

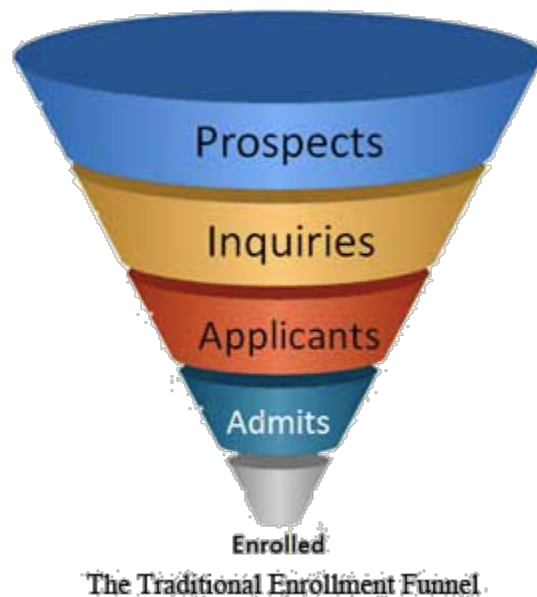
## Appreciative Admissions

Jennifer L. Bloom and Dakota Flynn  
University of South Carolina

Stacie Edington  
University of Michigan

On today's college campuses, admissions/enrollment management professionals often use the metaphor of a funnel to describe the process of turning prospective students into enrolled students. In fact, a quick search on Google Images for the term "admissions funnel" produces an amazing quantity and array of graphics, including this one:

Figure 1. The Traditional Enrollment Funnel



Source: <http://www.stonybrook.edu/ugadmissions/erm/funnel.html>

A funnel is defined on dictionary.com as, “a cone-shaped utensil with a tube at the apex for conducting liquid or other substance through a small opening, as into a bottle, jug, or the like.” People are neither a “liquid” nor a “substance” – they are real human beings that have real needs, hopes, and dreams. So, is a funnel the most appropriate way to refer to human beings? We would argue that we are recruiting people who want to be treated and referred to as if they matter and are respected. With considerable focus on enrollment numbers, admissions professionals can lose sight that admissions is about people and meeting their needs. One way to avoid this trap is to intentionally use a theoretical framework for guiding admissions professionals’ interactions with prospective students. Therefore, this article describes how a positive theory-to-practice framework, Appreciative Advising, can be used to build positive relationships with prospective students as a means for enhancing the effectiveness of institutional recruiting efforts.

Appreciative Advising is, “the intentional, collaborative practice of asking positive, open-ended questions that help students optimize educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials” (Bloom, Hutson, & He, n.d., para. 2). While this definition and framework emerged out of the field of academic advising (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008) it is equally applicable to the important work that admissions professionals do every day. The Appreciative Advising framework has been demonstrated to be effective in retaining college students (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2013; Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007; Hutson, 2006; Hutson, 2010) and admissions officers and academic advisors at Miami University – Hamilton campus already use it as a unifying framework to guide their interactions with students (Murray, 2013). The purpose of this article is to highlight how the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework can be used by admissions professionals to optimize their interactions with prospective students

### The Six Phases

Appreciative Advising has six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Not all phases are necessarily used in each and every interaction with prospective students. Instead, as a theory-to-practice framework, Appreciative Advising can be used by admissions practitioners to guide their communication with candidates. In this section, we will highlight a definition for each phase as well as practical strategies and positive, open-ended questions for operationalizing each phase.

#### Disarm

The Disarm phase is particularly important in the field of admissions because as the old adage goes, “You only get one chance to make a first impression.” If that first impression is not a positive one, the institution risks losing that candidate forever. The first contact students have with an institution/program can be electronic (website, email, or social media) or a personal interaction with an admissions representative. In either case, the Appreciative Advising framework can be used to optimize these interactions.

**Electronic Communication Tips.** Here are some specific Disarm tips for ensuring that your electronic presence is positive:

1. Have you run focus groups with prospective students to ensure that the messages you are trying to convey through your marketing materials are being received as you intend?
2. Have you surveyed your current students to understand why they selected your institution and what were pivotal factors in their decision to attend the institution? Are these factors highlighted in your marketing plan?
3. Are you using images that reflect the mission of your institution? Are they authentic? Are they aligned with what students actually experience on your campus?
4. How are you consistently telling your institution's story throughout your written and electronic communications?
5. How are you answering the question: Why should I come here to this institution? What differentiates our institution from others?

6. On your admissions website, are the names, titles, contact information, and pictures available for your staff? Make sure that the staff pictures are professional and that staff members smile and look friendly and approachable in the pictures.
7. How are you showcasing current students' stories? Consider devoting a section of the admissions website to blogs and video blogs authored by current students about their experience. Candidates tend to place a lot of weight on the experiences of current students, so allowing current students to showcase their experiences at the institution in writing and through videos can be powerful recruiting tools.
8. Are you leveraging email to its full potential? Use a mail merge tool (such as ConstantContact) that allows you to send individual emails to large numbers of students. Personalize the emails as much as possible by addressing candidates by their first name (ideally you will have collected their preferred name information), and include a customized specific reason for contacting individual students. This helps to get your reader's attention and set a positive tone for candidates. Consider having current students send individualized emails to prospective students that share their experiences on campus and encouraging prospective students to contact them with any questions.

**Face-to-Face Communication Tips.** Admissions representatives interact with students in a variety of settings, including recruiting fairs, by phone, in office visits, and group information sessions. The social psychology literature tells us that people make decisions about our competence, approachability, and niceness in anywhere from first three to thirty seconds of meeting someone (Flora, 2004). No matter the setting, there are specific non-verbal and verbal behaviors that admissions professionals can adopt to ensure that they are making a positive first impression.

Professionals should pay careful attention to the setting where they are interacting with candidates. If at a recruiting fair – ensure that the backdrop for your booth space is eye-catching by maximizing the use of photos and minimizing text. Stand up and smile – look like you are having fun! If allowed by the policy at the recruiting fair, stand in front of the table and warmly acknowledge people passing by. If at your office, make sure that your office is tidy and welcoming. Sit in the chair that visitors typically occupy in your office to see what they look at and measure how comfortable the chair is and ensure that the office space reflects your interests, passions, and family, by showcasing pictures and other personal items (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008).

Non-verbal behavior tips include smiling, eliminating as many distractions (especially cell phones) as possible, and using open and warm gestures. Examples of friendly gestures include uncrossing your arms, pointing the palms of your hands towards the person, and not pointing your finger. In addition, looking candidates in the eye (although not staring them down) helps them feel like they have your full attention. Your body language should signal that you are fully present and authentically interested in engaging with the candidate (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008).

Verbal immediacy behavior tips include calling candidates by name, letting them know what name you prefer to be called, ensuring that your tone is enthusiastic, warmly welcoming candidates to the location/event, and engaging in small talk to break the ice with the candidate

(Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). Examples of Disarm questions that professionals can ask students to break the ice include:

1. What's the best thing that has happened to you today/this week?
2. What word best describes how you are feeling today? (Follow up by asking why they chose that word.)

In summary, the primary objective of the Disarm phase is to make prospective students feel welcome and important.

### **Discover**

Every prospective student has a story. The Discover phase provides admissions representatives with the tools in the form of positive, open-ended questions to learn students' stories. Giving students the opportunity to share their story builds trust and the information accrued about candidates can be helpful in pointing out connections between students' interests and the campus. However, the admissions professional must be sincere in asking and listening to candidates' responses. Actively listening to students' responses and asking appropriate follow-up questions allows professionals to demonstrate their interest in the candidate as a person. It is also important for admissions representatives to look and listen for the best in students – a key feature of the appreciative mindset. Examples of Discover questions include:

1. What types of activities are you engaged in when you feel at your best?
2. What do you do for fun?
3. Tell me about a time that you positively impacted someone's life.
4. What are concrete examples of experiences in your life when you felt passionate about a task at hand?
5. On a daily basis, what is the topic or theme of conversation that gets you excited?

### **Dream**

Institutions of higher education are hotbeds of creativity and new ideas. During college, students have the opportunity to engage in activities, both inside and outside of the classroom, to discover what inspires them and help them create professional goals. The Dream phase challenges students to look beyond what might be considered easy or conventional majors to chart an educational path leading to a fulfilling career where they wake up excited to tackle their work each morning. Utilizing the Dream phase affords admissions representatives and prospective students the opportunity to have valuable conversations for deciding if the institution is the best option. Sample dream phase questions include:

1. What does an ideal career look like to you?
2. What is the coolest career that you have ever heard of?
3. What does a perfect college experience look like?
4. If you were going to make your own major, what would it be?

One of the most important aspects of treating prospective students as humans is transparency. From carefully listening to prospective students answers to these questions, admissions representatives can quickly ascertain whether or not their institution offers an appropriate major that aligns with students' dreams. If not, recruiters who genuinely refer such students to institutions that more closely meet their needs will be more positively remembered. It may well be this act that influences the candidate to return if they change their mind about a major before committing to a school.

## **Design**

A vital part of the recruiting process is designing a plan for students to maximize the application experience. The Design phase provides a chance for students to sit down with their admissions recruiter to co-create a plan for turning students' dreams into reality. This task can include a multitude of conversations, ranging from specifics regarding the application process to referring students to appropriate campus resources once they matriculate, including:

1. Financial aid packages and scholarships
2. Housing options and deadlines
3. Orientation dates and transfer credit evaluations
4. Details on how to declare a major
5. Advisement on selecting a double major or minor

## **Deliver**

Once a plan has been co-created, the prospective student is charged with delivering on the plan. However, admissions professionals continue to play an important role in encouraging students and offering support as they begin to execute the plan. Key components of the Deliver phase include motivating and energizing students to be their best self, reviewing next steps and deadlines, offering positive reinforcement and making plans to stay connected (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). It is important for admissions representatives to reassure students that they will be present to offer lasting support, even after the plan has been established.

Motivating and energizing prospective students in this phase is critical to encourage student persistence throughout the potential personal and systemic obstacles faced in the admission process (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). As Tichy (2008, p. 297), reminds:

Simply put, a leader's job is to energize others. Notice that I don't say it's part of their job; it is their job. There is no 'time off' when a leader isn't responsible for energizing others. Every interaction a leader has is either going to positively energize those around them or negatively energize them."

Admissions representatives should let prospective students know that there may be some unexpected bumps in the road as they go through the admissions process and encourage contact(via phone, email, or other appropriate methods) if they need help or have questions at any time. Admissions representatives should consider inviting prospective students to stop by to visit them personally when they come for a campus visit.

Admissions professionals should also provide clear application deadlines and timelines. It is always helpful to provide candidates with electronic and published materials, such as an interactive admission checklist on your website, which students can refer to later. Many institutions have an electronic applicant tracking system that will allow recruiters to stay up-to-date on students' application status and to set up reminders for following up with prospective students.

The Deliver phase also reminds admissions representatives to end their conversations with prospective students in a positive manner (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008):

1. What questions do you have for me?
2. Is there anything else that I should have asked you?
3. Shake hands and encourage them to be in touch with any questions – Thanks so much for coming in, I really enjoyed meeting with you. Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

### **Don't Settle**

During the admission process, students are understandably focused on their primary goal: gaining admission to the program/institution. However, the Don't Settle phase focuses on challenging prospective students to move beyond simply "getting in" and encourages them to strive for greatness. Sanford's (1966) theory of challenge and support is an important reminder that admissions personnel play an important role in not just helping students gain admission to college, but also in helping students to graduate from college. For example, admissions representatives can ask prospective students challenging positive, open-ended questions such as:

1. Once admitted to college, what steps will you need to take in order to complete your degree in four years?
2. What is something that you would like to accomplish as a student leader on our campus?
3. How can you best use the time before starting college to prepare for your studies?
4. Have you ever thought about pursuing a graduate or professional degree after you complete your undergraduate degree?

Admissions representatives can help students set high expectations for themselves right from the beginning of the admissions process.

The Don't Settle phase pertains not only to prospective students, but also to admissions professionals. Admissions personnel must strive to be lifelong learners and to continuously develop and improve their own skills. By never falling into the mindset that they know everything about students or the recruitment process, no matter their years of experience, admissions representatives can be important role models to prospective students and their families about how to never settle for simply good enough. By asking themselves similar questions to the ones they pose to students they can stay on the cutting edge of their field:

1. What would happen if I challenged myself to become the best admission recruiter I could possibly become? What would I need to do differently?

2. How can I even better serve the need of prospective students and their families?
3. What other campus offices do I need to visit to become more familiar with the services they offer to students?

### Conclusion

At its very core, the heart and soul of the admissions process is people. However, it can become easy to lose sight of this reality in today's competitive arms race that higher education institutions are engaged in to attract the best and brightest prospective students. This article has demonstrated how the Appreciative Advising framework can be used by admissions personnel as a reminder to stay focused on building relationships with people instead of worrying about numbers and/or funnels. The six phases of Appreciative Advising (Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle) provide a flexible theory to practice framework for admissions personnel seeking to optimize each and every encounter with prospective students and their families. By focusing on the people first, we are confident that the numbers will increase and that the students who emerge from the bottom of the funnel are well prepared to not only survive, but thrive in college.

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