

From the Editor

The vitality of a profession is enhanced by its members engaging in the quest for new knowledge and improved practice. A mission of the *NACADA Journal* is to provide an avenue by which new knowledge and information about academic advising can be disseminated to association members and the broader higher education community. The relationship between the researcher and practitioner is symbiotic. The practitioner's ideas, problems, and challenges serve to guide and focus the researcher's efforts. In turn, the products of these efforts benefit the practitioner by facilitating improved practice. The link is vital and dynamic with an individual frequently moving between the roles of practitioner and researcher.

NACADA recognized the important role of research in the advising profession by establishing the NACADA Research Committee. The purpose of the Research Committee is to promote and encourage quality research in academic advising. The guest column which follows is authored by Victoria McGillin, Dean of Advising at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Massachusetts. Dr. McGillin is Chair of the NACADA Research Committee.

Michael Lynch

The Scholar and the Practitioner: Charting a Course for Future Research in Academic Advising

Victoria A. McGillin, Dean of Advising, Wheaton College and Chair, NACADA Research Committee

What do academic advisors need to know? What research would prove most critical when planning programs, working with particular students, or justifying advising's existence in a budget battle? What should be the priorities for the field as a whole?

Two years ago, the NACADA Research Committee initiated an electronic survey of advising practitioners asking them to identify their priorities for advising research. Members of the ACADV Electronic Advising Network were asked to identify the top five areas in which academic advising research was needed. They were asked to consider what research results would prove of greatest value in their own work as advisors. Our goal was to generate topics for discussion during the Research Roundtable at the National Conference. Consequently, no efforts were made to secure a randomized, representative sample. However 97 members of the network responded, representing a range of institutional types, regions of the country, and individual titles.

My content analysis of the responses yielded 9 categories of research needs. Individual responses were subsequently weighted to represent the relative rank assigned by each respondent. Simultaneously, I reviewed all research published on the topic of academic advising between 1990 and 1995. A content analysis of the completed research topics produced 11 categories of research. The comparisons are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

A comparison of published advising research (1990–1995) and reported advising research needs

Research Topics	Weighted Percentages	
	Published Research References %	Research Needs %
Effectiveness with target populations	16.0	13.0
Advising and retention	17.5	8.0
Student characteristics	16.0	6.5
Outcomes of student development	8.0	2.0
Organizational change/structure	8.0	15.0
Advisor characteristics/needs	6.5	3.0
Comparative delivery models	N/A	29.0
Overall effectiveness of advising	N/A	11.0
Comparative assessment techniques	N/A	3.5
Student satisfaction with advising	21.5	N/A
Predictors of academic success	6.5	N/A
Process of advising communication	6.5	N/A
Faculty versus student perceptions of advising	5.0	N/A
Major/curricular advising	3.5	N/A

The results were dramatic. We found that scholars and practitioners were miles apart. Practicing academic advisors called for a) documentation of the effectiveness of different delivery models (e.g., peer versus faculty advisors, intrusive versus passive advising, developmental versus proscriptive methods, etc.); b) help in evaluating organizational structures or change (e.g., centralized versus decentralized models); and c) guidance on the effectiveness of types of advising with specific target populations (e.g., minority students, honors students, academic risk students). Scholars, however, concentrated on a) assessments of student satisfaction with advising; b) explorations of the role of advising in retention; c) identification of characteristics of different advising populations (e.g., at risk students, minority students); and d) compar-

isons of the effectiveness of advising with different target populations (the only significant overlap with practitioners). Overall, practitioners wanted multidimensional studies, providing comparative data about practices and populations. Scholars predominantly researched single factors and individual characteristics.

This disconnect between the needs of practitioners and the activities of scholars is not unique to higher education. As Milton Shore (1994) commented, when discussing this lack of connection in the field of mental health research, "The supposition that research generates ideas for service is inconsistent with the facts. The flow is usually the other way; most research proposals arise from concerns and questions encountered in the practice area. Ideally, of course, research and practice would interact closely enough to give rise to new and improved interventions" (p. 15). Given the complexity of the needs expressed by advising practitioners in our survey, advisors also seek multidimensional and comparative research that would result in such an outcome.

What accounts for this disconnect between scholarship and practice in the field of advising? While this is also a question fit for research, some speculations are possible. A review of the published research highlighted the many dissertation-based articles. As advising has only recently entered the curriculum in higher education, faculty who supervise advising dissertations are likely to be less grounded in the literature and practice concerns of this area. Advisors who are not themselves faculty may have less contact with scholars and, therefore, be less able to shape this research. Given downsizing by many institutions, advisor-scholars may find themselves with even less time for any activity not tied to direct service. Finally, advisors with time and ideas may not have the professional expertise to design or analyze a publishable study.

The results of our investigation are suggestive. We desperately need quality, multidimensional research in the field of academic advising. Deans

and vice-presidents are demanding documentation on the effectiveness of programs on our campuses. Practitioners are unwilling to take best practices at face value. Directors are unlikely to award funding to new programs blindly.

Beyond individual, institutional concerns, academic advisors are practitioners in search of a discipline with a responsibility for shaping the growth of that discipline. This will only happen if and when advisors can contribute to the scholarship of the field. As demonstrated in this analysis, practitioners are a rich source of research ideas. They made it clear that our priorities must be to investigate comparatively advising practices, techniques, models, institutional programs, and students. We need to know not only what works, but what works with which students, by which advisors, working through which delivery models, and in which institutional cultures.

Advisors must go to their administrators and ask, nay demand, the five hours per week necessary to engage in serious investigations of these topics relevant to their own campuses. Advisors must establish connections with scholars and advisor-scholars on their own or on other campuses.

Find the individuals who possess the skills at which you may be rusty and who may be open to collaborations on new research questions. Connect with the NACADA research network of advisor-scholars interested in conducting research or consider applying for a NACADA research grant. Whatever action you take, remember that practitioners and scholars must engage in a dialogue, combining the best ideas from the field with the best scholarship. The outcome of such an interaction could be the critically needed multidimensional and interdisciplinary research needed to craft this discipline called academic advising.

References

- Shore, Milton F. (1994). Narrowing prevention. *READINGS: A Journal of Reviews and Commentary in Mental Health*. 9(3). 13-17.