An Appreciative Approach

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Parents and families are a key factor in college student success. As such, it is critical that institutions develop positive relationships with the families of students, particularly during new student orientation programs. Appreciative Advising has been used as a solid model for advisors and mentors to work with students on nurturing meaningful partnerships, generating co-constructed paths to success, and providing individualized sets of tools and timelines for personal development. Appreciative Advising is an effective, proven framework for enhancing student success which can be applied to working with parents during new student orientation. The six-phase model can be taught to parents as a way to empower them to assist their student in achieving their educational and personal goals.

The involvement of parents and other family members in the college experience is not new. According to Wartman and Savage (2008), the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Texas A&M University first established associations for parents of their students in the 1920s. In the 1950s, parent programming began to appear as a component of new student orientation sessions. The 1980s and 90s saw increased attention to parents as a key campus constituency as they became more involved in the lives and success of their students as a return on the investment in child-rearing and the cost of college attendance.

Across the decades, the degree to which campuses have involved parents in programming has varied as perspectives on parenting, social influences, and federal legislation such as FERPA affected the degree to which students, the institution, and families themselves viewed the role of parents (Wartman & Savage, 2008). In today's age of higher levels of parental involvement, the high cost of college

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attendance, and the availability of immediate communication and connection between students and their families through technology, the question before higher education professionals is not whether or not to involve parents in campus life but how to do so in a way that supports student success (Wartman & Savage, 2008; Ward-Roof, Page, & Lombardi, 2010).

Rather than focusing on the negative aspects of parental involvement— often discussed in terms of “helicopter parents”— institutions need to focus on the common goal of helping students achieve both academically and developmentally. Because families and higher education professionals share the same goal of supporting students toward becoming educated, independent citizens, it is in the best interest of institutions to build a partnership with parents and to educate and empower families in supporting their students. In this article, the term “parents” is used with the recognition that for many students, other family members or guardians may be a primary source of information, support, and encouragement.

It is clear that parental encouragement and support are important aspects of collegiate success (Adams, Ryan, & Keating, 2000; Mounts, Valentiner, Anderson, & Boswell, 2006; National Study of Student Engagement, 2007). The annual report of the National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) noted that family connection was a supporting factor in student success and engagement. Specifically, Klein and Pierce (2009) argued that positive parenting that fosters student development and emerging adulthood includes a balance of emotional support coupled with the ability to engage in trial and error decision-making that leads to autonomy. They found that students who had the most successful transition to college were those who reported their parents as having a unique combination of high care and low overprotection. As such, parents should be guided to support their children through caring and concern while encouraging them to experience college life, including allowing them to make difficult decisions that may not always lead to short-term success.

Based on the work of Kolb (1984), Erikson (1968), Chickering (1969), and Sanford (1962)—all of whom posit that the development of knowledge, independence, and autonomy are based in experience and dissonance—several authors have argued that the principles of student development should be planted firmly at the center of programmatic efforts to build relationships with parents who support student transitions and academic success (Coburn, 2006; Kennedy, 2009; Wartman & Savage, 2008; Ward-Roof, Page, & Lombardi, 2010). Overall, parents play a significant role in helping their student’s transition to college and adulthood.

Family orientation programs often focus on providing critical information on the institution as well as the family’s role in their student’s success. Discussions of parental roles tend to address the “balance of involvement with appropriate boundaries” (Daniels, Evans, & Scott, 2001, p. 11; Ward-Roof et al., 2010; Wartman & Savage, 2008). This conversation can be difficult to navigate as institutions want families to be key partners in student success but then focus on the limits of that partnership by spotlighting federal regulations regarding the sharing of information and students as independent adults; the result is often a confusing

mixed message (Coburn & Woodward, 2001). This may be particularly confusing for families of first generation students or those with specific cultural norms and expectations surrounding family relationships (Daniels et al., 2001).

What families need, then, are specific strategies and tools that they can utilize to support their children in a manner that fosters student growth and development. The Appreciative Advising framework model offers such a tool. By exposing parents to the model and specific questions that assist the student in dreaming, designing, and delivering their student's achievement, family members maintain a significant role in their student's life and have a specific strategy for fostering student success.

Appreciative Advising Overview

Before this model can be used as a parental support structure, it is important to have a basic understanding of the theoretical infrastructure of the approach. Appreciative Advising is a social constructivist philosophy of academic advising that provides a framework for campus advisors to optimize their interactions with students in both individual and group settings (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Appreciative Advising involves a six-phase model through which advisors intentionally use positive, active, and attentive listening and questioning strategies to build trust and rapport with students (Disarm); uncover students' strengths and skills (Discover); encourage and be inspired by students' dreams (Dream); co-construct action plans with students to make their goals a reality (Design); support students as they carry out their plans (Deliver); and challenge both themselves and the students to do and become even better (Don't Settle) (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The goals of Appreciative Advising are to 1) nurture meaningful partnerships between advisors and students, 2) generate co-constructed paths to success, and 3) provide individualized set of tools and timelines for personal development (Bloom et al., 2008). The term "appreciative" describes both the advisor and the student uncovering and appreciating the strengths and passions that they have brought with them to the advising relationship.

Appreciative Advising has been adapted to other contexts with great success, often with a higher education professionals who are invested in the student's success, such as an instructor, tutor, or student affairs professional, incorporating the six-phase model as well as strength-based activities into their interactions with students. For example, the framework has been adapted to first-year experience programs, leading to significant gains in retention and first-semester grade point averages among participants (Hutson, 2010).

Additionally, Appreciative Advising has been used in student success courses to help students regain their academic standing (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). In comparing these studies, a recurring theme was the importance of front-loading students' higher education experience with opportunities to uncover and operationalize their academic and personal strengths. In fact, it appears that the earlier students were engaged in activities in which they identified and activated their strengths, the more significant was their academic achievement. Additionally, these studies found that, in both written course assignments and

quantitative measures such as the Appreciative Advising Inventory (He, Hutson, & Bloom, 2010), students indicated the importance of family support in their previous academic achievement.

Given the positive outcomes associated with engaging students in Appreciative Advising early in their academic experience, as well as the important role that families play in students' achievement, we propose that higher education institutions adopt the Appreciative Advising phases into their orientation sessions. By doing so, institutions can assist family members in playing a significant role in their student's life in a manner which fosters student success. Part of the parent orientation session can be devoted to coaching parents on how to use the framework of the six phases of Appreciative Advising to positively guide their interactions with their children as they transition into the next phase of their educational journey. Until now, a solid, theoretical, and proven framework for teaching parents how to best support their children has been missing from the literature. We posit that the six phases of Appreciative Advising will provide a non-threatening and positive approach to teaching parents how to optimize their interactions with their college student.

Disarm

The Disarm phase can help parents understand the importance of the role they play in their student's life and give parents positive techniques for helping their student successfully transition into the new institution. A crucial first step is letting parents know up-front that the institution recognizes and appreciates the positive impact that parents can have on their student's academic success. This can be done during orientation by sharing Klein and Pierce's (2009) findings with the parents, relaying that students with parents who demonstrated high levels of care and support balanced with few overprotective behaviors were most likely to smoothly transition into the institution.

Once the importance of the parental role has been established, orientation leaders can share the following tips with parents on how to Disarm and appropriately support their college students:

1. Parents should establish a plan for communicating with their student while he or she is attending college. Parents can ask their students questions such as:
 - "How can I best support you as you transition to college?"
 - "What role do you envision that I will play in helping you make the most of your collegiate experience?"
 - "In what way and how often do you want to communicate while you are away?"

However, parents need to be flexible with these plans and be willing to make adjustments in that communication pattern as needed by the student. For example, students may want to have more communication at the beginning of the semester while they are trying to make new friends, but once those friendships are established, students may not want or need

- to call, text, or e-mail quite as often.
2. Focus on the positive when beginning conversations with the student. By cheerfully answering the phone and avoiding the temptation to focus on negative events that may be happening at home or that the parent perceives might be happening at school, parental conversations with their student can start off on a positive note.
 3. Parents should be encouraged to send regular updates from home, even if they do not always hear back from their student. This sense of anchoring can provide students with self-confidence. Also, parents should be encouraged to send care packages with their favorite treats from home and/or cards with uplifting quotes/messages to the student at various times throughout the year. This could be just the thing to bring a smile during a lonely or high stress period.
 4. If at all possible, parents should try not to immediately convert the college student's bedroom into something else. When students transition to college, it can be comforting for them to know that they still have their own space back home.
 5. Parents whose student may be struggling should avoid telling their student that "college days should be the best of your life." Furthermore, when students share their midterm or end-of-term grades, congratulate the student on a grade that is higher than the rest instead of focusing on the poor grade(s). Then ask what strategies the student used to perform well in the class with the better grade. Listen carefully for the specific strategies the student used before moving on to discuss the next class.

Discover

Many parents are concerned about how to stay connected with their student while they attend college. The key to building and maintaining relationships is being an active listener and asking positive, open-ended questions that will elicit stories from their child. The Discover phase involves parents asking questions, such as the following, and listening carefully to their student's answers in order to demonstrate that they care and to provide opportunities for their student to reflect on their collegiate experiences:

1. What was the highlight of your day?
2. What is the most fascinating thing you learned in classes this week?
3. Tell me about a time this week when you got so immersed in what you were doing that you lost track of time.
4. What student organization have you heard about that intrigues you the most?
5. Who is your favorite professor this semester? What do you enjoy most about this person?
6. What class do you feel you are learning the most in? Which one do you enjoy most? Which one do you think you will get the highest grade in? Why?

If these types of conversations did not take place throughout high school, parents should be counseled to be patient. It may take a while for the parent and student to become comfortable with this level of discussion.

During parent orientation, participants can be paired and given a Discover-type question (Bloom et al., 2008) to ask a parent of a different student. A sample Discover question for parents is, "Tell me about your proudest moment as a parent." Ask one person per pair to be the questioner and the other person in the pair to answer the question. The questioner in each pair should be encouraged ahead of time to ask follow-up questions. After three minutes, the facilitator should stop the discussion and then ask the pairs to change roles. Afterwards, a facilitator can ask the audience, "How many of you were inspired by your partner's story?" and request for a volunteer to share their partner's story. This will give parents an opportunity to build a relationship with at least one other parent and allow them to see first-hand the power of asking Discover questions.

Dream

The focus of the Dream phase is to help parents begin to understand what their student's hopes and dreams are for their future. Parents want to be supportive of their child's dreams, although some may inadvertently misconstrue their own dreams as their student's dream. Parents may do this due to their desire for their student to be financially secure, to follow in their footsteps, or because of cultural expectations. By teaching parents the importance of allowing their student to pursue his/her own career and life goals, we may be able to help avert what their child may perceive to be parental pressure. A quick way to illustrate this to parents is to ask for a show of hands on how many of the parents ever had a job that they hated, where they constantly watched the clock because they could not wait until their time was finished. Ask how that experience made them feel. Were they a pleasant person to be around? Were they motivated to do their best or even to go to work each day? Ask them to extend that feeling into a career of 5, 10, or 15 years. Would they want their student feeling that way by possibly choosing a career that was a poor fit for them?

One way to help parents begin to learn about their child's hopes and dreams is to provide them with an arsenal of questions to ask their student, but this must be preceded by information about why it is important for students to pursue their own goals. This might be done by sharing Bandura's (1997, p. 218) findings: "When people select their own goals, they are likely to have greater self-involvement in achieving them. If goals are prescribed by others, however, individuals do not necessarily accept them or feel obligated to meet them." Asking parents to reflect on their own dreams when they were 18 years old may help them remember how important it is to identify and pursue one's own dreams instead of trying to pacify others.

The following are questions can be provided to parents to help them begin to understand their student's dream:

1. If time, money, and education were irrelevant and you could be anything

- you wanted, what career would you pursue? Why?
2. Do you know someone or of a position that reflects your passion (identified from the question above)? How about contacting that person to see if you might be able to set up an appointment to learn more about what his/her job entails and get advice from that person?
 3. What are your goals for this semester both inside and outside the classroom? For the year?

The tone of voice used when asking these questions is crucial because if the student perceives that the parent has ulterior motives, the answer might likely be, "I don't know." Parents should also be encouraged to listen carefully to their student and self-monitor their verbal and non-verbal reactions because any rolling of the eyes or defensiveness when asking these questions or listening to the answers will be perceived negatively by the student.

Design

Once parents know what their student's dreams are, they can help their student come up with his or her own plan for accomplishing those dreams by helping their student identify and utilize appropriate campus resources. During the parent orientation session, specific information about the most commonly utilized campus resources—such as tutoring, academic advising, career services, counseling, and financial aid counseling—can be presented to parents. It is especially helpful for parents of first generation students to receive information that explains some of the common terms and acronyms. An overview of the rhythm of the academic year (i.e., what is to be expected during the first several weeks of the semester, as well as the timing of midterms, pledging, declaration of major, and other significant events) can be of great value to new students and their families.

It would also be beneficial to distribute a brief hand-out which lists campus resources, increasing the chances that parents can help point their student towards these resources as necessary. Parents should be coached on how to effectively refer their student to appropriate resources. For example, a parent could communicate as follows: "During parent orientation this summer, they mentioned that there is free tutoring available, and since we are paying for this service anyway, I'm wondering if it wouldn't hurt for you to stop by and inquire about receiving help with your math class?" As a follow-up, the parent can send an e-mail with a direct link to the tutoring office. By approaching the referral in this way, the parent is planting the seed instead of dictating to the student, thus increasing the chances that the student will seek out this help.

Parents can also encourage their student to engage in productive behaviors such as:

1. Becoming involved in appropriate out-of-class activities, including student and community organizations;
2. Meeting with faculty members outside of class;
3. Keeping an up-to-date calendar planner that lists all activities, assignments,

and due dates;

4. Brainstorming solutions to problems (Note: Parents should avoid the temptation to solve problems for their student. However, parents who are truly concerned about the health and/or well-being of their child should be encouraged to contact the appropriate institutional office sooner rather than later.);
5. Clarifying a financial plan that will not involve the student accumulating an overly burdensome student loan debt load;
6. Breaking down large goals into manageable sub-goals, especially if the student is feeling overwhelmed;
7. Securing on-campus jobs and summer positions that build the student's skill set; and
8. Developing a networking plan for meeting people in the student's chosen field.

Deliver

The focus of the Deliver phase is on educating parents about the fact that their child will make mistakes in college, and teaching parents how they can best support their student before, during, and after those mistakes, and helping their student learn from those mistakes. Parents also need to understand that changing majors is not necessarily a mistake. Students typically switch majors three to five times during their undergraduate career, and parents need to be available to support students as they make these transitions and identify a major that best suits their interests and aspirations. Most college students believe in the myth that a major equals a career. For the vast majority of careers, this is not the case. Students should be encouraged to focus on the skills learned as part of the educational experience and how those skills can be applied to the career choice, rather than on the title of the degree. Understanding this reality can take the pressure off of the decision to choose and declare a major. For example, many schools have a very competitive process and grade point average requirement to declare a major in business. Once students understand they do not have to have a business major to have a career within the business field, it can free the student to search for a better fit based on his or her strengths, values, and interests.

Likewise, parents will benefit from talking to other parents of college students as they enter this new phase of parenting. Parents should be encouraged to exchange contact information with other families they meet at orientation so that they can serve as resources to each other and reassure one another that they are not the only ones attempting to effectively parent a college student. In addition, parents should be prepared for the possibility that they may experience the "empty nest syndrome" in the fall as the child leaves home. Thus, orientation staff can use appreciative techniques and questions that lead parents to consider ways in which they can proactively fill their time with new interests when their child leaves home.

One of the best ways that parents can demonstrate their care for and support of their child is to authentically express confidence in the student's ability to perform

well in college. Making affirmative statements such as, “You can do this. I believe in you,” and “I have seen you overcome challenge after challenge in your life, and I have no doubt that you will figure out a way to overcome this particular challenge.” The more specific examples of overcoming past challenges parents can offer, the more effective the statement will be. Parents should also pay attention to the rhythm of the academic calendar and be aware of the high-stress times each term, including mid-terms and final exams. The level of support and encouragement needs to be highest during this time, and the level of demand in terms of their responsibilities back home should be at its lowest.

Don't Settle

The Don't Settle phase is a reminder to all of us that we must be committed to continuous self-improvement and raising of our expectations for ourselves. While it is good for parents to have high standards for their student, orientation is the perfect time to remind parents that their job at this point in their child's life is to help their students establish and achieve their own standards and expectations. Parents should be advised that the best thing that they can do is to be a positive role model in terms of striving to better themselves. Parents can also help their students reflect on their accomplishments as well as what students can do even better by asking the following Don't Settle questions at the end of an academic term:

1. As you look back on last term, what is the most important thing you learned that can help you become even more successful next term?
2. How can I better support you in your academic pursuits?

Conclusion

Instead of viewing parents as inhibitors of student success, college officials should be mindful of the literature that demonstrates that parents have the potential to be contributors to student success (Klein & Pierce, 2009). During orientation, by arming parents with specific questions and techniques for building healthy, supportive relationships with their student by utilizing the framework of the six phases of Appreciative Advising, colleges can empower parents to be partners in our shared vision of their student graduating from college. Coaching parents at orientation should be the beginning, not the ending point, of discussion. Parent newsletters throughout the term, parent weekends, alumni activities, sporting events, and other parental touch points provide opportunities to reinforce this appreciative mindset and support the final goal of retaining and graduating students.

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