A Preliminary Report of Advisor Perceptions of Advising and of a Profession

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Practicing advisors may not agree, know, or understand that advising does not meet the scholarly definition of a profession. Through a phenomenological study, members of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising were invited to describe the position of academic advisor. The data gathered were used to address two research questions: "How do advisors describe the occupation of advising?" and "How do advisors describe a profession?" Answers to these questions provided a foundation to understand advisors' views of advising as an occupation, definition of their own career, and understanding of a profession as it relates to advising.

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Although scholarly literature suggests that academic advising does not meet the historical and sociological definition of a profession (Habley, 2009; Kuhn & Padak, 2008; Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010), practicing academic advisors may not understand that their occupational responsibilities do not fall under the category of a profession. The following vignette illustrates the issues faced by advisors trying to reconcile their current standing with the typical status of those in a recognized profession:

> Two academic advisors are enjoying lunch on a sunny afternoon.
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> Jo (a full-time academic advisor in a department): "Are you coming to play basketball tomorrow at 12:15?"
>
> Jim (a full-time college-wide academic advisor): "Too busy. I wish I could. I've got too much going on: I've got five student appointments, a staff meeting, an orientation presentation, and I have to review the *Prerequisite Report for Courses* by 5 o'clock so the College can cancel enrollment for students who haven't met the pre-reqs. And then I'm trying to sneak in some things for myself, like write in my advising blog, write a presentation for regional conference, and work on this IRB for research. I'd really like to do some research or get published."
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> Advisor Jo: "Wow! What's your job title? You are doing too much. I don't do any pre-requisite checking! Don't you have other staff who could handle some of those things?"
>
> Advisor Jim: "It seems like someone always has a task for me to do. Yeah, in our college, anything that isn't being done by someone goes to the advisor.
>
> "I had lunch with Vickie last week. The departmental administrative associate in her department is on leave for four months. So, her department chair told her to learn payroll, travel reimbursement, and basically anything else he asked for."
>
> Advisor Jo: "That doesn't surprise me. There are, like, two people on campus whose actual job is to advise students. Everyone else does anything and everything under the sun. I do, like, 500 things. It seems that each of us has a common position title of academic advisor but the tasks and responsibilities are so different.
>
> "Maybe you can play next week. Put it on your calendar."

This case reveals the real conversation that inspired this study. Each of us has experienced dialogues or situations that pointed to the varied tasks of persons filling academic advisor positions. Roles, responsibilities, job titles, and compensation

vary wildly across campus and units. Additional discussions revealed that many of our advising colleagues perceived their current position as a stepping stone to another career opportunity rather than an intentional choice made as a primary occupation. Their career goals differ from those of professionals described in the literature: People enter a defined profession with the intention of being a member of the profession (Evetts, 2003). The conversations we have witnessed, such as that between Jo and Jim, suggest a lack of congruency between the academic advisors' lived experiences, their expectations, and the scholarly literature on professions.

Our study documents the themes that emerge as academic advisors describe their occupation, specifically in relationship to the concept of a profession. We sense that advising colleagues and those who work with advisors use the word *profession* without full awareness of the meaning and outcomes related to the term *professionalization*. Also, we have heard advisor anecdotes of interest in enhanced career opportunities (e.g., research activities, certifications, and professional development) appropriate to the field of academic advising, and these declarations inspired the question: If tasks and responsibilities undertaken by academic advisors remain unclear, how do opportunities related to a profession emerge?

To explore the current state of advising and a profession, we generated two questions to guide our study:

RQ1. How do advisors describe the occupation of academic advising?

RQ2. How do advisors describe a profession?

We addressed the research questions through a qualitative design that engaged advising colleagues from six geographical regions (2, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10) of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA, 2014). With a NACADA research grant and through the kind support of the University of Utah and advising practitioners, faculty members, and administrators who shared their experiences, this study contributes to further understanding of academic advising as an occupation.

Literature Review

As this study about professions and the academic advising position emerged, we realized the importance of distinguishing the word *profession* in the colloquial context versus its use in historical and sociological literature. The advising literature often refers to academic advisors as *professionals*. However, the criteria articulated for all recognized professions demonstrate that academic advising does not qualify as an established profession. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, we use the term *profession* based on the historical and sociological frameworks rather than the colloquial sense as adopted by practitioners and stakeholders of advising. Likewise, we use *professional* to refer to an individual who belongs to a recognized profession rather than someone who behaves in a manner consistent with a recognized profession.

Evolution of the Academic Advisor Position

Many have shown interest in trying to define academic advising ever since the responsibility was first undertaken by the President of Harvard College at the dawn of U.S. higher education in 1636. In 1876, The Johns Hopkins University introduced the first faculty advising model. Starting in the 1930s, the term *student personnel work* emerged and was applied to academic advising. In the 1960s, the functions of counseling and advising diverged to become distinguishable from each other, with the former characterized by specialized training and certification in matters of psychology and mental health concerns.

In the early 1970s, the first student development theories were published, and in 1977, the first national academic advising conference was held (Cook, 2009; Grites & Gordon, 2009). Since this burgeoning interest in theory and practice, practitioner-scholars have been examining the field of advising and striving to articulate the specific features, functions, and duties an academic advisor demonstrates to benefit the student and institutional mission.

Habley (2009) examined the late 20th and early 21st centuries to identify the criticisms about the description of the field and called for further research on the state of advising as a field of inquiry. Through his examination, he surmised that academic advising "is yet to be recognized as a branch of learning, a field of study, a discipline, or a profession" (p. 80). Habley recommended moving the field of advising forward by expanding the opportunities for intensive graduate education. Currently, a few limited master's programs specifically address academic advising; they exert a limited influence on the availability of

informed practitioners with a common set of skills and the contribution of research on relevant advising topics.

Kuhn and Padak (2008) described academic advising as the engagement of students to advance their educational experiences, and they referred to the individuals involved in this interaction with students as *academic advisors*. They also explored advising within the context of four categories: bundled faculty responsibility, a service, a field, and a discipline. They contended that "*academic advising* should refer to situations in which an institutional representative gives insight or direction to a college student about an academic, social, or personal matter" (p. 3). To further the understanding of advising, research needs to focus on the classifications of advising as discipline, career, occupation, or profession.

Defining a Profession

The consensus in the sociological literature suggests that all professions recognized by government and society include four characteristics: education, sole jurisdiction, self-regulation, and public service. Sociologists assert that a recognized profession is comprised of members who have studied for a certain period of time, learned a guiding theory, and acquired information about the research supporting the profession. They reason that professional work cannot be learned on the job. In addition, most professional practices are built upon a theoretical foundation such that only graduate level training adequately prepares a person for the responsibilities. That is, professional work is not prescriptive and cannot be performed by anyone except recognized professionals with the proper education in that field. (Evetts, 2003; Klass, 1961; Kolb, 2008; Wilensky, 1964)

Sole jurisdiction refers to the authority over the tasks professionals perform as part of their job Furthermore, professional undertakings vary little from office to office, institution to institution, or state to state. Only those with proper credentials should undertake the responsibilities. All professions fall under a governing body that provides membership in that field, ensures specific standards are articulated for professionals as well as advocates and determines the scope of practice for members. (Evetts, 2003; Klass, 1961; Kolb, 2008; Wilensky, 1964)

Standards often are called *self-regulation* and allow the governing body to either award or revoke a license or certification from the professional. The authoritative body may also set down criteria in the forms of standards, guidelines, or ethical codes to which professionals adhere.

Professions provide a necessary service to a potentially vulnerable population. The professional is viewed as the expert and shoulders a moral obligation to assist the population outside of normal operational hours. The professional engenders trust from others who expect the person to meet expectations held by those served. (Evetts, 2003; Klass, 1961; Kolb, 2008; Wilensky, 1964)

The intersection of academic advising definitions and the sociological characteristics of a profession offers a place for inquiry among individuals employed in academic advising. We endeavored to build upon the current state of understanding and debate to elucidate a clearer picture of advising as currently practiced.

Methods

We selected a phenomenological study to address the primary research questions: "How do advisors describe the occupation of advising?" and "How do advisors describe a profession?" Creswell (1998) indicated that a "phenomenological study describes the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or the phenomenon" (p. 51). After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we invited individuals engaged in academic advising in an official capacity to participate in a focus group. We employed a semi-structured interview protocol to focus the discussion on describing the tasks and responsibilities of an academic advisor and the concept of a profession.

Sample

The research strategy of phenomenology suggests the use of criterion sampling, which encourages participants experiencing a phenomenon to offer a rich description of it (Creswell, 1998, 2003). NACADA facilitates 10 regional conferences each year and thus provided places to solicit participants for the sample. In 2012 and 2013, conference attendees in six regions (2, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10) were invited to self-select as focus group participants to explore the advising position. All conference participants received information about the study, location of the focus group, and researcher contact information.

Forty-seven conference attendees agreed to participate in the focus-group data collection

process. All completed an optional and anonymous demographic survey before the focus group discussions. Data from the survey indicated the following about the participants:

- 57% had been working in academic advising for 5.00 or more years with an average of 4.73 years in the current position.
- 80% had completed a graduate degree.
- 70% identified as a staff advisor and the rest of the sample identified as faculty members, peers, interns, or graduate assistants.
- The average amount of time spent on academic advising responsibilities was reported at 80%.
- 78% of respondents were female.
- 70% identified as White.
- 40% specifically chose a career in academic advising.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data were drawn from participant responses made through a semi-structured interview protocol in a focus group. A guide for introducing the study, the structure of the focus group, and role of the moderator were developed to inform data collection. After the protocol was established and used in the Region 10 focus group, which all team members attended, various members of the research team conducted the other five focus groups at regional conference locations.

The focus group model allowed for the description of multiple perspectives of *academic advisor* and *profession*. This data-gathering tool is particularly effective for investigating a concept, understanding the degree of consensus on the concept, and offering an approach that respects the lived experience of those familiar with the concept (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Morgan & Krueger, 1993). Each focus group discussion was recorded and then transcribed for later analysis. Tapes and transcripts were secured in a locked file cabinet and on a password-protected computer. Data were managed through the data management tools as selected by each researcher and included Atlas TI, Dedoose, and Excel.

Protocol questions were developed to gather extensive detail from the participants about the concept of a profession and the academic advisor position based on their own lived experience. Main and probing questions were developed through the literature review on academic advising and the concept of a profession, conversations with other advisors, our own experiences, and feedback from advisors after a presentation at a state conference on the concept of advising as a profession. See Table 1.

Data collected through main and probing questions contribute breadth and depth to the research questions from the participant's perspective and respect the lived experience of the participants. Main and probing questions also complement each other and offer credibility to the study (Creswell, 1998, 2003; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). We continually reviewed the questions and responses to ensure that they provided rich description for the research question.

In addition to answers from the main and probing questions asked during each focus group and the optional demographic survey that provided primary data, we collected secondary data through observation and reflection. Each investigator made notes to record nonverbal elements of the focus group sessions and maintained a reflective journal. These secondary data sources were used to validate categories and themes that emerged during the analysis process of coding.

To categorize and look at the data, we used grounded theory coding at three levels. First, through open coding, researchers focus on each sentence for common themes after each session. In the second level or axial coding, these themes are organized into categories. In the third level, selective coding, concepts are described and connections identified. Also, diagramming codes contribute to describing the concepts (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through this coding method, we analyzed the occupation of advising and the concept of profession as described through the words of academic advisors.

Trustworthiness

A triangulation process addressed the trustworthiness of the findings (Creswell, 1998, 2003). First, individually, we each analyzed the transcripts to develop codes for later group discussions. This process engaged each member in the process and the team subsequently produced a set of codes that each member agreed was appropriate. Second, each of us referred to field notes and reflective journals as we analyzed and discussed the data as a team. Third, findings

Table 1. Questions used in focus group protocol

1. What are your responsibilities as an academic advisor?
2. How do you define/describe a profession?
   a. What knowledge do you have about certification processes for other professions (e.g., bar exam [—attorney], CPA exam—certified public accountant, etc.)?
3. What characteristics define a professional academic advisor?
   a. Do they serve on committees?
   b. Do they dress professionally?
   c. Do they demonstrate exceptional customer service skills?
   d. Do they engage in professional development opportunities such as attending conferences?
   e. Do they continue to develop a knowledge base of current advising issues (e.g., reading journals, recent research, etc.)?
   f. Do they have a certain type of degree or certification?
4. Is there a difference between acting professional and being in a profession?
5. Could academic advising be more professionalized?
   a. If academic advising was a profession, from your perspective describe the characteristics.
   b. What would change? Or what would happen?
   c. Would outsider's perspectives of academic advising change (e.g., dean, department chair, etc.)? If so, how?
6. How did you arrive at your current position? (Optional if time is short.)
7. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss about the topic that we haven't covered already?

were presented at the 2013 NACADA conference in Salt Lake City.

During the Salt Lake City presentation, each audience member ($N = 48$) used an electronic clicker to member check and peer debrief the findings (as per Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). With the exception of Region 8, at least one person from each region in which a focus group had been held attended the presentation. Approximately 50% of the presentation attendees had been advising for 6 or more years, and 79% of all attendees had a master's or doctorate degree. Sixty-three percent of attendees described their position as involving advising at least 50% of the time.

After each finding was presented by a member of the research team, The Salt Lake City participants were asked to agree or disagree with the finding by using the designated option on the electronic clickers. At least 85% of audience members agreed with each presented finding. After the votes cast via the clickers were documented, the group discussed the topic to refine the future research on it.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis was informed by the rich descriptions provided by the focus-group participants. The data revealed four outcomes that illustrate participant perspectives on the academic advisor position as described by Kuhn and Padak (2008) and the nature of a profession as described in the socialization literature (Evetts, 2003; Klass, 1961; Kolb, 2008; Macionis, 2007; Wilensky, 1964): the lack of uniformity among academic advisor responsibilities, advising and profession as explained through internal and external frameworks, descriptions of advising as a dichotomous position based on student-centered and administrative duties, and advisors' lack of power to affect higher education or institutional policy.

Inconsistently Defined Practice

The data collected during the focus groups correlated with our own lived experiences, which inspired the development of this study. Some advising practices share aspects such as the act of meeting with students. One participant explained, "On my job description it has advising students and meeting with students about 60% of the time." However, outside of student interactions, the advising tasks differ. The analysis resulted in four aspects of the occupation that vary among practitioners or from others in the academy: titles, backgrounds, practice, and recognition and affirmation.

Titles. Advisors in the focus groups described the lack of uniform titles from one advisor to another, including those titles assigned at the same institution. "There's no titling. Right? So an academic advisor at my school may be an assistant dean in another school. It may be an office

manager. It may be an academic counselor. There is no uniformity in title" (Region 2). The participants made clear that titling exerted a great impact on ways academic advisors are seen and portrayed. Titling also affected the participants' capacity to navigate a system based on credentialing:

> But somehow certifying it, or making it so that there's a specific, I guess, title or some type of authorization that gives you credence. Whereas, at this point, the faculty, in my school of business, don't consider me a professional at all. All I do is help students figure out what to take. (Region 2)

Backgrounds. Participants came from vastly different backgrounds. The discrepant training, skills, language, and education among participants were, in part, viewed as positive: "Because to me, one of the beauties of academic advising is the different backgrounds that advisors bring to the table, and if that's standardized, we may lose some of the diverse life experience that makes academic advising valuable" (Region 10). However, participants also indicated that the diversity in educational background, training, and skill set requirements played a major role in the lack of advancement and recognition for the field and its practitioners:

> I'd like to see our role as academic advisor, at this profession, be more of respect and more prestige, for people outside of advising to understand it, so much more than course selection. But students often have that misconception, [as do] faculty, just people out in the world. This is something that's chosen, that you want to be, that you do some sort of training, or have some sort of professional background to come into this career, and that it's not just something you fall into and anybody can do, or that you do on your way up to something else. (Region 10)

Practice. In relation to students, academic advisors empathized with the student experience, describing how a student could undergo a totally different process and outcome from two advisors, even at the same campus or in the same department. A participant from Region 9 stated,

> I'm not saying we all have to have academic advising degrees, but I think there needs to be some form of common knowledge that we all go through and we take our certification and check, yes, you meet a certain level of competency, to say that you are an academic advisor.

Participants described this lack of coherence in the experience of advising (both as experienced by the student and other advisors) by stating that advising had "no continuity of care."

Recognition and affirmation. Participants (70% identified as staff) questioned whether the faculty recognizes advising as a legitimate occupation in which practitioners contribute more to the educational experience than as helpers to students completing a checklist of courses. The summarized data suggest that participants questioned ways an academic advisor, or anyone in an advising position, could be treated as a stable contributor to the institution or department if each person in the role demonstrates different qualifications, standards, processes, outcomes, and goals. This confusion may particularly characterize institutions in which educators possess degrees that define their responsibilities based on credentials and training. "Some advisors on our campus don't even have a bachelor's degree to advise. . .and then you know other departments require master's degrees..." (Region 8).

Focus group participants clearly indicated their beliefs that the academic advisor wielded very limited power unless he or she presented qualifications similar to those of department or college peers (e.g., PhD, MFA, Phar.D.) or had a credential that represented specific qualifications and training (e.g., licensed social worker or counselor). Without visible and acknowledged pedigrees, advisors do not feel welcomed at the table where discussions that affect advising and higher education move agendas.

Participants described a need for a "title or some type of authorization that gives you credence." These realizations especially frustrated participants who described themselves as the only people at their institution involved in all aspects of a student's education and know more about the students than anyone else. In addition, they view themselves as the main person who sees the impact of policy decisions on a student and the institution firsthand but rarely are asked to contribute to curricular, policy, or other critical discussions. Despite such a unique perspective

and so much knowledge to offer, academic advisors find themselves unable to influence the educational experience.

In relation to the institution and the public, participants related social incidents (e.g., conversations at parties) in which their occupation was neither recognized nor understood: "There's no standardization at all. There's no set qualifications at all, really, and so it's hard for people who don't understand our work to really grasp what we actually do" (Region 8). The participants explained needing to explain the definition, qualifications, expectations, and the tasks of their job and expressed frustration that the same explanation may differ from that of other advisors with a similar title or institutional role. "I think that if we had a standard, that would help administrators and supervisor[s] understand the job, more than they do now" (Region 8).

The focus group participants often and emphatically asserted the desire for others to understand and affirm them as advisors. They feel demoralized because many administrators, department chairs, and students have no idea the academic advisor's roles, responsibilities, and daily work life. "We don't get that recognition. So I think the profession is that name that you can mention at a cocktail party and everybody knows what you do" (Region 2). According to the participants, the lack of colleague knowledge about advising negatively affects the position:

> Some have considered the advisor as a professional, and some of them have considered them to be just a body to fill in, or glorified secretary, or, "Well, we can get anybody to do this." Like a student advisor can fill in for you. (Region 10)

Participants offered alternative titles for their roles, describing themselves as "mothers," "curricular accountants," "counselors," "middle men," "glorified clerics," and many other terms. Some participants in the room took offense at the choices offered, but others felt that the terms captured a sliver of others' perceptions of their role. Additionally, participants described a seemingly disparate list of activities that they ascribed to their job: "party planner," "learning outcomes," "research," "credit evaluation," "tech person," "the go-to person," "glorified secretary," and others. These data demonstrate that the responsibilities expected of and articulated by advisors are wide ranging, disparate, and unclear. Furthermore, the position descriptions closely resembled a unique dialect or colloquialism of the institution, department, and region of the country. Despite the regional language differences, the position description often reflected a catch-all for every unassigned task: "But, as was alluded to before, it's a little bit of everything" (Region 8).

These data illustrate the lack of common experience, understanding, titling, and responsibilities among advisors across institutions and positions. The only shared characteristic among participants involved some form of engagement with students.

Advising and Professions Viewed From Internal and External Frameworks

Our second research question ("How do you define or describe a profession?") elicited responses that fell into two viewpoint categories: internal and external. We do not place a value on the responsibility sets as identified by participants, but describe the terms as they emerged from the data.

Without being prompted, participants described advising and professions in terms that illustrate either an internal or an external framework, respectively, for the concept. Specifically, when explaining the skills that an academic advisor should possess, participants included phrases about internal characteristics such as "passion" (Region 2) and "having pride in their work" (Region 2). Conversely, when describing professions, they used language that reflected an external focus; for example, "There are a set of requirements and a set of training that you have gone through in order to carry out that task" (Region 2), "standards" (Regions 2, 8, 9, 10), "body of knowledge" (Region 2), and "theory or mission that the school follows" (Region 9).

The terms of the internal framework used to define advising included *qualifications*, *personality type, working style, commitment to the occupation*, and characteristics that embody theory, such as *ethics, mission* or *framework*, and *vision*. The external framework used to describe a profession consisted of descriptors such as *licensure, certification, professional development, governing* or *accrediting body*, and *defined goals*; these terms reflect characteristics attributed by society or authority over the membership.

Responsibility Dichotomy: Student Interactions and Administrative Activities

Focus group participants wasted no time in sharing descriptions of their tasks and responsibilities. One respondent explained, "I do a lot of different things—but main duty, probably 50% is meeting with students" (Region 10). Another focus group participant communicated, "to assist the students to get to that avenue in the best possible way, versus just handing them a piece of paper and saying, 'go at it'" (Region 5). The term *curricular accountants* surfaced regarding a variety of procedures that involved a student and an advisor: checklists, degree checks, graduation planning, career options, and evaluating transfer credits. Although participants cited engaging students as a consistent requirement of the position, they described many other activities.

The nonstudent contact activities ranged in complexity and scope from clerk to maintainer of campus information to organizer of assessment. Advisors described these tasks as "wearing many hats," and the activities included information technology evaluations, FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act) enforcement, and curriculum decisions. The following responses describe the diversity within the positions:

- "I'm responsible for assessment of student satisfaction with our services, while trying to do learning outcomes." (Region 2)
- "It's kind of a stop where people can come in and say, 'if you're not the right person, who is the right person?' We know where to send them." (Region 10)
- "What do you recommend we do with curriculum?" (Region 2)

These data point to two responsibilities, direct student contact and administrative duties, that divide the job of advising practitioners. This division leads to concern about appropriating advisor time to accomplish the tasks assigned, especially when priorities are not made clear. The majority of participants agreed that student engagement remains the key element of the advising role, but their comments on the significance of the other important additional tasks resulted in an inconsistent and confusing context that confounded a common definition of the advising experience.

The structure of the higher education organization may reinforce the complexity of the advisor role. Some advisors are assigned to academic affairs while others work through student affairs. Although these differing reporting lines emerged in the data, their impact on assigned tasks remains unclear. However, study participants described a division of labor that caused concern in fulfilling their role of as a practitioner:

> So I think an academic advisor has to wear many hats. . .. They need to look at a student holistically, but then they need to look at their position holistically, and they need to know a lot of things to appropriately advise a student. (Region 5)

The findings highlight the difficulty of those who advise full-time to identify advising as a career path due to the ambiguity of responsibilities. Also, interested persons face challenges preparing to enter a field with unclear tasks and responsibilities for which no specific skill sets are defined. These descriptions of disunity contribute to the finding about the power inherent in a profession.

Power

Participants expressed a concern that stakeholders do not appreciate the contributions of advising to the academic mission. As a result, department chairs, deans, and faculty members do not include advisors in decision and policy making as might be afforded by others in a recognized profession.

> When you said, "I wonder how other people perceive us," especially within the higher ed community . . . some would argue that academic advising is not a discipline. . . . So I wonder how they would put it in a discipline and if they would value that and see that as important and, in their opinion, legitimate. (Region 9)

If stakeholders considered academic advising a profession, they would acknowledge the inherent power of academic advisors to make decisions and form policy valued by campus-wide peers. "In the profession sometimes we have to make the hard choices" (Region 7). A practitioner in a profession is associated with "having enough knowledge that you have the ability to make

decisions and have discretion and justify what your decisions are" (Region 2).

Without academic credentials or other predetermined qualifications, participants feel left out of the important processes that affect practice. They feel powerless to effect change: "A professional . . . has the ability to go outside the rules to make the right decisions" (Region 2); however "a lot of times, a lot of things that we can provide input on, we aren't asked because we're not really professionals" (Region 8).

Further observation made during the academic presentation of the findings in Salt Lake City indicated noncongruence and perceived misunderstanding about the nature of power and the persons who wield it with regard to academic advising. Some members of the advising field communicated that power was given to them by others; this, of course, would not represent autonomous power because it is defined by others and duties are assigned to the advisor to execute. A deeper look at advisors' concepts of power would prove relevant to further understand the findings, and we advocate that it be undertaken as a key element for future research.

Limitations

Three main limitations affect the generalizability of the findings. First, descriptive studies offer insight, but not necessarily generalizable facts that apply across the entire career field. Second, the sample did not include persons who represent the diverse identities of student populations. Third, only advisors engaged with NACADA and have resources to attend conferences had the opportunity to participate. Despite these limitations, the descriptions offer worthy ideas to consider for practice, policy, and future research.

Implications

Advising Practice

The first implication of the study reflects the impact of increased professionalization on the administration of advising appointments. If a standardized process was implemented for becoming a licensed or certified advisor, the advising process would be conducted, at least to some measurable extent, in a uniform way. Naturally, advisors would utilize their training of university policy and counseling skills to tailor each individual appointment. However, a structure would ensure that each student receives a comprehensive and equitable experience. In this way, students could expect that their situations are addressed in the most efficient manner; they would experience less run-around and more substantial engagement at each meeting.

Second, with deliberate efforts toward professionalization, advising could become a more universally recognized and intentional career choice. Most participants in the focus groups did not enter the world of work with the ultimate goal of becoming an academic advisor. Some participants stumbled into the profession directly after completion of their bachelor's degree; others found the option of working as an advisor through or following a graduate program; still others entered the advising field after working in career fields outside of higher education.

Third, the nature of peer conversations would reflect a common understanding if the advisor position description received a more standardized treatment. One of us was networking with fellow advisors from the same campus at a local advising conference and found the need to explain the job tasks of the position despite having the exact same job title as the other advisors in the conversation. In turn, the rest of us revealed that the types of tasks we perform differ from each other. We asked ourselves: "How often does this type of confusion come up in conversations among CPAs at a conference on accounting?"

Recognized professionals need not describe their duties to another professional in that same field. The findings suggest a need for clarity on the tasks and responsibilities of the academic advisor position, especially with respect to student interaction. The question surfaces whether becoming a profession would provide this definition and positively influence practice.

Higher Education Policy

According to the participating advisors from across NACADA regions, the position description for an academic advisor position does not reflect a standard set of tasks and responsibilities. If codified position descriptions exist, the means by which they are monitored to guarantee accomplishment of the assigned tasks remain unclear. Institutional policies on accuracy and enforcement of position descriptions must accompany assessment of academic advising quality as measured in meeting the institutional mission for student retention and completion.

In addition, the descriptions by advisors did not demonstrate a standard student caseload. If

advising affects graduation rates, advisors need guidance on how many students they should engage within a certain time frame. All of these issues—position descriptions, enforcement, and caseloads—provide implications for policy. They also serve as suggested directions for future research projects.

Future Research

Data gathered through the initial research period were provided by a broad group of participants within the academic advising community. Therefore, the findings of the study point to overarching themes for all practitioners rather than for specific populations of advisors.

To provide relevant findings for various types of academic advising, more data are needed from specific communities in higher education. With many populations connected to the academic advising role, the different views from non-advising faculty members, students, or college administrators would provide important insight into advising as an occupation. Other important populations to consider include advising administrators, and new faculty, peer, and full-time academic advising practitioners from specific types of institutions.

These populations may offer particularly useful information on credentialing. Throughout the focus groups and the accompanying NACADA presentation in Salt Lake City, we found disagreement among participants over the critical academic credentials.

This qualitative study included 47 advisors and offered rich description, but despite the clearly emergent themes, does not provide generalizable findings across the entire field of academic advising. The descriptions collected offer support for building survey items that could be used to further explore the views of a variety of advisors. By continuing the research on the advisor position and the concept of a profession from multiple perspectives, the field of advising will continue to evolve.

Summary

In this paper, we describe the academic advisor position and the concept of a profession through the words of current day practitioners. The lived experiences captured through various means of qualitative research strategies demonstrate that advising involves a binary set of tasks and responsibilities with only one common attribute: student engagement. Participants framed the concept of a profession through characteristics of their employment as an advising practitioner. The descriptions gathered through the focus groups and vetted by advisors during the Salt Lake City conference provide a basis for continued research into the academic advising position as a profession and the future of advising within higher education.

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