

# Virginia Gordon as Servant Leader

Elizabeth M. Higgins, University of Southern Maine

Susan M. Campbell, University of Southern Maine

*Virginia Gordon was a teacher, scholar, practitioner, and leader who also served as a role model and mentor to others. Her insight and research informed the many innovative initiatives she pursued on behalf of the student advising experience. Gordon's scholarly and evidence-based approach set the stage for academic advising as a field of scholarly inquiry and helped shape the growth and direction of the profession. Virginia Gordon's work was other-directed. Her goal was always to support the growth and development of others. This qualitative study tried to capture Gordon as understood by the higher education professionals who knew her, worked with her, and/or studied with her. That she was other-directed supports our view regarding Virginia Gordon as a servant leader.*

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Virginia remained a down-to-earth woman . . . She readily accepted each and every participant as a friend and colleague in spite of her celebrity . . . I recall one such instance when an admiring graduate student who worked in the NACADA Executive Office asked me if she could have her picture taken with Virginia. I said that I was sure that Virginia would not mind and upon seeing Virginia, I asked her. Her response surprised even me. She said, "Why does she want a picture with me?" (Roberta "Bobbie" Flaherty, personal communication, December 2, 2018)

This is a classic question from a woman whose career was dedicated to improving the college student experience and the institutional conditions involved in shaping that experience. Dr. Virginia N. Gordon's life was intentional and well-lived.

Perhaps the greatest legacy Virginia Gordon left was the impact she had on so many lives around her. Not only was Gordon a prolific author and researcher, she was also a practitioner who used her research and scholarship to inform the develop-

ment of academic advising programs and services in an effort to improve the college student learning experience. As George Steele (2019) revealed in another manuscript in this dedicated issue of the *NACADA Journal*, Dr. Gordon's contributions to the field of academic advising were numerous and significant. Through her research, Gordon helped us better understand and support students who entered college without a declared major by developing a continuum of undecidedness to indecisiveness. Gordon also modeled the way academic advising professionals could engage in the research and scholarship necessary to advance the field and, in the process, helped to shape the field as central to the student academic experience. She believed that academic advising was a developmental process and was, in fact, teaching. She engaged with her professional associations, was a charter member of NACADA, and served as the association's president from 1983 to 1985. As an administrator, Gordon introduced and implemented the concept of a university college at Ohio State University. As a teacher, she developed curricula to guide student exploration and development of educational plans (Steele, 2019). Her work on integrating academic and career advising foreshadowed current discussions and initiatives. That she had an influence on the lives of many people throughout her career was an understatement. In fact, her influence served as the motivation for this study, as we sought to understand the impact Gordon had on some of the higher education professionals who knew her best.

Our goal in this study was to explore the ways in which Dr. Gordon touched and influenced the lives of higher education professionals who worked with her, studied with her, and/or professionally engaged with her. How did others experience Virginia Gordon as a colleague, teacher, and friend? What might we learn from their collective voices about her as a person, professional, and leader? We chose servant leadership as the conceptual framework for this phenomenological study because of its emphasis on growth and development. Evidence of Gordon's leadership revealed itself in several ways, including the many programs and services she designed and

**Table 1.** Characteristics of servant leadership

| <b>1977 Greenleaf,<br/>Practices of<br/>Servant Leadership</b> | <b>1991 Graham,<br/>5 Characteristics of<br/>Servant Leadership</b> | <b>1995 Spears,<br/>9 Critical Characteristics of<br/>Servant Leadership</b> |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Servant first                                                  | Humility                                                            | Listening                                                                    |
| Growth and well-being of others                                | Relational power                                                    | Empathy                                                                      |
| Needs of others first                                          | Autonomy                                                            | Healing                                                                      |
| Development of individuals                                     | Moral development of followers                                      | Persuasion                                                                   |
| Insists on highest performance                                 | Emulation of leaders' service orientation                           | Awareness                                                                    |
|                                                                |                                                                     | Foresight                                                                    |
|                                                                |                                                                     | Conceptualizing commitment to growth                                         |
|                                                                |                                                                     | Stewardship                                                                  |
|                                                                |                                                                     | Community                                                                    |
| Greenleaf (1977)                                               | Graham (1991) as cited in Focht & Ponton, 2015, p. 2                | Spears (1995) as cited in Focht & Ponton, 2015, p. 2.                        |

implemented at Ohio State University and her efforts to support the development of NACADA, an association dedicated to academic advising. However, it seemed that underpinning all of her work was her passionate commitment to the growth and development of others—one of the hallmarks of servant leadership. Through data collected in this study, it is clear that Dr. Gordon's actions and behaviors match the characteristics of a servant leader.

Although we both have met Dr. Gordon, we know her best through her written work. As advising practitioners and administrators, we have used her many works to influence advising on our own campuses, campuses that we have visited, presentations we have facilitated, and pieces we have written. We acknowledge the subjectivity of our perspective regarding Virginia Gordon and that it is a potential limitation of this work.

### **Conceptual Framework: Servant Leadership**

The extant literature on leadership examines a variety of perspectives and is extensive. For example, Bennis (2009) posited that leadership is learned and identified critical behaviors, such as self-awareness, risk-taking, and forward-thinking, that are important for effective leaders. Bennis is most known for his often-quoted phrase, "Leaders are people who do the right thing; Managers are people who do things right" ("Warren Bennis

Quotes," n.d.). Others more deliberately address leadership in relation to the context, such as Hersey and Blanchard's (1982) work on situational leadership. Bolman and Deal (2003) argued that leaders should examine organizational issues through multiple lenses to better match the approach to the nature of the issue at hand as well as its context. In their most recent work, Kouzes and Posner (2017) explored the mindset of the leader. Servant leadership is about all these things, and it is also about the altruism of the leader. The servant leader's intention is to promote the growth and development of others. This notion of altruism drew us to consider servant leadership as the conceptual framework for this study.

Robert Greenleaf (1977/2002) introduced servant leadership in 1977 in his essay, "The Servant as Leader." Servant leadership is a complex concept grounded in a perspective that places serving ahead of leading and makes leading a conscious decision. Service to others or service in support of others is fundamental to the servant leader. "A servant-leader focuses primarily on the growth and well-being of people and the communities to which they belong . . . The servant-leader shares power, puts the needs of others first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible" (Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2019, para. 4). It could be argued that servant leadership is a philosophical stance

**Table 1.** Characteristics of servant leadership (extend.)

| <b>2000 Russell,<br/>2002 Russell &amp; Stone,<br/>Functional Attributes of<br/>Servant Leadership</b>                | <b>2015 Focht and Ponton,<br/>12 Characteristics of<br/>Service in Servant<br/>Leadership</b>                                                                                                   | <b>2013 Yukl,<br/>7 Characteristics of<br/>Ethical Leadership-includes<br/>Servant Leadership</b>          |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Vision<br>Honesty<br>Integrity<br>Trust<br>Service<br>Modeling<br>Pioneering<br>Appreciation of others<br>Empowerment | Value people<br>Humility<br>Listening<br>Trust<br>Caring<br>Integrity<br>Service<br>Empowering<br>Serve others' needs before their own<br>Collaboration<br>Love, Unconditional love<br>Learning | Integrity<br>Altruism<br>Humility<br>Empathy/healing<br>Personal growth<br>Fairness/justice<br>Empowerment |
| Russell (2000) Russell &<br>Stone (2002) as cited in<br>Focht & Ponton, 2015, p. 3                                    | Focht & Ponton (2015), pp. 6-7                                                                                                                                                                  | Yukl (2013), p. 348.                                                                                       |

grounded in social justice principles (Ferch, 2005). Although Greenleaf does not directly echo this view, his thesis seems to support it. “This is my thesis: caring for persons, the more able and the less able serving each other, is the rock upon which a good society is built” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002, loc 754, para. 1). Therefore, literature seems to posit that servant leadership is service to others for their growth and good.

However, the true test of leadership is the actual growth of those served. Greenleaf (1977/2002) argued that, to create a better and more just society, capacity must be built within institutions (where caring is now largely mediated) to serve and perform as a servant. Leadership follows service in this model. Indeed, as Focht and Ponton (2015) stated, “Servant leadership is the only form of leadership that places service as its first priority” (p. 4). This, they say, distinguishes servant leadership from other leadership constructs.

The motivational element of servant leadership (i.e., to serve first) portrays a fundamental presupposition which distinguishes the concept from other leadership thoughts. This presupposition forms the mental model of the servant leader, that is the “I serve” as opposed to “I lead” mentality. The primary reason why leaders exist is to serve first, not

to lead first. (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002, as cited in Focht & Ponton, 2015, p. 4)

From Greenleaf’s (1977/2002) perspective, the “test” of servant leadership is manifested in the evidence of the growth of others. “The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons?” (p. 351).

The single question of the “best test” view has not prevented the pursuit of further efforts to explore and more precisely define servant leadership. In their 2015 work, Focht and Ponton presented a summary of the exploration of servant leadership and the scholarship that exists around attempts to bring clarity and preciseness to the concept. They suggested that the list is long and varied. They also noted that consensus around characteristics—the overlap notwithstanding—remains elusive. Table 1 provides a visual representation of the characteristics of servant leadership revealed by researchers and scholars. The works in this table are not exhaustive, and indeed, subsequent research on servant leadership underpins and reaffirms its complexity and the myriad attempts to define and explain the construct (Blanchard, 2018). However, the works in Table 1 seem to represent the landscape of thought regarding servant leadership and thus acceptably serve as the basis for our consideration of Virginia Gordon as a servant leader.

### Methodology

The design of this study was qualitative and phenomenological. The purpose was to explore, understand, and describe the ways in which Virginia Gordon, as a servant leader, influenced the lives of other higher education professionals, particularly regarding their personal and professional development. We further sought to understand, through the perspectives and experiences of others, the influence Virginia Gordon had on the field of academic advising. We chose a qualitative research design for reasons outlined by Marshall and Rossman (2016, p. 2):

Qualitative research typically:

- takes place in the natural world,
- draws on multiple methods that respect the humanity of the participants in the study,
- focuses on context,
- is emergent and evolving rather than tightly prefigured, and
- is fundamentally interpretive.

This study is a quest for understanding and meaning derived from the lived experiences of others, which made a qualitative research design appropriate (Creswell, 2009).

Phenomenology was selected from the many different genres of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Creswell (2009) noted: “Phenomenological research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). The goal of phenomenological research is to identify patterns and relationships of meaning from the myriad of experiences of others. The focus of this study was to understand leadership as it was practiced by Virginia Gordon. The participants were individuals in higher education who had a relationship with Dr. Gordon and who shared their perspectives about those relationships with us.

### Participants

Based on the recommendation of Creswell (2012), a purposeful sample of individuals who could offer insight regarding Virginia Gordon’s influence on their lives and the field of academic advising was developed in collaboration with colleagues also involved in writing manuscripts for the dedicated issue of the *NACADA Journal*. One of the colleagues had a continuing personal

and professional relationship with Dr. Gordon and was considered a close family friend; others were professional colleagues or former students. In all, eight academic advising professionals assisted in refining the interview instrument questions employed in this study. The sample selection goal was to identify individuals who could respond to the questions from the vantage point of a colleague, student, friend, or scholar. While the intention was to have individuals in unique categories, in reality, participants indicated that their association with Dr. Gordon spanned multiple categories. In all, twenty individuals were identified and contacted, and two more were added and contacted after the initial list was developed. A third individual was contacted after a review of the responses revealed an area of importance in Dr. Gordon’s career (i.e., the first-year seminar) for which we had not identified a participant. This reflexivity is consistent with a qualitative design.

Ten individuals agreed to participate, sign, and return the consent form. The consent form gave us permission to reveal their identities within the manuscript. Thus, in this narrative, we refer to all respondents by their names. Appendix B acknowledges and thanks those who responded to our questions and includes their self-identified relationship with Dr. Gordon.

### Interview Instrument

To allow time to reflect on the questions being asked, participants were invited to provide written responses to a series of open-ended questions. It was believed that this would result in richer, more descriptive data. The open-ended questions were sent with the invitation to participate and the consent form via e-mail. The questions (see Appendix A) sought to explore each person’s relationship with Dr. Gordon as a friend, colleague, student, or scholar. It was important to capture responses as understood by the participant through each participant’s own experiential lens (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Seidman, 2006). We asked to receive responses within a month. Those not received by that time were re-contacted and reminded via e-mail.

### Data Analysis

Transcripts of the responses masked the identities of the respondents to mitigate researcher bias in the review and coding process. Both researchers separately analyzed respondents’ transcripts, identifying emergent categories and

themes using in vivo coding methods (Saldana, 2013). After the initial coding was complete, the researchers re-reviewed the data and identified the most dominant categories and themes using axial coding (Saldana, 2013). The researchers developed a consensus around a set of categories for further exploration. Additional refinement of the categories/themes occurred as each author put pen to paper. Finally, the categories/themes were reviewed in relationship to the literature on servant leadership to determine the appropriateness of using them to describe Virginia Gordon and to add to the literature.

### Results

This study invited friends, colleagues, scholars, and former students in higher education to share reflections and thoughts about Virginia Gordon's influence on their personal and professional lives as well as their views regarding Gordon's contribution to academic advising. From the responses to the interview questions, a number of categories/themes emerged from the coding. Dr. Gordon was described by her higher education peers and colleagues as an innovative expert and leader and an inspirational role model who was authentic and other-directed in life and work. Let us explore these characteristics of Virginia Gordon as a servant leader through the contributions of the study participants.

#### Innovative Expert and Leader

Virginia Gordon was a leader in the field of academic advising who developed programs to support student success, researched and wrote prolifically about topics of interest to her, and supported the growth of NACADA by working tirelessly on its behalf. Dr. Gordon helped establish the foundation for academic advising as a field and area of scholarly inquiry. Her standards were high, and her goals transcended the present and directed attention toward the future of what academic advising could be or, in her view, what it *should* be.

As one of the longest-serving members of NACADA, Dr. Gordon volunteered many hours to build, legitimize, and improve the organization. Former NACADA president, Dr. Eric White, highlighted this commitment when he said, "Virginia never stopped. She was constantly busy. She was writing, making presentations, running workshops, volunteering for NACADA, all the while working a full-time job at Ohio

State" (personal communication, November 14, 2018). Dr. Diana Kline worked with Dr. Gordon at Ohio State when NACADA was in its infancy and spoke of her commitment to the association and to the field:

I think she has solidified the profession of academic advising. When I was working with her in the 1982–87 range, NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) was in its infancy. She worked tirelessly to write, research, attend conferences, edit journal articles, serve in leadership positions, and network with others throughout the country and overseas; and it never seemed to be a burden for her. She loved what she was doing, and she was "in her element." (personal communication, November 28, 2018)

NACADA colleague and friend, Dr. Thomas Grites, agreed that Dr. Gordon had a "tremendous impact" on academic advising and that her work was cutting edge. As he noted:

She was writing about the career aspect of academic advising before the latter became recognized as a force in facilitating student development . . . She was always seeking new theories, approaches, strategies that could be applied to the advising process, and she continued to advocate for that process as a way to achieve student development. (personal communication, November 27, 2018)

Dr. Gordon's influence on the association and the field seemed to be matched only by the inspiration she provided as a role model and mentor.

#### Inspirational Role Model and Mentor

The concept of *role model* was one that continually emerged in the comments of many of the participants. Role model was used in relation to her influence on other professionals and in relationship to the field of academic advising. Dr. Gordon served as a mentor and role model for many. Former graduate students attributed their association with Dr. Gordon as foundational to their own future careers. As Dr. Kline said, upon reflecting on her graduate school experience, "Now that I look back, I realize that

watching her in these two roles [coordinator of undecided students and faculty member] provided the foundation that I needed to launch my own career as a higher education administrator and instructor” (personal communication, November 28, 2018).

As a working woman, Dr. Gordon served as a role model to women who wanted to pursue families *and* careers. Dr. Kline once asked Dr. Gordon whether or not she had done any volunteer work, to which Gordon replied, “Oh, yeah, I did volunteer work. But I got bored with it.” For Dr. Kline,

I saw myself like Virginia in many ways—I wanted what she had—a husband, children, and a career. So, when she said that to me, that made sense to me. She had already done the traditional role of a female—a volunteer—and she knew she wanted more than that to have a fulfilling life. (personal communication, November 28, 2018)

Perhaps most telling is that Dr. Gordon continued to serve as Dr. Kline’s role model, “I have worked with countless women now over the course of my 30-year career in higher education, and she continues to hold one of the brightest candles” (Diana Kline, personal communication, November 28, 2018). Dr. Kline respected Gordon’s constant “pursuit of excellence and production” and noted that “she did not stop for anyone, and she pushed through with joy and enthusiasm for what she was doing” (Dr. Kline, personal communication, November 28, 2018).

In addition to serving as a role model for other professionals, Virginia Gordon was a role model for academic advising. Dr. White credits Dr. Gordon with putting academic advising “on the path to professionalism.” He further indicated:

She showed us all that issues in advising were capable of being studied and written about. She helped us to understand that advising had a history that should be acknowledged, while she also continued to shape the practice with new concepts of practice. (Eric White, personal communication, November 14, 2018)

For NACADA Executive Director, Charlie Nutt, Virginia Gordon *was* academic advising:

What has Virginia NOT impacted in academic advising? First, she was one of the first women who conducted research in the field that was respected and valued and, in my opinion, began the path toward academic advising . . . as a profession and as a field of study. It is her extraordinary work focused on exploratory students that first brought to light there were theories, approaches, and concepts about academic advising that were not prescriptive. And last, Virginia is one of the primary reasons that NACADA exists as it does today. She envisioned our association as more than a networking group, but a group that should have an impact on research and higher education. (Charlie Nutt, personal communication, December 11, 2018)

More than anything, Dr. Gordon was always the teacher-scholar-practitioner. She enacted these interconnected roles almost simultaneously and, in the process, empowered others to engage in advancing the field of academic advising.

### **Empowering teacher-scholar-practitioner**

Participants used the phrase teacher-scholar and scholar-practitioner repeatedly in their responses. As a scholar-practitioner, Dr. Gordon sought out research and scholarly opportunities to support the advising profession and to advocate for student learning. One participant described Dr. Gordon as a mentor and “an effective and knowledgeable trailblazer” in the field of academic advising whose actions were always “based on the evidence” (Gary Kennedy, personal communication, November 21, 2018). Former NACADA president and friend, Dr. Wes Habley, corroborated these statements by sharing that Dr. Gordon’s “work opened the door on academic advising as a field of inquiry” (personal communication, November 13, 2018). These comments showcased Dr. Gordon as a teacher-scholar who was committed to evidence-based practices and validated her “strict sense of truth” (Gary Kennedy, personal communication, November 21, 2018).

Dr. Gordon influenced the professional careers of participants in this study through empowerment and support. She was known for her willingness to “teach and mentor anyone who cared to learn from her” (Gary Kennedy, personal communication, November 21, 2018). Reflecting on how Dr. Gordon helped her over the years,

friend, colleague, and mentor Betsy McCalla Wriggins said, “Virginia . . . [was] a teacher, a counselor, a colleague who was never too busy to support an aspiring professional and leader” (personal communication, November 28, 2018).

Virginia Gordon consciously and unconsciously sparked interest in others in the profession of academic advising. Dr. Habley described Dr. Gordon’s influence as an “epiphany.” He continued to explain how Dr. Gordon “triggered” his curiosity, crystalized his “understanding of the impact that academic advising could have on the lives of students,” and helped him to understand how academic advising is a core student function (personal communication, November 13, 2018). Dr. Nutt credited Dr. Gordon with helping him realize that his faculty role “was needed in the association because [he] brought something unique to the table and discussion” (personal communication, December 11, 2018).

Virginia Gordon had a knack for empowering others and creating the collaborative space to support their success. Evidence of this came from NACADA past president Betsy McCalla Wriggins in a conversation with Dr. Gordon about writing a chapter in an advising handbook:

“Virginia, I don’t know enough about that topic to write a chapter.” Without hesitation, she said . . . “Yes, you certainly do.” I still wasn’t convinced because I replied, “But Virginia, my writing is not good enough.” She responded with “Then I will help you,” And with that interchange and encouragement, a whole new chapter in my professional development began. Virginia . . . a mentor, a coach, and a friend. (personal communication, November 28, 2018)

By all accounts, Dr. Gordon was an exceptional scholar and teacher who applied her research to her academic advising practice. She was also viewed by others as an authentic individual who was motivated by a deep desire and commitment to support the growth of others.

### **Authentic and Other-Directed in Life and Work**

A recurring theme in the participant responses indicated that Virginia Gordon was authentic. Individuals described her as a down-to-earth, humble person who expressed a deep concern for and interest in others. As friend and former NACADA president Dr. Nancy King recalled,

A characteristic that stands out for me is the fact that Virginia never felt that she was more important than others . . . I will never forget how she listened to a “first-timer” at a NACADA conference. I also observed her many times as she talked to other beginners and to students . . . Again what struck me most was Virginia’s deep concern for others and her willingness to help. (personal communication, November 30, 2018)

Dr. Gordon was also reported to have a playful spirit that sometimes surprised those around her. Three participants shared their “memorable moments” with Virginia Gordon. For Dr. Habley:

The most memorable moment came at a Summer Institute (SI) in the mid-eighties when the SI was held at the University of Iowa. Somehow, Virginia’s luggage never arrived and after a day or two she went shopping (in a college town with the latest in coed fashions). At least for that week, Virginia was the height of youthful fashion. (BTW...she never got her luggage). (personal communication, November 13, 2018)

For Dr. Nutt, there was the yodeling experience at a different summer institute,

We spent an afternoon finding [a ski resort for dinner]—I was driving . . . All of the sudden out of nowhere in the quiet I heard yodeling coming from the back seat—not yodeling done for humor or fun . . . true amazing yodeling with a pitiful pitch and sound . . . and it was Virginia. (personal communication, December 11, 2018)

Friend and colleague Roberta “Bobbie” Flaherty recalled the Viking helmet fashion statement,

We were taking in the shops in Breckenridge before a faculty dinner and found ourselves in a shop that sold a variety of hats that one might see on skiers on the slopes. As I rounded the corner of one aisle into the next, there stood Virginia in a Viking helmet complete with blond braids hanging down to her shoulders! (personal communication, December 2, 2018)

Apparently, there are pictures of “Virginia as Viking” in NACADA’s Executive Office. Each story shared highlighted an appreciation of Dr. Gordon as a humble, authentic, and accepting individual: “Amid all of her celebrity, Virginia remained a down to earth woman . . . She readily accepted each and every participant as a friend and colleague in spite of her celebrity” (Bobbie Flaherty, personal communication, December 2, 2018).

That Dr. Gordon was other-directed seemed almost an understatement to Dr. Grites, who talked about her passion and drive, “She always seemed to be on a mission to improve the academic life of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, administrators, researchers, and ultimately the entire profession/field of academic advising as the best vehicle for this goal” (personal communication, November 27, 2018).

Further evidence of Virginia Gordon’s other-directedness was in the way she envisioned membership in NACADA. As Dr. Nutt said,

Virginia encouraged me in ways no one did to become involved in NACADA . . . She created for me a vision for what I might or could do FOR the Association, not just what I could get from the Association. It is because of her . . . that I continued to focus on what I could bring to the association. (personal communication, December 11, 2018)

Dr. Gordon’s career motivation was to improve the undergraduate student learning experience in college. This study’s purpose was to understand her leadership through the experiences of higher education professionals. In his responses, however, Dr. John Gardner articulated the significant influence Dr. Gordon had on *students* by sharing his own experience as the type of student she was most interested in supporting - the undecided student.

From my professional and personal perspective, she gave intellectual dignity and imprimatur to the huge sub population of “undecided,” “undeclared,” “exploratory” students. Coincidentally, I was such a student during the same period of the 1960’s when she was at Ohio State and I [was] at the diametrically opposite kind of place also in the same state of Ohio: the small, private,

liberal arts college. But it was her work that legitimized students like me, who affirmed our rights and needs to be open and were “exploratory.” Her research, writing, and advocacy was hugely influential in lifting the stigma from students like me. She persuaded many in the academy to stop looking at us as being more “at risk” or less intelligent, less motivated, less focused. She articulated why for many students it was actually a good and adaptive thing to be more open and delay major selection. Her work in this regard was truly transformative. It even helped my self-esteem! Thanks to Virginia students like me we were finally able to achieve a status other than being regarded as “deficient.” (personal communication, January 2, 2019)

Our findings reveal a friend, mentor, colleague, and leader who has been described as an innovative expert that inspired others through her servant leadership, her example, and her authenticity. Virginia Gordon was a visionary who empowered others to engage and contribute to the field. As a leader, Virginia Gordon influenced many individuals who have followed in her footsteps of making a difference in higher education and the field of academic advising through the lens of servant leadership.

## Discussion

We developed Table 1 to share the characteristics of servant leadership from a variety of leadership scholars. This study identifies these characteristics within the context of Gordon’s leadership. Additionally, these data offer a rich description of Gordon’s leadership style, which we conclude is a servant leader style based on the characteristics outlined in Table 1. Through these data provided by the participants, we found several overlapping relationships, (some explicit and others more implicit), that enhance our understanding of servant leadership as accomplished by Virginia Gordon. Some themes, (such as empowering), were identical; others, (such as innovative and role model), while not identical, were similar. Others were more role-related and particular to Gordon and her context and extended beyond that which they described. For example, the construct of teacher-scholar-practitioner was used to describe the roles Dr. Gordon enacted; it was also used to describe her. She was a teacher-scholar-practitioner. In the end, what made Virginia Gordon a

servant leader was the intentions underpinning her work; her work and actions were intended to support the growth of others. Moreover, she pursued this work consciously and deliberately.

In servant leadership, the decision to lead is a conscious one. Dr. Gordon was relentless in her quest to improve the student experience, and she was a pioneer for the field of academic advising. Her accomplishments as a university administrator are well-documented in other chapters in this volume. She used her position as a teacher-practitioner—and her scholarship—to develop initiatives that have become noted effective practices in higher education. In this regard, she established herself as an innovative leader and expert. “She set the stage for others to research, write, speak, and advocate for quality academic advising” (Wes Habley, personal communication, November 13, 2018). “[Virginia] wrote the book . . . Her work has clearly benefited all of us who follow her. From my perspective, I would suggest that she is the preeminent expert in the field of academic advising” (Nancy King, personal communication, November 30, 2018).

### Conclusion

Virginia Gordon dedicated her professional life to student success and academic advising. She was a humble individual who was never too busy to support her colleagues, friends, and students or too self-conscious to reveal the playful side of her personality. Those around her learned from her, and she from them. She was a trusted professional whose vision for her work was “to improve the academic life of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, administrators, researchers and ultimately the entire profession/field of academic advising” (Thomas Grites, personal communication, November 27, 2018).

Her commitment was to the development of others and was reflected in her teaching, scholarship, and practice. Virginia Gordon adroitly connected theory with practice. This skill added relevance to her scholarship for academic advisors and, through initiatives like her advising curriculum, served to ground the practice of academic advising within teaching and learning.

True to servant leadership, Dr. Gordon worked to influence what Greenleaf (1977/2002) referred to as a “more just and more loving” society (para. 1). Through her work, scholarship, teaching, mentorship, and friendship, Dr. Gordon “raised the capacity” (Greenleaf, 1977/2002) for others to

serve and further advance academic advising as a profession and field of inquiry (para. 1).

As this study was, in large part, a tribute to this remarkable woman, we end with a thank you to Virginia Gordon for her contributions to advance the field of academic advising through her scholarship and commitment to the growth of others and to NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. As Dr. John N. Gardner, CEO and president of the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, so aptly said:

Virginia was a great in her time. She achieved that rare status of being a prophet in one’s own land during her time. And now after her literal life, she remains a great in the annals of U.S. undergraduate education. (personal communication, January 2, 2019)

The quote at the beginning of this article presented a question asked by Dr. Gordon in response to a request for a photo: “Why does she want a picture with me?” Our response: “Virginia, the answer to that question is a question in return—Who wouldn’t?”

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#### Authors' Notes

*We express gratitude to Virginia N. Gordon's friends, colleagues, co-authors, students, and mentees who shared their thoughts, experiences, and stories. Their comments about Virginia N. Gordon provided the rich data necessary to frame our manuscript.*

*Elizabeth M. Higgins, EdD, is the director of academic advising at the University of Southern Maine. She also teaches a Foundations of Academic Advising graduate course in the Adult and Higher Education Department. Dr. Higgins' research focus is the faculty and student advising relationship, student retention, and process improvement. Dr. Higgins can be reached at [bhiggins@maine.edu](mailto:bhiggins@maine.edu).*

*Susan M. Campbell, EdD, is Chief Student Affairs Officer, Emerita at the University of Southern Maine. She currently serves as one of the Co-Managers of the Excellence in Academic Advising project, a partnership between NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising and the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. Dr. Campbell has held several leadership roles in NACADA, including serving as president in 2006–2007. Dr. Campbell can be reached at [scamp@maine.edu](mailto:scamp@maine.edu).*

**Appendix A.** Invitation and agreement to participate**E-mail Invitation Sent to Participants**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising is dedicating one of the 2019 *NACADA Journal* issues to honor Virginia Gordon's contributions to academic advising. One of the chapters will examine the impact Virginia had on the lives of her friends, NACADA colleagues, former students, and fellow scholars. As a person who knew and/or worked with Virginia, we are inviting you to be one of a few individuals to be asked to help us with this chapter by responding to a few brief questions that capture elements of your relationship with Virginia. Responses to these questions will help to inform this chapter; appropriate attribution to responses will be made. In addition, we also wish to conduct follow-up interviews with a few colleagues; these would be video-interviews and posted to the NACADA website in a section designated for that purpose.

We hope that you will agree to participate and that you will submit your written responses to us in writing by November 30, 2018. Our goal is to craft a chapter that captures the myriad ways in which Virginia touched the lives of those around her. We think the six questions are fairly straight forward:

1. Introduction to the Interviewee: Your Name, Current Title, and Institutional Affiliation (if applicable), and Contact Information
2. How do you know Virginia (e.g., friend, colleague, teacher, mentor, scholar, etc.)?
3. How has Virginia influenced your personal and/or professional life? (Please describe an example)
4. From your perspective, what impact has Virginia had on academic advising (as a field, as a practice, etc.)?
5. What is your most memorable moment with Virginia and what makes/made it so?
6. Are there other things that you would like to share about Virginia Gordon that you think are important to understanding this remarkable woman?

Thank you in advance for considering this request. As previously noted, our goal is to capture the myriad ways in which Virginia touched the lives of those around her. In anticipation of your willingness to contribute to this work, we are including a consent form with this letter for you to sign and return to us as soon as possible.

Thank you for considering.

Beth Higgins  
Director of Academic Advising  
University of Southern Maine

Susan Campbell  
Chief Student Affairs Officer, Emerita  
University of Southern Maine

**Agreement to Participate**

**Virginia Gordon Dedicated Issue of the *NACADA Journal* and Video-Interviews**

**Dedicated Issue of the *NACADA Journal*: Agreement to Participate**

By signing below, you are agreeing to the following:

1. NACADA has my permission to use statements with attribution from the information I have shared.
2. Timely review of comments and quotes for accuracy prior to submission to the *NACADA Journal*.

---

Print Name

Signature

Date

**Interest in and Agreement to Participate in Video Interviews**

\_\_\_ Yes, I would be willing to participate in a video interview about Virginia Gordon.

By checking “Yes” and signing below, you are agreeing to the following:

1. NACADA has my permission to use statements with attribution from the information I have shared.
2. Timely review of comments and quotes for accuracy prior to submission to the *NACADA Journal*.
3. Review of the video prior to posting for public viewing.
4. Posting of the video to NACADA’s website for public viewing.

---

Print Name

Signature

Date

**Please return the signed form to: bhiggins@maine.edu**

## Appendix B. Participants

We acknowledge and thank the following individuals for their willingness to share their experiences and insight into the personal and professional life of Dr. Virginia Gordon as participants in this work:

*Roberta “Bobbie” Flaherty, M.S.*

Executive Director Emerita, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising  
Kansas State University  
Worked with Dr. Gordon through NACADA, Friend, Colleague

*Thomas Grites, Ph.D.*

Assistant Provost, Stockton University; former NACADA President  
NACADA Colleague, Co-author, Friend

*Gary Kennedy, Ph.D.*

Senior Associate Director, Research  
Office of Enrollment Services – Analysis and Reporting,  
The Ohio State University  
Mentor, Teacher, Scholar, Supervisor

*Nancy King, Ph.D.*

Vice President for Student Success, Kennesaw University, Emerita;  
former NACADA President  
NACADA Colleague, Friend, Mentor, Teacher

*Diana I. Kline, Ph.D.*

Senior Lecturer, Department of Computer Science and Engineering  
College of Engineering,  
The Ohio State University  
Colleague, Mentor

*Charlie Nutt, Ed.D.*

Executive Director, NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising  
Associate Professor, College of Education, Kansas State University  
Friend, Mentor, Scholar

*Eric White, Ph.D.*

Executive Director, Division of Undergraduates Studies, Emeritus; Associate Dean of Advising,  
Emeritus, The Pennsylvania State University;  
former NACADA President  
NACADA Colleague, Friend

*Betsy McCalla Wriggins, M.S.*

Director, Career and Academic Planning Center, Rowan University, Emerita;  
former NACADA President  
Friend, Colleague, Mentor

*Wes Habley, Ph.D.*

Assistant Vice President for Strategic Initiatives at ACT, Inc. (retired);  
former NACADA President  
NACADA Colleague, Friend, Co-author

*John N. Gardner, Ph.D.*

Chair and Chief Executive Officer,  
John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education  
Colleague, Scholar