

## Appreciative Advising in Action: How One Person Changed My Life

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At the University of South Carolina (USC), Ms. Althea Counts is known for being the Associate TRiO Director/Opportunity Scholars Program (OSP) Coordinator, but to her students she is their mom away from home. Ms. Counts treats all of her OSP students as if they are her own children, giving each the tough-love they deserve. As one of her former students, I have experienced her tough-love first-hand. The purpose of this article is to provide a personal, real-life example of how Ms. Counts used the six phases (*Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver, and Don't Settle*) of Appreciative Advising to guide me through the toughest four years of my life and continues to impact my life today.

Ms. Counts starts disarming her students with in the first moments of meeting them. Her University 101 class was basically a disarming class 101. Her U101 class is designed specifically for OSP students. Everyone felt relieved once they got to her U101 class on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays because she created a warm, welcoming environment that every student wanted to soak in. Because she was able to build this warm environment for the class, we were able to be open about our own lives with each other in an activity that is a merge of never have I ever and musical chairs. The class got in a circle with one student in the center, the student in the center would say something that defines them as a person and for the students in the circle if they could identify with that they would step forward. The student that spoke would return to an open place in the circle and the students who stepped forward would get to an open place in the circle leaving a new person in the center. This activity was done during the first half of the semester so that we could further develop meaningful relationships with our classmates. Ever since that class, we were more open about our new experiences at USC and viewpoints during class discussion because we knew where everyone was coming from.

During her office hours, she kept an open door policy. She had a couch in front of her desk and almost every time I stopped by her office there were at least three students on the couch spending some quality time with Ms. Counts. Every time a student enters her office, her face lights up with the most sincere smile that instantly make you feel welcome. She has this gift of making every student feel like he/she is her favorite. Whenever I have talked to Ms. Counts in her office, I have never felt like I was talking to just an advisor - I was talking to someone who really cared.

Ms. Counts is curious by nature and thus the *Discover* and *Dream* phases come naturally to her. She asks great questions that allow her to get to know each student as unique and sacred individuals. She also wants to know your dreams and goals for the future, including your plans for the next football game. Throughout my undergraduate career, Ms. Counts had many conversations about my future after college. She patiently listened to the many careers I considered, including becoming a marine biologist, a high school band director, a restaurant owner, and an accountant. Not only was she my soundboard for my evolving dreams, she was instrumental in helping me graduate with a degree in accounting.

As part of the *Design* phase, Ms. Counts referred me to tutoring and other resources on campus as I struggled academically my last two years at USC. I had recognized that I did not want to be an accountant for the rest of my life, but the reality was that I could not change my major and still graduate on time. I felt trapped and my grades reflected it. Ms. Counts always kept me grounded. She made sure that my eyes were still on the prize of graduating on time and she also helped me discover my true calling – becoming a student affairs professional.

When I decided that I wanted to go into the student affairs profession, Ms. Counts was one of my biggest supporters. She knew that I would do well working with college students after my years of being a Resident Mentor (RM) at USC. Ms. Counts and I share a special bond with USC: not only are we both first generation college students that attended USC, we were both RMs at Bates House, a residence hall on campus. Knowing that she was able to graduate from college as a first generation student inspired me to persevere through the many obstacles that I faced.

When I felt trapped during my junior and senior years, Ms. Counts lived out the *Don't Settle* phase by constantly challenging me to do my best. She helped me realize that even though I was not enjoying my course work that I could pursue my passions outside the classroom. She would bring up my RM position and my face would light up when I would tell her stories of my residents and OSP residents that I have or known in Bates House those years. She always helps her students see the bright side of things no matter how bad a day they are experiencing.

As a current graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) program at the University of South Carolina, I take my responsibility of advising students seriously because I want to have the impact on them that Ms. Counts has had on me and the rest of the OSP family. She continues to be one of the biggest influences in my life. If I have learned anything from her, it is that every college student needs someone that truly cares about him or her, who is there to support and guide them through the good times and bad.