

# A Humble Grassroots Organization and the Appreciative Advising Approach

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## Abstract

When a small group of dedicated student support professionals collaborate, learn and celebrate together, students and professionals can benefit. This article demonstrates how the phases of Appreciative Advising were used to create and operate a campus association for advising professionals. In this article we delve into how each of the tenets of Appreciative Advising helped shape a NACADA affiliated grassroots group on a small non-flagship urban serving campus.

## Academic Advising

Academic advising is the art of working in partnership with students to help them navigate their college experience. Academic advisors, faculty and key staff help students to realize their personal strengths, talents, and passions through examination of their core values. This process cannot be performed in a vacuum; instead, silos need to be broken down to provide a comprehensive set of services to ensure student success. With so many departments and offices on campus for students to navigate, it is beneficial to have the campus community (financial aid, career development, registrar, faculty and directors, etc.) work in partnership to help students achieve their goals. One solution for the areas of campus to work together is to use the theory-to-practice principles of Appreciative Advising. This framework can provide a common language, mindset, and approach to working with students (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008). At the University of Washington Tacoma, a small group of dedicated student support professionals are applying the phases of Appreciative Advising to help break down silos across campus and create a sustainable and supportive future for its members and student population.

## UW TACADA

In autumn of 2015, a small group of student support professionals launched the University of Washington Tacoma Academic Advising Association (UW TACADA), a grassroots affiliate member of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA). The mission of UW TACADA is to promote continuous improvement in student services through collaboration, education and advocacy (UW TACADA, 2018). One of the innovative traits of UW TACADA is its inclusive nature. From the inception, all student support colleagues on campus were encouraged to join. Many advising personnel expressed enthusiasm due to the fact that the organization is professionally affiliated with NACADA.

The six phases of Appreciative Advising are a guiding model for forming and managing the organization. Stakeholders were considered when creating the structure, mission and the goals of the organization. In the beginning, feedback from the University advising community was gathered to find out what they would like to see in a student support organization. The organization carefully crafted its mission, values, goals, and by-laws to align with the University's mission, structure, and strategic plan; several drafts and iterations were edited in order to encompass the holistic nature of the grassroots group. The mission is to foster collegiality through bringing people from all student service departments on campus together to

generate and exchange fresh ideas, all with the shared goal of increasing student success and providing excellent student service. One of the primary goals of the University is to enhance students' sense of belonging, a key overall goal of UW TACADA.

While recruiting members for UW TACADA, the steering committee sought to *Disarm* (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) prospective members to help them feel at ease with joining a grassroots organization. It can be daunting for charter members to start a new organization and members may be timid to join. When considering an organization, prospective members might want to know how the organization will benefit them, the amount of time involved, and the expectations of membership. At an initial mixer, prospective members were informed that they could commit as little or as much time and effort as they desired. To provide current information about UW TACADA, a website was designed to share the organization structure, information and its programmatic offerings.

Membership is building through connections that foster a spirit of collegiality, transparency and respect. Sharing resources and programs that better serve our students with one another is paramount. Bi-monthly general membership meetings are held as open forums where student support professionals from all departments come together and continue to build UW TACADA. Although this grassroots group has an organizational structure that includes an executive committee of co-chairs, treasurer and secretary, members facilitate the meetings and contribute to the agenda. Everyone is a stakeholder. Everyone is an owner. To date, UW TACADA has 43 members from different departments campus-wide.

Recently, the association created a Membership and Professional Development committee to plan initiatives. One group is working on a faculty and student 'scavenger hunt' to provide an opportunity to interact in a fun and informal setting. We also collaborated with a local medical center to offer a suicide prevention workshop. Future plans include ongoing support for our campus food pantry. Additionally, UW TACADA sponsored a presentation connecting Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) and Resiliency in college which was presented by a Nursing Department faculty member. These are only a few examples of how a small group can affect the student experience. It is truly exciting to see representatives from different departments collaborate and *Design* (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) programming with one another who share a like-minded vision.

Through UW TACADA, members have opportunities to come together and discuss what they are learning and how they are implementing creative new ideas. In this intentional dialogue, they can *Discover* (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) innovative ways they approach different student issues, challenges, and scenarios. Members are encouraged to *Dream* big and to *Discover* (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) ideas that contribute to student success. Postings on the website encourage members to share articles, TED Talks, and webinars related to their work. Members also put into practice the *Deliver* (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) phase by building each other up and celebrating small victories.

UW TACADA is committed to the *Don't Settle* (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) phase of Appreciative Advising. A priority of the organization is to be accountable for completing its projects in a timely and responsible manner. Members of the organization will assess their progress on the benchmark goals and revisit the by-laws annually. By reviewing and assessing, members will ensure that the organization is working toward the original goals and the overall mission and vision. The organization will not settle. If it falls short of accomplishing the goals, it will revise its plan and continue to work on completing its goals. As goals are set and accomplished, momentum continues to build. The overall catalyst for and goal of UW TACADA is aiming to make a positive impact on the campus as a whole.

Based on the success of UW TACADA, we can offer several recommendations for starting a grassroots, member-driven group made up of student-serving colleagues. The first is to offer a 'discovery meeting' where student support personnel can learn more about starting a NACADA affiliated grassroots group on campus. It is important to remember that even just three or four individuals can make a strong impact if

truly dedicated, so do not be discouraged if only a handful of people across campus show interest in the beginning. From there, a steering committee with designated working groups is key to creating accountability for the upcoming tasks. The steering committee may develop the by-laws, mission, vision and values of the organization. Constructing a website and hosting a mixer or casual gathering for prospective new members to learn more about the group is key. It is important to have a clear vision and Q & A session for those prospective members in attendance, as this worked well for UW TACADA.

In summary, the phases of Appreciative Advising (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008) have played a role in the creation and ongoing efforts of UW TACADA. First, *Disarming* prospective members by helping them feel welcome. Next, actively seeking to *Discover* the unique strengths of each member and to share what is occurring in member's respective departments. Further, continuously *Dreaming* and *Designing* intentional programming to enhance members' knowledge. UW TACADA is *Delivering* on its commitment to promote continuous improvement in student services through collaboration, education, and advocacy. And finally, the *Don't Settle* phase has encouraged inspiration to keep growing, encouraging scholarship, and celebrating. Although UW TACADA is still in its early stages, the commitment to intentional learning and communication among members has allowed UW TACADA to provide a productive and safe space for colleagues to grow academically, professionally, and personally. Not only are members benefitting from their organization, students are as well.

### References

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