

Using Email for Appreciative Advising

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Introduction

Grand Valley State University is located in Allendale, Michigan. If Michigan is known as a “winter wonderland,” then Grand Valley is located in the heart of the icy landscape, just miles from Lake Michigan, in a part of the state that I like to call the area’s “snow bucket.” Lake effect snow is common from November to April, and this can make travel to and from campus treacherous at best. The university’s annual registration period is in March, and thus the weather creates challenges for students and faculty academic advisors who try to make face-to-face meetings to talk about course scheduling.

During one particularly bad winter, I found myself doing most of my academic advising by email and phone. At first, I was frustrated by the process; I am committed to engaging in appreciative advising, and this approach is most often described in terms of face-to-face interactions. But necessity really can be the “mother of invention.” By collaborating with my advisees online I was able to get through the winter, and the registration process, successfully. This prompted me to explore the potential for email to work in the framework of appreciative advising more generally. Specifically I wondered, “Can email serve as an effective medium for appreciative advising?”

After reviewing the phases of appreciative advising, I worked with my advisees to identify the types of messages that they found most effective. For the past two years I’ve been using these email messages as part of my advising toolkit. Each year, I survey my advisees to assess their satisfaction with the advising that they receive. So far, the project has been a success. Students report that they receive effective advising, and I find that using email is a natural fit for what needs to be accomplished when advising with appreciation.

In the following sections, I explain the process of appreciative advising, explore the limitations of electronic communication with students, and I describe how email can be used to engage in an appreciative advising experience with undergraduates.

Appreciative Advising

Appreciative advising is “the intentional collaborative practice of asking open-ended questions that help students optimize their educational experiences and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials. It is perhaps the best example of a fully student-centered approach to student development” (Appreciative Advising, 2015). Appreciative advising positions students as travelers and advisors as mentors and guides as students complete their academic journey. Appreciative advising calls on advisors to help students turn negative thinking into positive perspectives on what “can be” from their education experience. Students who work with advisors who engage in appreciative advising report greater satisfaction with their educational experience and overall, students who receive quality advising has been shown to aid in student retention (Truschel, 2008).

The appreciative advising process unfolds in six phases. They are:

1. **Disarm.** In this phase, advisors are tasked with making a positive first impression on the student by building rapport and creating a safe, welcoming space for academic and personal exploration.
2. **Discover.** In phase two, advisors should pose open-ended questions that help them learn about students' strengths, skills, and abilities.

3. **Dream.** One key to the process of appreciative inquiry (the process through which students develop a love of learning) is that students will explore their passions and interests. This means that advisors can help by inquiring about students' hopes and dreams for their futures.
4. **Design.** In this phase, students and advisors work together to co-create a plan for making student dreams into a reality.
5. **Deliver.** In stage five, the student delivers on the plan created during the Design phase and the advisor is available to encourage and support students.
6. **Don't Settle.** In the final phase, advisors and students alike need to set their own internal bars of expectations high. Students should be called to accomplish the best of what they can achieve.

At first glance, appreciative advising feels like it calls for face-to-face interactions. In fact, most of the research about advising is completed using survey data collected after office encounters between advisors and advisees (e.g.,). Yet many advisers and students report that they communicate online, and this anecdotal evidence points to a need to explore how electronic communication impacts the advising process.

Undergraduate Students and Electronic Communication

People express two general areas of concern when I suggest that advising can be accomplished effectively through online messages. First, colleagues point to evidence that the internet and social media are “ruining” the way that students communicate. I can’t help but chuckle a little, since these predictions about impending doom associated with a zombie-generation of young adults incapable of talking to one another remind me of the way that my parents once bemoaned the emergence of call-waiting and three-way calling (both landline features were *crucial* to my junior high social life). Critics of email advising argue that students lose interpersonal skills when they aren’t required to read and assess body language and tone. Likewise, critics say, students treat email too informally. Students won’t learn how to communicate in the professional world if we allow them to email. Moreover, students may abuse email and faculty advisors may find themselves overloaded with electronic messages.

These are valid concerns. Yet as I explain in the following section about using email for appreciative advising, I believe that academic advisors can and should be part of the solution by guiding students towards more effective online communication practices. Moreover, experts believe that email will remain a permanent part of an undergraduate’s “toolbox” and therefore, advisors who develop email advising strategies can expect to use those techniques for quite a while. While students prefer social media (such as YikYak and Facebook) for close personal relationships, they still want a single, secure, place where all their “important” information can come together. University email accounts accomplish this goal. Likewise, students want to have an address to give to non-personal (business, university, official) sources. And unlike text messages which are lost if a cell phone goes missing, university email accounts are accessible as long as a student can get online (Kolowich, 2011).

For these reasons, I took on the challenge of designing an email campaign to engage in appreciative advising. The project is very new. In 2013 I tried out a few emails in order to develop a more complete calendar of messages to send to my advisees. The 2014-2015 academic year was my

first full-year effort, and I'm pleased with the results. I've found that while email cannot replace the interactions that take place between advisors and students in a face-to-face meeting, it appears to be a nice complement to a faculty advisor's practice, and is certainly one way to engage in appreciative advising.

In the next section, I identify the type of email associated with each phase of the appreciative advising cycle and describe the type of content a faculty advisor should consider if they want to engage in an email appreciative advising campaign.

Email in Appreciative Advising Phases

Each phase of the appreciative advising process calls for a different type of email. It is important to remember that the examples and descriptions provided below are offered as a starting point, rather than a prescriptive formula for using email in advising. Appreciative advising is grounded in symbolic interaction theory which explains that *how* messages are understood and interpreted is a *function of* the exchanges and relationship between people. Put another way, how my messages are constructed is a reflection of my personality, my interests, and the types of students I work with (majors in the School of Communication). The content of a message should be tailored to each as advisor. Effective advising is as much art as science.

PHASE 1 – Disarming

Recall that in the first phase, advisors should Make a positive first impression with the student, build rapport, and create a safe, welcoming space. To accomplish this goal, I suggest a beginning of the year email to advisees. The email should include the following:

- Your name
- Your office hours
- The courses you are teaching that semester
- An invitation to contact you for advising
- Instructions for making an appointment
- A personal “reveal” about yourself
- A request for a personal “reveal” from your advisee

Appendix A includes a sample of a welcome email I sent to advisees. Most of the information is pretty basic. Most faculty advisors do not fret about telling students about their office hours. The “personal reveal” seems to be the criteria that causes my colleagues the most pause. However, that element of the email does not need to be *that* personal and I have been surprised by how much it has sparked responses from students.

My email includes a little ditty about “what I did over the summer.” For the past few years, I've had the opportunity to lead a study abroad program in London with Grand Valley students. It is not an exaggeration to say that I have enjoyed the experience tremendously. My email says so, and also includes a photo of me and the students on our trip. Especially at Grand Valley where so many of our undergraduates are first-generation students, I am hopeful that seeing my picture accomplishes a few things. First, it may give them confidence to say “hi” or introduce themselves if they see me on-campus. Many first-generation students express concern about “even talking to” a professor, and I also believe that showing students that I enjoy being with students can help mitigate this unease.

I also use the welcome email as way to help students navigate some of the other tricky parts of being an undergraduate. I use the title that I want students to use when they refer to me. I know that faculty have a wide-range of expectations for students' forms of address. My colleagues feel strongly that students should use titles, and by referring to myself as "Dr. Leek" I hope to help guide them in the right direction so that they do not have to ask. Likewise, faculty differ in the way that they use office hours. By telling students that my office hours are "drop-in" they can avoid the extra work of trying to make an appointment.

I also benefit when advisees do follow-through on my request that they reply with their own photo from the summer. As I get older, I find it is increasingly difficult to remember names. The welcome email helps me get a head-start on remembering faces, and this makes me a very appreciative advisor. During the fall 2014, I sent over 100 of these emails and I was very excited when 30 students replied with stories about their summer or questions about advising. I think the next step this year will be to engage in more welcoming by sending a version of the email to new advisees that are assigned to me throughout the semester.

Phase 2 – Discovery

In phase two advisers should ask positive open-ended questions that help them learn about students' strengths, skills, and abilities. The purpose of this process is to encourage students to share stories about their past experiences so that the advisor can identify opportunities for students to succeed, even if this means changing majors. At first, this phase was a challenge for me. Put simply, how could I engage in open-ended questioning with students over email? I was fortunate to engage in some brainstorming with my colleague Betty Schaner, who is the Director of the CLAS Academic Advising Center at Grand Valley, and she helped me envision some interesting possibilities for this phase. I now use email to send students instruments designed to spark their reflection about their skillsets. Some of the generic questions I ask are:

- What are your hobbies outside of class?
- What is your favorite type of assignment in class?
- Tell me about a project you have done in school that you really enjoyed.
- Describe to me a time that you used your skills to manage a challenging situation.

For faculty academic advisors, an important part of the discovery process is trying unpack the *reasons* that a student chose *YOUR* major program. Often students have not considered how their strengths naturally lead to a particular emphasis within the field or that those same strengths can be applied to other major programs.

For example, I work with students in the School of Communications. These students choose from seven different major programs including: Advertising & Public Relations, Communication Studies, Film & Video Production, Health Communication, Multimedia Journalism, Photography and Theatre. I also include open-ended questions related to these areas. For instance, I ask communication studies students about stories that highlight their interest in the program. Students will often say "I really like talking to people." While at first glance, this might appear to be a perfect fit with the major, in practice, the communication studies program heavily emphasizes writing and the theoretical frameworks that define the field. Students may not realize that many career paths involve making personal, communicative connections with others. Health communication, social

work, teaching, marketing, and business are just a few other areas a student who enjoys working with people might explore.

I send students an email with a series of questions and encourage them bring their responses with them if they want to talk more about their academic program. I've also thought about broadening our understanding of "discovery" to include opportunities for students to engage in self-reflection by using instruments that assess qualities such as leadership, communication empathy, and character strengths. While I haven't yet had many students complete full answers to the questions, I have noticed that students will make an appointment to see me following a discovery email. They often will say, "That email got me thinking..." and this leads to a more purposeful discovery conversation.

Phase 3 - Dreaming.

In this phase, the advisor tries to help the student envision a positive future. To accomplish this goal, I try to plan at least three emails a semester that are meant to help students dream about what they can achieve both in school and after graduation. This phase was the easiest to translate to email. In fact, I have had to use restraint so that I do not overwhelm students with too many possibilities. This is probably the case for all faculty. One reason I teach at the university level is because I am so inspired by the many opportunities that are available on campus.

With each email I encourage students to contact me if they are interested in similar opportunities. And I always try to make sure I've done the work to provide contact information so that students can easily turn their dreams into reality. Some of the opportunities I've emailed advisees about include:

- Studying abroad
- The Student Summer Scholars program
- Volunteering with the United Way's Schools of Hope program
- Special Topics courses in the School of Communication
- Graduate school programs
- Internship opportunities
- On-campus lectures

I have also started to develop a "where they are now" email that will highlight some of the accomplishments of my past advisees. When I'm talking with students, I often find myself sharing stories about the woman who is now the top legislative aid for Dave Camp (R-Midland, MI) or the student who joined the Peace Corps and was stationed in Romania, or the student who just finished the Master's program at Illinois State University. By highlighting these students by through email, I hope I will encourage my current advisees to dream about their futures.

Phase 4 - Designing.

Appreciative advising means little if students can't get beyond the dreaming phase. Advisors need to work with students in order to co-create a plan to make dreams into reality. At a minimum, this means that students need to enroll for the courses that will lead them to be successful in their major program and to complete the requirements for graduation at Grand Valley. This task is made difficult by the increasing complexity of student academic experiences. For example, many students enter the university having already completed AP courses or college credit. Students also change

majors many times during their academic career. Both circumstances require careful attention to course equivalencies, pre-requisites and so on in order to ensure students are on the right path. Students also have various non-class obligations from family to work which also need to be considered when scheduling courses.

Student dreams both enrich and complicate the curriculum planning process. Study abroad programs and internships, for example, may require students to take classes during certain semesters or complete pre-requisites by a certain application date. The details that need attention for schedule planning can be tedious and challenging even for experienced professional advisors. If we hope to advise with appreciation we need to be proactive in co-creating schedules with our advisees so that we can effectively help them navigate the process.

At the beginning of the winter semester (when students enroll for the next academic year) I send my advisees an email that includes the curriculum planning guide for their major program, and blank table to fill out with their proposed schedule. If there are any relevant curriculum changes or important notes about courses for the upcoming year I include those in the email as well. I invite students to use their online curriculum tools (MyPath) and to develop a proposed schedule that they can return to me by email. I review any student responses and email if I find problems or have suggestions about what the student proposes.

For faculty advisors with hundreds of advisees, this could become an unmanageable time burden so the process should be adapted accordingly. Advisors might, for instance, choose to only include sophomore and junior advisees in the process. If students learn to understand their requirements early, they may need less help as they move through their program. I have also adapted the scheduling table to include spaces for students to list their Gnumber, cell number, and questions. Having all of this information in one place has been very helpful (see Appendix B). In my Outlook account I have also created advising folders for each advisee I have email contact with. This makes tracking our conversations and details very easy. I am convinced that time taken to complete appreciative advising on the front end translates to less time dealing with student crises later on.

Phase 5 - Delivering.

This phase calls on students to deliver on plan created in phase 4. The advisor is expected to be available to students should they need support. To try and avoid being a helicopter advisor, I only send one quick email during this phase. I use email to let students know that I am available to them by phone, email or in-person. If I know that I will be away from campus for a period of time, I use email to notify my advisees as well.

Phase 6 - Not Settling.

Appreciative advising does call on us to make a commitment to our advisees. It is important to challenge ourselves and our students by create a culture of expectation. Email can be used to set the bar high and to challenge students to accomplish new heights. When an advisee has an accomplishment, I might send an email to push them even further. For instance, during the past semester I had an advisee who got an "A" in her Spanish 201 course. She also earned "A's" in her previous two Spanish courses. At Grand Valley, students only need complete 201 to meet the requirements for a bachelor's degree. To engage this phase of appreciative advising I decided to email the advisee and encourage her to consider an additional semester of the language. I included the link to an article about the benefits of bilingual skills in her field, and encouraged her to come

talk with me about adjusting her schedule if she was interested. She didn't, but that doesn't mean this wasn't an effective attempt at appreciative advising.

Conclusion

I am still in the process of developing my efforts to use email for appreciative advising. Most recently I sketched out a timeline for emailing advisees (Appendix C). I have even set reminders in my online calendar and this helps make sure I keep up with this commitment. This means that I am also still in the early stages of researching the effectiveness of this approach. Based on my experience so far I offer the following tips and observations for faculty advisors who are considering how email can be used for advising.

- Any email can be a good thing. Students want to know that their advisors are thinking about them. An email can be enough to make that happen.
- It is ok to tell students what you expect from them in their email messages. When students fail to include a subject line, or use vague language in their messages, I tell them. I like to think that this is helping them to develop better electronic communication skills.
- Use a consistent subject line, and tell your advisees what it will be. Anecdotally, my advisees report that this makes it easy to differentiate between my messages and other university communications.
- Incorporating email into advising is especially helpful when I am traveling for conferences or when I cannot connect with students during regular hours. I have advisees who really do not get a free moment until after 11pm.

The more I use email for advising, the more comfortable I become with the medium as a means of communicating with students. I feel confident that email can be an important tool in the appreciative advising process.

References

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Kolowich, S. (2011, January 6). "How will Students Communicate?" *Inside Higher Ed*. Retrieved from: https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2011/01/06/college_technology_officers_consider_changing_norms_in_student_communications.

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Appendix A

SAMPLE EMAIL

Subject: Important Advising Information – From Professor Leek

Greetings students! Welcome to the start of the 2015-2016 semester. If you are receiving this email it is because I am listed as your faculty academic advisor for the _____ major program.

I'm really looking forward to meeting with each of you this year. I wanted to send a quick note to introduce myself and to let you know that my office hours this semester are Tuesdays from 10-11am, and Thursdays from 4:15-6:15pm in my office in Allendale (127 LMH). You don't need an appointment – you can just drop in. And, if those times don't work for you just send me an email and we'll find another time to connect in person or by phone.

If you have a moment, I hope you'll send an email with any questions you have about your course schedule, major program, or school in general.

I had so much fun in July – I took a group of 14 students to London for the School of Communications Study Abroad Program. Here is a picture of us on a beautiful sunny day when we were visiting Stonehenge.



And another picture of me and three of our Lakers on a walking tour of central London:



Even if you don't have an academic question, I would love to hear about your summer. And I really like photos. So if you have a moment, why not send me a quick update on what you have been up to.

I'll be sending more advising updates as the semester progresses – the subject line will read "Advising Update" – so keep an eye out for those messages.

Have a great first week Lakers!

Dr. Leek

Appendix B

GNUMBER: _____

Preferred Email Address: _____

Cell phone number: _____

What is the best way for me to reach you if I need to ask questions or give you feedback? (circle one or more)

Text Phone call Email

Major program: _____

Are you planning any changes in your major/minor program? Are there any special circumstances I should know about the schedule you've planned below? (e.g., only want to be part-time, trying out a minor program, etc.)

PROPOSED SCHEDULE:

FALL	# of Credits	Winter	# of Credits

Appendix C

Semester Start – Welcome email

October – Discovery

November – Dreaming

January – Designing

March – Deliver

April – Don't Settle