From the Co-Editors: Research Ideas from Academic Advising Practitioners

The authors of the study presented here, all members of the *NACADA Journal* Editorial Board, set out to capture topics in need of research from advisors. To this end, they offered a session titled Voices from the Field: Building a Research Agenda for Academic Advising at the 2003 and 2004 NACADA National Conferences. Attendees suggested researchable topics, first steps they would need to take, and the resources they would need to conduct a study. The authors recommend more research training, collaboration opportunities, and mentoring for academic advisors.

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Voices from the Field: Building a Research Agenda for Academic Advising

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At the 2003 and 2004 NACADA National Conferences, we offered a session titled Voices from the Field: Building a Research Agenda for Academic Advising. The presentation ideas grew out of our belief that every academic advisor is a potential researcher and that every researcher could profit from collaboration with practicing advisors. Habley (1988) stated that research is necessary to document the impact of advising on higher education outcomes, to gain support, and to elevate the status of advising in higher education. Therefore, empirical research on academic advising continues to be a priority of NACADA.

McGillin (2000, p. 374) gave a sense of urgency to the need for more research in academic advising when she wrote,

> It is evident that the research agenda for academic advising must become a national priority. The very status of advising as a field and of roles, institutional support, training, and recognition will all depend on the generation of qualitative and quantitative research documenting what advisors do. The field can no longer afford to stand outside the national demand for documented outcomes in higher education.

In the conclusion to her article, McGillin identified six areas of initial importance to academic advising: a) A theory of academic advising must be generated to clarify the elements that do and do not constitute advising; b) the process of advising should be studied using a variety of methodologies; c) researchers studying the relationship between advising and retention must account for the multiplicity of advisors, advisees, and advising approaches; d) advisors should be studied in terms of gender, percent of time commitment to advising, training methods, reward structures, and integration of advising into the academic role; e) research collaborations should connect advisors to others in the academy and advising topics to other higher education issues; f) researchers should establish appropriate collaborations to determine how advising functions within disciplines. She concluded her article with, "The search for a single model of good advising must give way to the documentation and celebration of the multiplicity of advising encounters across advisors, students, disciplines, and institutions" (p. 375).

Expanding upon McGillin's and Habley's comments, Steele (2004) reported that Internet searches show a comparative paucity of research on academic advising. The need to build a sound, comprehensive research foundation for the academic advising profession seems uncontested.

Method

Presenters of the Voices from the Field sessions reviewed descriptive, experimental, qualitative, historical, and theoretical/philosophical formal research approaches as well as steps in the research process (identify an issue, learn about it, form an answerable question about the issue, collect some data, draw conclusions, and disseminate results). They then assembled participants into groups of 2, 3, or 4 persons and asked them to discuss topics and indicate areas where more research was needed. After their interactive discussions of researchable topics in academic advising were completed, participants were asked to either choose from issues provided (see Table 1) on a session feedback sheet or write down their own unique research topic. The issues provided were based on McGillin's (2000) article. They

also wrote the first steps they would need to take and the resources they would need to acquire to complete the research that interested them.

Results

Thirty-five groups of 2, 3, or 4 participants turned in a session feedback sheet in 2003 ($n = 24$) and 2004 ($n = 11$). On the session feedback sheets, the groups selected research topics that they had discussed as well as the related steps and resources that they had identified as necessary to conduct the research of interest.

Topics Suggested

Table 1 presents the frequency with which respondent groups selected as important the research topics listed on the session feedback sheets. Student needs, retention and advising, and assessment of advising were the most frequently selected research topics listed on the session feedback sheets.

Table 2 shows an alphabetical listing of the research topic ideas contributed by participants. Some of the participant ideas were refinements of the listed topics (Table 1) (e.g., advising special populations/retention, advising undecided science students, and examining persistence of students in retention academic jeopardy), while others added unique topics (e.g., advisor certification).

First Steps to Take

More participant groups selected searching the literature than any other first-steps-to-take strategy (Table 3). Researchers typically search the literature to find out what is already known about the topic and how previous research was conducted. The need to refine the research question(s) was duly noted by 12 respondent groups.

Several doctoral candidates were among the participants. Prior to the workshop, they had selected their dissertation topic, prepared a formal research proposal, and searched the literature. Because of this, these individuals wrote steps that are advanced in the research process (e.g., collect data). The data regarding first steps in research are interesting because of the breadth of ideas that participants selected, which suggest the many ways in which one might begin a research project.

Resources Needed

Table 4 shows the resource needs identified by the participants as they discussed their research ideas in small groups during the sessions. With 21 responses, group participants identified the need for design assistance as the paramount need for initiating research. The groups identified a variety of design assistance—from survey construction, interview structure and questions, focus group procedures, data collection and formatting, statistical analysis, qualitative procedures, and perhaps most interesting, research mentoring.

Participants ranked time and collaborators as second among resources needed to conduct research. Collaborators were identified not only as fellow advisors with whom to conduct the study and write the research report, but they were also identified as resource people, advisors, or researchers from institutions where the study could be replicated or expanded. According to the data, following students from one institution to another through the transfer process is a popular idea that would require institutional collaboration.

Recommendations and Discussion

Increased research training, course work, and mentoring in master's and doctoral programs designed for individuals who seek to become scholars of academic advising are the most compelling recommendations that grow out of these data. Research skills are valuable tools that are basic building blocks for the improvement of advising practice, student success, and the development of the advising profession. Many faculty members, particularly those in the sciences and education, receive research training, but often those courses and skills do not prepare emerging faculty members to conceptualize studies that relate to academic advising.

The data also suggest that the amount of collaboration and mentorship in advising research activities should also be increased for practitioners. Academic advising is a time-intensive endeavor and most advisors are not expected to conduct research, write papers, or engage in scholarly discourse. Yet the need for sharing experience and learning among professionals is paramount to improving the success of students.

Because advising administrators constitute a significant group of contributors to current research in the field of academic advising (Gordon & Grites, 2001), we recommend that they provide greater mentoring and release time to front-line advisors who are interested in conducting research. While research on academic advising is typically done by faculty members and administrators at research universities, most faculty advisors work at small liberal arts colleges where their reward structure recognizes teaching and advising but not the scholarship relating to teaching and advising. Finding collaborators is a very important aspect of

Table 1 Research topics participants selected from choices provided

Research Topics	Frequency Selected
Student Advising Issues	
Retention and advising	6
Advising special populations	3
Developmental or holistic advising	2
Career and major advising	0
Advisor Issues	
Assessment of advising	4
Faculty role in advising	2
Advisor recognition and reward	2
Advisor training and development	1
Advising workloads	1
Organizational Issues	
Organizational structures	3
Managing institutional change	2
Technology and advising	1
Additional Issues	
Student needs	6
Advising approach(es)	3
Advising program(s)	2

Note. Listed topics were based on McGillin (2000). Groups could choose one, none, or more than one topic.

Table 2 Participant listing of unique potential research topics

Research Topic
Advisor certification
Advising special populations/retention
Advising transfer students on probation
Advising undecided science students
Advisor work environment
Assessment of students' perceptions and understandings of the advising process
Career paths of academic advisors
Communicating with advisees
Examining persistence of students in retention academic jeopardy
Impact of intrusive counseling on student behavior and achievement
Institutional culture and first-year students
Integrating advising in two disciplines (i.e., interdisciplinary or dual major)
Intervention programs
PhD attrition in graduate studies (predicting failure)
Student success and advising
Students' perceptions of advising and satisfaction
Students who do not pass language test proficiency after 3+ years

Note. Participants could list none, one, or more than one self-generated research idea.

beginning a research project, and the collaborators might be co-investigators or support resources.

A second corollary recommendation is for the NACADA Research Committee to emphasize its potential to serve as an informational and methodological resource for NACADA members wishing to conduct research. Further, those interested in conducting a research study could profit from reading through the list of research agenda topics maintained by the NACADA Research Committee at http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/Research_Related/researchagenda.htm.

Table 3 Participant listing of first research steps

First Steps	Frequency Selected
Search literature	21
Refine research question(s), narrow topic(s)	12
Identify/select population of students to study	5
Create operational definitions of constructs	4
Collect data (study already begun)	2
Identify evaluation instrument	2
Conduct needs survey	1
Conduct pilot study	1
Brainstorm definitions of campus activities	1
Contact community college transfers who drop out	1
Develop an appointment tracking system	1
Decide time frame for survey and follow-up survey	1
Devise qualitative questions (focus group effort?)	1
Discuss research plan with other advisors	1
Examine community college business course syllabi	1
Network with other advisors at community college	1
Redefine questions for student input	1
Seek institutional support	1
Use qualitative research to determine why students choose to take business courses at community college	1

Table 4 Participant listing of resources needed to conduct research

Resource Need	Frequency Selected
Design/statistical analysis assistance	23
Time	8
Collaborators	8
Administrative approval	6
Money/funding	6
Funding	4
Access to institutional data	3
Equipment	2
Permission to observe/use faculty and full-time advisors	2
Conceptualization of study	1
Literature review	1
Room to conduct focus groups	1
Rewards for study participants	1
Student subjects, participant pool	1

First steps data suggest a distinction between formal and nonformal approaches for getting started with research. Often when instructing future researchers on how to initiate a study, veteran researchers present a conceptual model in which "search the literature," "refine the research question(s)," and "narrow the topic" are listed as first steps. They pay little attention to the triggers that set the research process in motion. The trigger can be the curiosity arising from a perceived problem or issue in advising. This informal precursor to the more formal steps typically modeled can be expressed such as: "contact community college transfers who drop out," "network with advisors at community college," or "examine community college business course syllabi." These activities need to be acknowledged and supported as legitimate research steps so a beginning researcher can conceptualize these more clearly and benefit from the road map provided by a formal research model.

Certainly, anyone conducting a literature search in the field of academic advising should scour pub-

lications in related fields for topic words; such a strategy will allow the researcher to clarify operational definitions and refine ideas so the literature search can be completed both thoroughly and efficiently. Searching the literature is an iterative process; therefore, to minimize repeating previous search steps, keeping complete records of words and sources searched is important.

Conclusion

To recapitulate, we believe that every academic advisor is a potential researcher and that every researcher could profit from collaboration with practicing advisors. Collaboration between advisors and research mentors is essential because both bring an important perspective to researching the field of academic advising. A collaborative attitude from advising administrators is necessary to provide support and time for advisors' research activity. For practitioners, collaboration can be a learning experience about research methodology, and it can provide a reality base for trained researchers.

Those who conduct studies can choose among many approaches to conducting research studies, and the acquisition of training and mentorship in one or more of those approaches is essential. While master's and doctoral students are socialized through thesis and dissertation writing, those who pursue a course work or nonthesis option have no clear route to acquiring research knowledge and skills.

Practitioners can begin engagement in the research process through the simple act of trying to improve their practice through action research and formal, as well as informal, evaluation and assessment. They can also approach publications and other products of research as a body of knowledge that is capable of informing their practice and to which they can contribute.

It is critically important to the professional development of academic advisors, and to the improvement of their advising practice, that they engage in formal and informal research activities. By building a strong base of practitioners contributing to the scholarship of academic advising, those concerned with advising in higher education can make progress toward meeting the first of eight challenges sounded by Habley in 1986. He called on the profession to develop a "significant body of research which enhances our understanding, assists us in planning, and serves as a guide to our decision-making" (p. 6).

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