

Enhancing International Student Orientation at U.S. Colleges and Universities Using Appreciative Advising Practices

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Abstract

For many newly admitted international students, traveling from their home countries to attend New International Student Orientation (NISO) activities can be filled with mixed feelings of excitement and anxiety. In this article, I propose the Appreciative Advising (AA) framework (Bloom et al., 2008) as an innovative theory and practice that can be integrated into NISO activities to create exciting, enriching, and transformative orientation experiences for new international students. I provide practical application of each of the six phases of AA for orientation leaders and new international students. By so doing, the AA model is used as a culturally relevant and strengths-based framework that encourages and prioritizes the enhancement of intercultural competence, educational, and interpersonal skill sets relevant for both orientation leaders and new international students.

Keywords

U.S. higher education, international students, Appreciative Education, Appreciative Advising, orientation

As one of the top destinations for international students (OECD, 2021), the United States (U.S.) hosted 914,095 international students during the 2020-2021 academic year (IIE, 2021). IIE's (2021) Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange revealed that 54% of international students in the U.S. are funded by themselves or their families. For the purpose of this article, international students are defined as either undergraduate or graduate students who are studying at U.S. colleges and universities on either F1 or J1 visas.

International students make important economic, academic, and cultural contributions to both host institutions and host communities. Because international students come from various countries across the globe, they bring with them and contribute a range of assets, including self-determination, diverse personal experiences, global awareness, learning styles, and cultural backgrounds (Andrade, 2008; Baklashova & Kazakovm, 2016; Jean-Francois, 2017). International students also provide the opportunity for domestic students and local communities to interact with people from different cultures.

One of the first initiatives intended to welcome and help with the transition of international students in American postsecondary institutions is the New International Student Orientation (NISO). The purpose of NISO is to welcome newly admitted students and provide them with key information relevant to making a smooth social and academic transition into the institution and the host community. NISO typically involves sharing knowledge with attendees on a broad array of pertinent topics, including immigration, social activities, and advice for living and thriving at the institution and within the host community. In many institutions, NISO is planned and organized by international student affairs offices

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that hire and train orientation leaders, who are generally current domestic and international students, to mentor new students through the orientation process.

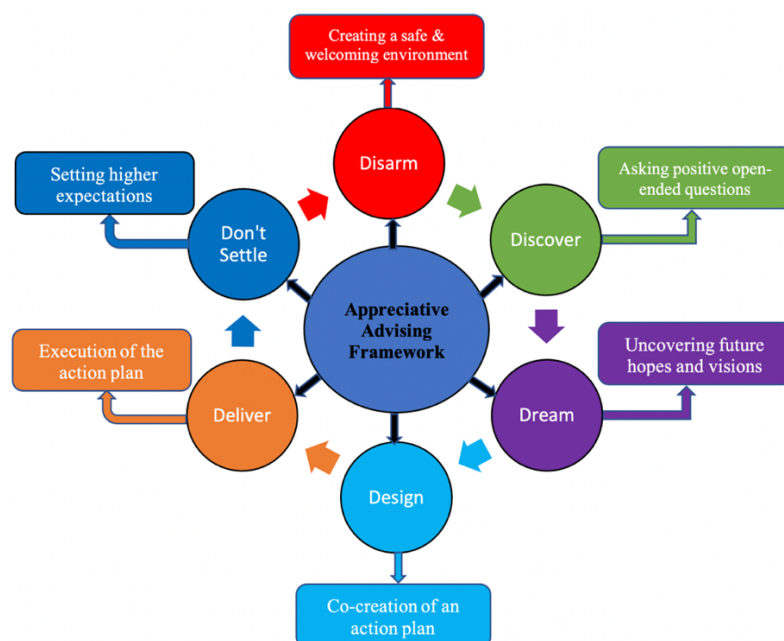
The purpose of this article is to offer suggestions for infusing the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework (AA; Bloom et al., 2008) into NISO activities to welcome new international students to campus. Using the AA framework in NISOs can help new international students learn effective intercultural communication strategies that can help them appreciate and share their stories, personal perspectives, and ideas, which can in turn support their sociocultural and academic integration into the institution (Jean-Francois, 2017). A careful and intentional adaptation of the AA framework can also help NISO teams develop more engaging, interactive, and enriching orientation activities to ease the transition of new international students into the institution. This article will provide an overview of AA before sharing specific ideas for integrating it into NISOs. Subsequently, the benefits that can accrue from infusing the AA framework into NISO will be highlighted.

Appreciative Advising Fundamentals

Rooted in social constructivism, positive psychology, and appreciative inquiry, AA was developed by Bloom and her colleagues (Bloom & Martin, 2002; Bloom et al., 2008). AA offers higher education professionals a framework to deliver high-quality and student-centered services (Bloom et al., 2013). The AA model is based on 6-Ds: *Disarm*, *Discover*, *Dream*, *Design*, *Deliver*, and *Don't Settle* (Bloom et al., 2008). Although the *Disarm* phase stresses the importance of making a positive first impression by creating a safe and welcoming environment for students, the *Discover* phase encourages the use of open-ended questions and active listening to learn about students' strengths, passions, and interests (Bloom et al., 2008). The *Dream* phase is focused on uncovering students' dreams and hopes. According to Bloom et al. (2008), the *Design* phase involves supporting students to create a plan to achieve their dreams, and during the *Deliver* phase, students execute their plan. The final phase, *Don't Settle* consists in challenging and inspiring students to pursue their fullest capacity (Bloom et al., 2008).

Figure 1

The 6-Ds: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, Don't Settle and their key characteristics.



Researchers have encouraged the use of AA to enhance the educational experience of international students in the United States (Elliott, 2012; Palmer, 2009; Zhang, 2016). For example, Elliott (2012) demonstrated how international student advisors could practically use the six phases of AA to reframe their advising practices and positively support the transition of a female first-year student (Zai) from Central Africa during her study abroad experience. Elliott (2012) illustrated ways the intentional use of AA allowed Zai and her advisor to build a culturally sensitive, meaningful connection, and a welcoming advising environment, drawing on Zai's prior experiences and strengths, which encouraged Zai as she socially and academically navigated her new environment. Furthermore, Zhang (2016) argued that as a strength-based advising tool, the AA model is a powerful framework that can allow international student advisors at community colleges to reframe and enhance their advising practices and interactions with their international student advisees. Zhang (2016) argued that reframing is important given that the literature related to the experiences of international students in the U.S. is often framed from a cultural deficiency or deficit-perspective. Both Elliott (2012) and Zhang (2016) advocated that as a strength-based, culturally sensitive, and student-centered framework, the AA model can support the efforts of institutions and advisors to create thriving learning environments and enriching experiences for international students, which can in turn encourage and support these students to make the most of their socio-cultural and academic experiences both within and out of the classroom.

As a research-based advising model, AA has also been adapted for use in planning and implementing innovative and enriching orientation programs (Hendley, 2010; Longshore & Stuessy, 2017; Propst Cuevas et al., 2011; Tollefson, 2017). For instance, Longshore and Stuessy (2017) discussed the incorporation of the AA approach to new student orientation at Midlands Technical College (MTC), a two-year institution, in Columbia, SC. In 2012, MTC decided to intentionally include the six phases of AA in the planning of their orientation activities. Data collected with respect to students' overall satisfaction with the orientation activities indicated that 96% of students believed their orientation was excellent or good (Longshore & Stuessy, 2017). Moreover, Tollefson (2017) discussed the experiences of South Dakota State University (SDSU) in using the AA approach in their new student orientation in 2015, 2016, and 2017. The data from the initial graduating class of 2019 showed a 2.5% increase in SDSU's freshman to sophomore retention, that is from 76.1% for the 2014-2015 academic year to 78.6% for 2015-2016 (Tollefson, 2017). The MTC and SDSU cases offer multiple creative application perspectives for institutions looking for guidance on how to integrate AA into orientation programs.

Hendley (2010) was the first to discuss the practical implications and application of the AA model (Bloom et al., 2008) to orientation leader training. Hendley discussed the use of the AA model to remodel the training and leadership growth of orientation leaders. The following year, Propst Cuevas et al. (2011) also wrote about how AA could be used to help train orientation leaders and noted that AA provided a "framework which focuses on the conceptual and relational aspects of training while leaving room within the framework for inserting institution-specific informational components of training" (p. 87).

Although this previous literature has focused on using AA with international students and as a tool for increasing the effectiveness of New Student Orientations, no articles to date have focused on how Appreciative Advising can enhance New International Student Orientation (NISO). Therefore, building on the growing literature related to the application of the AA model to orientation programs, this article expands the literature by recommending the adaptation and utility of the six phases of AA for NISOs at U.S. colleges and universities.

International students' experiences are often framed and discussed from a cultural deficiency perspective generally because of adjustment issues, language barriers, and differences in academic cultures (Jean-Francois, 2017; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). Consequently, using the AA practices in NISO activities provides higher education institutions with an alternative culturally sensitive, strength-based, and student-centered approach to focus on the strengths and potentials of international students through a new way of thinking and doing. Doing so is important because NISOs are generally the first initiatives to welcome new international students on college and university campuses.

Integration of AA into NISO Activities

The primary focus of NISO staff members is to facilitate the smooth transition of new international students into the institution. This section shares how the six phases of Appreciative Advising (AA) can be integrated into NISO activities and as a framework for enhancing the interactions between orientation leaders and the new international students.

Disarm: Creating a Welcoming and Thriving Orientation Environment

Student transitions into university settings can be daunting. The challenges new students face are often magnified for many international students, who are simultaneously entering a new country and experiencing a foreign culture. According to Jean-Francois (2017), many international students are faced with a double integration into both a new community culture and university culture. International students often face being separated from families and friends, which can be stressful. Additional challenges include language barriers, homesickness, loneliness, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, navigating new social and academic cultures, and acculturative stress (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Jean-Francois, 2017; Kegel, 2009), which can also negatively impact the social and academic integration and success of these students (Jean-Francois, 2017). Consequently, setting the tone with a welcoming and inclusive learning environment at the NISO can help new international students' transition into the institutions, which can ultimately impact their retention and graduation rates.

International students who travel from their home countries to attend the required NISO activities experience a wide range of emotions, often including simultaneous feelings of excitement and anxiety. Orientation can help alleviate some of the stress and anxiety new international students face. In fact, the primary function of the Disarm phase of the AA model is to help create a safe, warm, and welcoming environment for students (He et al., 2016). In the case of NISO, the Disarm phase focuses on creating a welcoming and positive orientation environment. This phase is also about building rapport and trust among the NISO staff, orientation leaders, and the new international students. Because NISO staff and orientation leaders are usually the first to greet new international students, they can use disarming strategies to warmly welcome new international students and create a positive first impression. Therefore, NISO staff should be aware of the importance of how a genuine smile and an authentic and enthusiastic initial greeting can help signal to new students that the institution is excited to have the new international students join the campus community.

Given the importance of first impressions, visibly displaying relevant signs (such as way finders and positive welcome messages) and posting orientation leaders at key locations can make it easier to welcome and direct new students arriving on campus for the first time. In addition, welcoming messages can be shared on Orientation leaders' shirts, buttons, or on signs they carry: *"I Am Here to Help!" "Ask Me A Question about [X College or University] or [X host community]!" "You Are Welcome at [X College or University]!"*

When I was an orientation leader at Ohio University (OU), my exposure to the AA practice through my positive psychology class allowed me to be intentional about how I interacted with new international students to make sure I made a positive first impression. I warmly welcomed new international students to campus and happily introduced myself and assured them that I was available to support them through orientation as a peer advisor. For example, I would energetically and enthusiastically greet/welcome new international students by saying something like:

Hello! My name is Oumar. Welcome to Ohio University, your home away from home. It is exciting to have you as a part of the Bobcat family/community. I am one of your peer advisors and I am here to support you! Please do not hesitate to let me or any other orientation staff know if we can help with anything.

Actively encouraging orientation leaders to think about creative ways to warmly welcome new students on campus is important and can be accomplished by breaking the orientation leaders into small groups to brainstorm ideas and then later practice and receive constructive feedback on the greetings they have drafted. For example, Orientation leaders can also create Disarm questions to use when they first meet a new international student. Examples of Disarm questions during the NISO may include:

- What has been the best part of your day/orientation so far?
- What have been your first impressions of your new campus environment?
- What is the best thing that has happened to you today?
- How was your journey to the United States? Describe what/how you are feeling using two words.
- Tell me about your home country!
- What are your top three hobbies?
- What is one thing that has brought you joy lately?

These Disarm questions can help create lively and engaging discussions among new student participants. The importance of the Disarm phase is not just limited to the initial meeting with students. In fact, Disarm can be seen as a continuous process throughout the orientation period and all orientation staff should continuously seize every opportunity to engage in building positive relationships through being fully present during their interactions throughout the NISO. Doing so can make a difference for new students who have traveled many miles away from their families and friends.

Discover: Uncovering Strengths and Assets through Assets-based Thinking

The Discover phase of Appreciative Advising involves the use of generative, open-ended questions and strength-based conversations to learn about new international students' interests, skills, and assets (He et al., 2016). For example, the following Discover questions can be used during the NISO to draw out the personal stories of new international students:

- Tell me about a transition experience you previously experienced back home? What strategies did you use to successfully navigate the transition?
- What inspired your decision to pursue a degree at this institution or in the U.S.?
- What college experiences did you have in your home country that you would like your peer new international students to know about or experience?

- Describe one or two of your personal accomplishments you are most proud of.

Asking Discover questions can allow new international students to reflect on, draw, and share elements from their personal experiences they appreciate, feel proud of, and want others to know or learn from (Propst Cuevas et al., 2011). Orientation leaders can ask Discover questions, like the ones listed above, in their NISO small group sessions to build rapport and promote international students learning from each other.

Dream: Setting Personal, Academic, and Professional Goals

The Dream phase involves uncovering students' dreams and hopes for their futures (Bloom et al., 2008). The Dream phase is an opportunity for incoming international students to dream about their future academic, personal, and professional achievements (He et al., 2016). New international students can be asked to complete *The Daring Dreams Delivered Exercise* during which they are given few minutes to, for instance, jot down their personal and academic aspirations (Propst Cuevas et al., 2011; Tollefson, 2017). Next, new international students can be paired to share their goals with their peers. In addition, orientation leaders can help make new students aware of campus and community resources that may help them achieve their goals. The NISO Office can borrow from SDSU's Orientation and create a "Dream Wall" (Tollefson, 2017), in which new students write their dreams on sticky notes and post them on the wall.

Orientation leaders can also ask Dream questions during their small group sessions. According to scholars (He et al., 2016; Propst Cuevas et al., 2011), examples of Dream questions include:

- What are some goals, two or three, that you have for your first semester or year at X Institution?
- X Institution has over 500 student organizations. If you could have any opportunity to assume (or be involve in) a leadership position in one of the student organizations of your interest, what would it be and why?
- Imagine/Envision/Think about your social and academic integration at X Institution in relation to your first ideal semester or year. What academic and social goals would you like to achieve?
- What do you want to be doing five years from now?

The Dream phase stresses the importance and boldness of goal setting and sharing. Tollefson (2017) noted that dreaming together has the potential of creating and maintaining a culture that gives new students the opportunity to explore and imagine the possibilities right at the beginning of their academic career.

Design: Building a Roadmap to a Thriving Social and Academic Transition

Longshore and Stuessy (2017) noted that the Design phase "is when students start to visualize the road map for achieving their goals and take ownership of their education" (p. 28). Acting as guides and role models, orientation leaders can help co-create with the new students a plan for accomplishing the dreams they shared during the Dream phase (Propst Cuevas et al., 2011). Notably, creating a plan for this first term about how to make a smooth social and academic transition into the institution will be an important task. Examples of Design questions that NISO leaders can ask incoming international students (see Propst Cuevas et al., 2011 for more) include:

- What are a couple of things you could do to get yourself ready for a thriving social, academic, and psychological transition in your first academic semester/year in the U.S.?
- Describe some goals you have for your first academic semester/year, and ways you hope to achieve those goals.
- What resources do you think are necessary to support your social, cultural, and academic transition, particularly in your first semester/year?

After listening to incoming students' answers to the questions above, orientation leaders can help brainstorm resources that the new students may need to access to accomplish their goals and objectives. New students should be encouraged to brainstorm or talk about their academic and personal goals and how they can use their strengths and assets to achieve their goals (He et al., 2016). Also, NISO is a great time to begin covering skills such as time management.

In terms of personal planning, akin to He et al.'s (2016) idea of Personal Presidential Cabinet, new students can be encouraged to design their *Circle of Support*. New students' Circle of Support include people and networks who can support and encourage them while studying in the U.S. This Circle of Support can be introduced as a strategy to encourage new international students to intentionally build their support network at their new institution. International students' Circle of Support members can include current and former teachers, peers, friends, parents, and advisors with each playing a specific role in supporting students' academic and personal growth and success. The objective is to encourage new international students to reflect on who is in their network, ways their network can support them, and the skills and strengths they will need to draw upon as they transition into their new sociocultural and academic environments in the U.S.

Deliver: Achieving or Thriving through Academic and Cultural Transition

Although the Design phase is about creating a roadmap to thrive, the Deliver phase is focused on students delivering on the academic and personal goals they have established. This phase "entails thoughtful actions taken not only to carry out the individual...plans created during the Design phase; it emphasizes the importance of personal...resilience as obstacles and challenges arise" (Bloom et al., 2013, p. 9). Studying in the U.S. can often be both psychologically and emotionally challenging for international students (He et al., 2016). Many international students come from countries where the educational systems and cultures are vastly different from those in the U.S. Consequently, it will be helpful for NISO leaders to show students how to enroll in a class, how to ask for permission to enroll in a class, how to check their grades, and how to use online learning management systems. Orientation leaders should strive to support and encourage new students by sharing tips and advice. Orientation leaders can also engage new students by asking Deliver questions such as:

- What resources might you rely on when facing challenges during your first academic semester/year?
- As a student away from your home country, what keeps you going even when things are/seem challenging?
- Who can help you in achieving your designed academic and personal plans?

Equally important, NISO leaders can reassure new students that if they run into problems that they can always return to the NISO Office for further assistance.

Don't Settle: Striving for Lifelong Learning

The Don't Settle phase is focused on challenging and supporting new students to push and stretch themselves for excellence through a "virtuous cycle of self-improvement" (Propst Cuevas et al., 2011, p. 95) and lifelong learning (He et al., 2016). NISO leaders can, for example, tell new students toward the end of orientation:

You have been actively engaged in the orientation activities, and you have learned about available resources and effective ways to plan your social and academic lives during your time at X Institution. Now considering all these resources and your planning skills and potential you have demonstrated so far, what are some of the things you can do between now and your first class to be successful in your first semester/year?

Frankly, NISO programs can be overwhelming for new students in terms of the amount of information shared in a short amount of time. Many international students may need intentional and ongoing guidance to be successful. Although it is important to cover relevant topics prior to the start of classes, new international students can also benefit from more incremental, ongoing, or even year-long orientation activities (Jean-Francois, 2017; Pook, 2008). For example, sending timely post-orientation communications can be one way to follow-up and reconnect with new students during the semester. For instance, at Midlands Technical College (MTC; Longshore & Stuessy, 2017), the New Student Orientation Office sends a series of timely and informative emails. These emails can be sent weekly to remind students of key resources first covered during NISO. The post-orientation emails can be strategically and carefully designed to inspire students to be mindful of upcoming deadlines, contact information for pertinent campus resources, and timely advice on how to be academically successful.

Summary of How the AA Phases can be Infused into NISO

Table 1 below illustrates the alignment between the AA framework (Bloom et al., 2008) application to NISO and recommended related peer advising tasks for orientation leaders and new international students. The table outlines the practical implication of each phase of the AA framework to NISO and Orientation leaders during NISO activities.

Table 1

Appreciative Advising Framework Application to NISO and Peer Advising Recommended Tasks for New International Students

AA Phase	Appreciative Advising Framework Applied to NISO	Orientation Leader Tasks
Disarm	Understanding the significance of first impressions and the necessity for creating a safe, welcoming orientation setting for new international students and orientation leaders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create trusting and appreciative relationships to welcome new students and support their social and academic transition and personal growth at their host institution.

Discover	Asking generative, open-ended questions to encourage and support new students in uncovering their strengths, interests, and skills, and ways they can use their assets and skills to thrive through their academic and cultural transition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster a trusting and hospitable rapport to learn more about new students to better understand and support their various transition needs at their host institutions and communities.
Dream	Encourage and assist new students to frame a vision of what they might become and then support them in developing their social, academic, and career integration plans and goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage and support new students to elucidate their personal, social, and academic goals.
Design	Encourage and support new students to create concrete, incremental, and attainable goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and connect new students with key information, resources, and opportunities related to their personal, social, academic goals or potential roadblocks.
Deliver	The orientation leader is there for the new students when they stumble or get overwhelmed during orientation. Encourage new students to seek for help whenever needed while they continue to execute, revise, and refine their plans and dreams as they go.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss habits and skills key to building a solid and effective academic house primarily via self-based reflection and role modeling. • Decrypt and discuss ways to navigate university culture or that of a specific discipline based on self-reflection and available transition and academic resources. • Examine/probe potential barriers new students may face or experience and brainstorm and discuss ways to overcome them.
Don't Settle	Challenge and support new students to proactively raise their internal bar of self-expectations through continuous self-reflection and improvement. Encourage new students to embrace lifelong learning and a growth mindset as they learn and grow.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine/probe potential challenges or barriers new students may face or experience and brainstorm and discuss ways to overcome them. • Develop a follow-up plan to know about new students' transition progress to better support, motivate, and challenge them to strive for growth and excellence.

Benefits of the Application of Appreciative Advising Model to NISO

Integrating AA into the planning and activities of orientation programs can be beneficial to institutions, orientation staff, offices responsible for new student orientation, and new students (Fippinger, 2009; Propst Cuevas et al., 2017). For instance, orientation leaders benefit from assisting and guiding new students as they transition into the institution by allowing them to develop and hone relational skills that are imperative for effective communication (Howell, 2010). Additionally, “orientation leaders will have an opportunity to reflect on their own educational journeys and on how the lessons learned will serve them well as they eventually transition into the next phase of their own lives” (Propst Cuevas et al., 2011, p. 87).

Because the purpose of the NISO is to welcome and socialize new international students into their new social and academic cultures, using a culturally sensitive and relationship-focused framework like the AA framework in NISO activities could potentially enhance the intercultural competence of new international students. That is, the experience of an appreciative and constructive interaction during the NISO activities might enhance new international students’ awareness, attitudes, knowledge, and skills about their new social, cultural, and academic context in the U.S. Through their interactions with NISO leaders, incoming international students will have interactive and engaging welcome experiences, which will help them better understand and adapt to the U.S. social and academic context.

Furthermore, because the AA framework encourages the enhancement of meaningful interactions and interpersonal relationships, applying the AA framework into NISO activities can help generate constructive relationships/friendships that could benefit new international students and orientation leaders even after NISO is over. Finally, the positive and enriching experiences of both the orientation leaders and new [international] students during the orientation can enhance the overall sense of community on campus (Propst Cuevas et al., 2011).

Conclusion

In 2020-2021, 914,095 international students enrolled at U.S. colleges and universities, and these students come from a variety of home countries and cultural backgrounds (IIE, 2021). Higher education institutions host New International Student Orientations (NISO) to welcome and help with the transition of new international students into the institution and host community. The NISO process is vital to supporting the transition of new international students at their host institutions and communities, and it is important that higher education institutions are intentional about using culturally sensitive and research-based student support services to meet the complex sociocultural and academic integration needs of international students. This article has outlined how to integrate the Appreciative Advising (AA) theory-to-practice framework to enhance existing NISO programs.

The six phases of AA can be used to create interactive and enriching NISO activities while prioritizing the enhancement of intercultural competence and interpersonal skill sets relevant for both orientation leaders and new international students. Moreover, given the cultural deficiency approach that has largely dominated the literature about international students, the AA practice provides a positive, strengths-based approach to thinking about, understanding, and supporting international students. With a strong institutional will and adequate resources to sufficiently train the right personnel on AA practices, the intentional adaptations of the AA framework into NISO activities suggested in this article can benefit new international students, orientation leaders, NISO staff, and host institutions.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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

Funding

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

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