

Appreciative Advising to Promote Degree Completion by Appalachian Women

Brad Pulcini, Ohio University

Women from the Appalachian region complete undergraduate degrees at a lower rate than other students across the United States. The low postsecondary completion rate correlates to the high levels of poverty within this region. In addition to identifying the economic and educational gaps between the Appalachian region and others in the general U.S. population, advisors must examine the roles, values, and characteristics of Appalachian women to increase their college persistence. The cultivation of hope and the implementation of appreciative advising may increase postsecondary degree completion and thus help Appalachian women break the cycle of poverty.

[doi: 10.12930/NACADA-15-016]

KEY WORDS: Appalachian women, appreciative advising, hope, persistence, underrepresented students

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) (n.d.) defines the Appalachian region as a 205,000 square-mile tract that follows the Appalachian mountains from northern Mississippi to southern New York. The region includes all of West Virginia and parts of Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia. It encompasses 420 counties, extends more than 1,000 miles, and includes major cities, small metropolitan areas, and rural areas (ARC, n.d.). The population of the Appalachian region is less diverse than the general population of the United States. Of the 25 million residents of Appalachia, 83.2% identify as White, 9.2% as Black, and 4.3% as Hispanic or Latino (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2015, p. 13).

The well-being of the Appalachian people falls below the national average on a number of key indicators, including household income levels, poverty rates, employment and earning levels, and educational attainment (ARC, 2010). The percentage of Appalachian residents with a postsecondary degree is lower than the national average. As of 2013, in the United States, 28.8% of the general population over the age of 25 years had earned a bachelor's (or

higher) degree compared to 21.7% of the Appalachian population in the same demographic (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2015, p. 22). In 400 of the 420 Appalachian counties, the degree attainment rate is lower than the national average (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2015). The median family income for Appalachian residents of \$55,205 (in 2013 U.S. dollars) is lower than the U.S. median family income of \$64,719 (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2015, p. 37). Between 2009 and 2013, the poverty rate (17.0%) in the Appalachian region compared to that of the U.S. median rate (15.4%) (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2015, p. 39).

Education of women offers one of the most cost-effective ways of increasing economic development and where practiced is tied to more robust labor markets, improved social health and well-being, higher earnings, and improved economic productivity (Tembon & Fort, 2008). Therefore, institutions serving Appalachia should commit to increasing the number of women with bachelor's degrees as one means to break the cycle of poverty in the region, and at these colleges and universities, academic advisors assist women on this educational journey. Academic advisors conversant with student development theories understand and guide different student populations by leveraging their own knowledge of the higher education landscape to pilot travelers unfamiliar with the postsecondary terrain. In this article, I explore ways advisors can collaborate with women students from Appalachia to help them reach their educational destinations, which in the case of college students, translate to graduation.

Understanding Appalachia: Family, Equality, and Perseverance

Many students from Appalachia start their postsecondary educational journey carrying a strong sense of family as their priority and toting a clear understanding of their place within the family unit (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). For Appalachian women, the development of positive self-esteem relates to their status in the family. Appalachian women participating in a qualitative study evaluated their family roles, their ability to persevere, and the celebration of small accomplishments to maintain positive feelings about themselves (Fiene, 1991).

Fiene (1991) found that Appalachian women's positive self-feelings are sustained from the belief in supporting their children, and their relationship with their children creates the epicenter of relations in families of low status. In this case, the term *low status* reflects an individual's economic position and ascribed social position relative to others in their social world. In these situations, the mother provides for her children and works to give them opportunities for a better life than the one she has lived. For Appalachian women, this commitment to their children can pose a challenge to degree completion when mothers leave their own classrooms to focus on the education of their children. It also affects the next generation of women. On one hand, this strong commitment and bond between Appalachian mothers and daughters may increase the daughter's interdependence on the family, limiting her development of autonomy and independence. On the other hand, in families that espouse education as valued and as a means to provide support and care for the family unit, this type of commitment may positively affect degree completion.

Regardless of their birth status, Appalachian women view themselves as equals to other individuals in their society. Fiene (1990) observed that although social distinctions have characterized the rural communities of Appalachia for generations, an egalitarian ethic operates in local social customs. Due to the sense of fairness embraced within this society, women in Fiene's (1990) study believed that they should be accorded all of the services available to others of higher social or economic status. This feeling manifests when expectations for equality fail to materialize. Fiene (1990) found through interviews that Appalachian women become silent and withdraw from a situation in which they perceive unequal treatment or feel disrespected.

Fiene's (1991) research revealed Appalachian women's ability to persevere and demonstrated their appreciation for independent mindedness. Therefore, academic advisors might draw upon these general characteristics when helping these women clear potential barriers to success. Specifically, according to Fiene (1991), women from Appalachia may continue to work toward a goal despite lack of assurance they can succeed, and they form positive appraisals of self when they believe to have responsibility and instrumentality in shaping at least part of their destiny. Furthermore, Fiene found that Appalachian women take pride in and celebrate their accomplishments.

Cultivating Hope to Increase Persistence

When students begin to understand that focusing on desired outcomes can provide powerful results, their attention shifts toward the favored goal (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). As they redirect their focus, students may experience the meta-outcome of hope and adopt a positive view of their circumstances (Cockell & McArthur-Blair, 2012). According to a longitudinal study conducted by Snyder et al. (2002), students with high scores on a hope scale tended to stay in college despite factors that could negatively affect degree completion. In an earlier study led by Snyder, people reporting high levels of hope created routes to their goals and increased their mental agency to navigate these pathways (Snyder et al., 1991). These findings provide support for increasing the hopefulness of Appalachian women to help them sidestep roadblocks to degree completion.

Academic advisors can create a sense of hope through well-chosen language. Using terms consistent with a presumption that a student will complete a course or a semester of study sets the expectation of persistence for the student. Academic advisors should also use positive phrases when discussing advising policies and plans, focusing on the achievement of goals and the consistent message of expected graduation. To effectively infuse hope into practice, academic advisors must avoid viewing Appalachian women, or any population, through a lens that focuses on deficits. Furthermore, they must continuously employ positive and hopeful talk to forecast a student's academic success (Wells, Gilbert, Mahle-Grisez, Newman, & Rowell, 2014). This strategy may help a student carve different pathways to success, especially when roadblocks related to living in Appalachian society block the current route to graduation.

As advocates, advisors can project positive influence throughout the institution to promote the message of success. For example, by partaking in institutional planning, they can create avenues built on hope and success for Appalachian women to earn their degrees. Communications, policies, and syllabi used at the institutions should show a commitment to traveling with all students along their educational journeys (Wells et al., 2014), and those inclusive of Appalachian women may make them "feel they have a path to completing the class should they temporarily get off course" (Wells et al., 2014, p. 63). These thoroughfares can be constructed through the advisor-advisee co-creation of an educational plan that utilizes the six

stages of appreciative advising (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008).

Walking Together on the Path to Success: Appreciative Advising

The appreciative advising model lays the framework for optimized advisor interactions with students (Bloom et al., 2008). Through the six phases of an appreciative approach, academic advisors use positive, attentive, and active listening and questioning strategies to

- build rapport and trust with students (disarm),
- uncover strengths based on past accomplishments (discover),
- encourage students to share their dreams and be inspired by them (dream),
- co-author educational plans to make each student's dreams a reality (design),
- support students throughout their educational journeys (deliver), and
- challenge students to do and become better (don't settle) (p. 11).

By applying this model to advising, practitioners focus on utilizing students' strengths and unique characteristics to accomplish agreed-upon educational goals. Specifically, advisor-advising teams leverage the six phases to capitalize on the recognized strength, resilience, and pride associated with Appalachian women.

Disarm

Establishing initial rapport and trust promotes the equality particularly esteemed by woman of Appalachia (Fiene, 1990, 1991). The disarm phase consists of the "initial creation of a safe, welcoming environment for students" (Bloom et al., 2008, p. 35). When creating a welcoming space, advisors of Appalachian women should remember their equalitarian view of social and economic statuses, and create seating that does not seem hierarchical, but welcomes casual conversation. These spaces should include artifacts from the academic advisor's personal life that encourage conversation and that might prompt the academic advisor and student to draw connections with and see similarities between one another (Bloom et al., 2008). In particular, artifacts showing the advisor's connection to the local community may promote a sense of camaraderie, as Appalachian women feel a strong

bond to their family and community (Carter, 1997).

According to prior research, Appalachians maintain person-centered attitudes and value relationships, seeing these characteristics as central to their own identities (Fiene, 1991). Built on story sharing and reconstructing attitudes (Bloom et al., 2008), appreciative advising proves a particularly useful strategy for building trust. Using the appreciative approach, advisors share select aspects of their personal stories—including their experiences, successes, and challenges—to help establish rapport (Bloom et al., 2008). Advisors relate authentic and asset-based narratives relating to family and community, which Appalachian women highly value. By sharing with Appalachian women, academic advisors demonstrate their caring as helpers during the educational adventure.

Discover

After disclosing appropriately, advisors prompt students to tell their stories and teach them to recognize their own narratives as bases for advancing their academic careers. They focus on positive experiences, assets, and successes as related by the student (Bloom et al., 2008) to promote continued success, and they look for opportunities to reference students' experiences when co-creating the educational plan with them. For example, the advisor may learn that a student has been saving money earned over years of providing childcare to buy a car. The advisor can then encourage the student that through her work ethic and grit she can achieve big goals and advance academically in college.

To encourage open dialogue between both parties, academic advisors use open-ended questions to prompt students to share. Bloom et al. (2008, pp. 44-45) suggested questions that encourage students to evaluate ways past successes established pathways to future success; advisors may find the following from the list particularly helpful in learning about Appalachian women:

- How have you positively affected the life of another family member or someone in the community?
- Who are your role models? Why?
- What challenging situation have you overcome in a way that surprised you? How did you change that difficult situation into a positive one?

- Why have you decided to attend college?
Who most influenced this decision?

Using the guiding questions, such as those from Bloom et al. (2008), as a starting point, academic advisors delve into the unique experience of each Appalachian woman to offer guidance based her hopes and dreams.

Dream

The dream stage differs from the first two stages of appreciative advising as the practitioner coaxes students to share their biggest, wildest, if-everything-were-perfect dreams. Academic advisors may need to aid Appalachian women in cultivating a positive vision of the future, which is the first step toward setting and reaching their goals (Bloom et al., 2008). Dreams infused with hope can motivate the student to define the personal meaning of success (Bloom et al., 2008).

To meet goals articulated in the discover phase, students identify a major or career they expect to enjoy and in which they will use their strengths to succeed (Bloom et al., 2008). Advisors need to recognize that the dreams of an Appalachian college woman may be profoundly shaped by her view of family and community and that the student's strong commitment to family and community may hinder her ability to view herself outside of this context (Carter, 1997). Their connections to people and places may mean that Appalachian women do not pursue careers that could lead them away from the region, and academic advisors need to abide these preferences and introduce students to majors and careers that correspond to their personal and lifestyle goals. An Appalachian woman who perceives that her major or career choice might drag her away from family and community may develop anxiety and guilt that could affect her persistence and success in college.

Design

According to the traditional family norms of Appalachia, women typically do not make decisions in male-dominated households (Helton & Keller, 2010). Therefore, Appalachian women encouraged to make their own choices about educational plans with guidance from the academic advisor may feel empowered in a new way. Assuming ownership and control over their education keeps students vested in the

advising process and progressing on their educational path.

By co-creating the educational plan with an advisor, a woman from Appalachia may view herself as an equal partner. To maintain this trust and inspire further independence, the academic advisor must avoid appearing authoritative when discussing the educational plan. In fact, role models who engage in students' learning experiences—who share the journey with them—bequeath benefits not offered by those who primarily direct students toward success (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). After acquiring clear understanding of the student's vision for the future, the advisor using an appreciative approach collaborates with her to co-create a plan for accomplishing the outlined goals (Bloom et al., 2008).

When co-authoring the educational plan, the advisor–advisee team creates strategies and resources that the student can identify and utilize for achieving desired outcomes; however, when advising Appalachian women, practitioners might focus on the journey, rather than the destination. By encouraging Appalachian women to complete educational plans through incremental, small steps on the path to success, advisors teach that each accomplishment furthers them toward their final destination: graduation. With this realization, women may feel empowered to take larger risks that lead to larger rewards (Egan, 1993).

Deliver

After setting identifiable goals with the encouragement of the academic advisor, Appalachian women prepare to execute the plan co-created during the design phase. The advisor keeps advisees energized and focused to achieve the goals they have articulated (Bloom et al., 2008). Appalachian women face some of the same challenges as other minority groups from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, such as financial stressors, family commitments, child-care needs, abuse, unemployment, lack of health-care, and the like, which can negatively affect degree completion and other forms of success (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). Academic advisors need familiarity with these challenges to help Appalachian women use the force of their strengths and unique characteristics to push through these potential barricades to their educational goals.

Don't Settle

Although academic advisors want Appalachian women to be the driver of their own vehicle to success, each will need to rely on their own pit crew—which includes the academic advisor—to prepare, guide, and motivate throughout the race. Academic advisors need to maintain availability and facilitate meaningful discussions throughout the semesters. Frequent meetings foster relationship growth so that a firm advising partnership is established over the duration of enrollment.

Although the don't settle phase of appreciative advising features calls for continuously elevated heights of accomplishment, academic advisors must resist the urge to raise the bar too quickly. Like other advisees, if Appalachian women view the educational goals as unattainable, they may fall away from their educational path. As with all advisees, academic advisors should collaborate with Appalachian women to gauge their progress and focus on their past accomplishments to raise expectations that align with their current hopes and dreams. The ability to tackle difficult conversations, especially during setbacks, depends on the rapport established during the disarm and developed through the deliver phases. Even as the small goals come to fruition, the team meets on a regular basis to fine-tune plans and celebrate success.

Appreciative Advising in Higher Education

An appreciative approach to advising students has produced positive results in many areas of higher education. For example, at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), students on academic probation receive assistance through a motivational and empowerment model incorporated into appreciative advising (Kamphoff, Hutson, Amundsen, & Atwood, 2007). Through the UNCG Strategies for Academic Success program, advisors utilize positive affirmations rooted in appreciative advising with an emphasis on goal setting as described in the dream phase. The program supports retention and student success while improving the overall academic experience (Kamphoff et al., 2007). When the model was first implemented, the percentage of UNCG students eligible to return to the institution after being placed on academic probation increased from 40 to 58% over a 4-year period (Kamphoff et al., 2007). Although appreciative advising is incorporated within the model, the direct impact of it remains unclear; however, the theories and concepts of appreciative advising

contributed to several theoretical orientations used to design the program.

In another initiative, Grogan (2011) introduced an appreciative tutoring cycle in which tutors recognize and focus on the strengths of their students. The tutors who utilize the appreciative tutoring cycle provide strategies for academic success that maximize the potential of struggling students (Grogan, 2011).

Bloom, Flynn, and Edington (2015) recently applied the six stages of appreciative advising to the college admissions cycle. Appreciative admissions may help Appalachian students who need assistance navigating the registration and enrollment process as indicated by low bachelor degree attainment (21.7%) in the Appalachian region (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2015). The combination of the appreciative admissions and advising models creates a strategy for new students that facilitates the development of co-created educational plans beginning at a preenrollment stage. Furthermore, this strategy places Appalachian women's strengths and hopes in the forefront so they are continuously developed through degree completion.

Summary

Utilizing appreciative advising with Appalachian women may increase degree attainment rates. A complete education gives women more economic bargaining power in their households and firmer command of their destinies while diminishing the chances of being victims of domestic abuse and increasing the odds of breaking the cycle of poverty (Tembon & Fort, 2008). Specifically, educated women tend to exercise greater control over household resources than less educated counterparts and thus allocate them to education, food, and children's health-care, improving the lives of the next generation in the region (Tembon & Fort, 2008). Future research that examines the well-being, health, and socioeconomic status of Appalachian women who complete a degree after receiving appreciative advising would make valuable contributions on the impact of the strategy, especially for underrepresented populations at U.S. institutions.

References

- Appalachian Regional Commission. (n.d.). *The Appalachian region*. Retrieved from https://www.arc.gov/appalachian_region/TheAppalachianRegion.asp

- Appalachian Regional Commission. (2010). *Economic assessment of Appalachia: An Appalachian regional development initiative report*. Retrieved from <https://www.arc.gov/images/programs/ardi/EconomicAssessmentofAppalachiaJune2010.pdf>
- Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice and mind*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bloom, J. L., Flynn, D., & Edington, S. (2015). Appreciative admissions. *Journal of Appreciative Education*, 2(2), 16–23.
- Bloom, J. L., Hutson, B. L., & He, Y. (2008). *The appreciative advising revolution*. Champaign, IL: Stipes.
- Bradbury, B. L., & Mather, P. C. (2009). The integration of first-year, first-generation college students from Ohio Appalachia. *NASPA Journal*, 46(2), 258–281.
- Carter, C. S. (1997, March). *The stuff that dreams are made of: Culture, ethnicity, class, place, and adolescent Appalachian girls' sense of self*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL. Retrieved from Eric database. (ED407206)
- Cockell, J., & McArthur-Blair, J. (2012). *Appreciative inquiry in higher education: A transformative force*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Egan, M. (1993). Appalachian women: The path from the “hollows” to higher education. *Affilia*, 8(3), 265–276. <http://doi.org/10.1177/088610999300800303>
- Fiene, J. I. (1990). Snobby people and just plain folks: Social stratification and rural, low-status, Appalachian Women. *Sociological Spectrum*, 10(4), 527–539. <http://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.1990.9981944>
- Fiene, J. I. (1991). The construction of self by rural low-status Appalachian Women. *Affilia*, 6(2), 45–60. <http://doi.org/10.1177/088610999100600205>
- Grogan, J. (2011). The appreciative tutor. *Journal of College Reading & Learning*, 42(1), 80–88.
- Helton, L. R., & Keller, S. M. (2010). Appalachian women: A study of resiliency assets and cultural values. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 36(2), 151–161. <http://doi.org/10.1080/01488370903578124>
- Johnson, J., & Rochkind, J. (2009). *With their whole lives ahead of them: Myths and realities about why so many students fail to finish college*. New York, NY: Public Agenda. Retrieved from the ERIC database. (ED507432)
- Kamphoff, C. S., Hutson, B. L., Amundsen, S. A., & Atwood, J. A. (2007). A motivational/empowerment model applied to students on academic probation. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(4), 397–412. <http://doi.org/10.2190/9652-8543-3428-1J06>
- Pollard, K., & Jacobsen, L. (2015). *The Appalachian region: A data overview from the 2009-2013 American community survey*. Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau.
- Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., . . . Harney, P. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 570–585.
- Snyder, C. R., Shorey, H. S., Cheavens, J., Pulvers, K. M., Adams V. H., III, & Wiklund, C. (2002). Hope and academic success in college. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(4), 820–826. <http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.94.4.820>
- Tembon, M., & Fort, L. (2008). *Girls' education in the 21st century: Gender equality, empowerment, and economic growth*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Wells, M., Gilbert, E., Mahle-Grisez, L., Newman, R., & Rowell, K. (2014). High hopes: Fostering a culture of hope at a community college. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 26(1), 60–66.

Author's Note

Brad Pulcini is the Assistant Dean of Student Engagement and Director of the First Year Experience at Ohio Wesleyan University. He holds an MEd from Duquesne University (PA) and is currently pursuing his PhD in Higher Education Administration at Ohio University. Prior to joining Ohio Wesleyan in Fall 2016, he oversaw enrollment functions, to include advising, at Central Ohio Technical College. His research to date has focused mainly on ways higher education institutions support minoritized populations in

navigating their college education through the use of the anti-deficit lens of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry. Additionally, he is keenly interested in retention and first-year experience

topics in higher education, and he has co-authored conference papers on the community college libraries' role in student retention. He can be reached at btpulcin@owu.edu.