The Professionalization of Academic Advising: A Structured Literature Review - A Professional Advisor's Response

Eric R. White, Pennsylvania State University, Emeritus

Craig M. McGill's article in Volume 39, Number 1 of the *NACADA Journal* raises many issues about the status of academic advising as a profession. Despite having origins in the early 19th century, academic advising to many is still not a fully realized profession. Dr. McGill, writing on the literature addressing academic advising as a profession, has done what any professional would do: used a recognized forum in the field to present his research, thus allowing the opportunity for others to respond.

Academic advising, like many professions, was a response to a recognized need. In the 1870s, administrators at Johns Hopkins University realized that students should not select electives without required input from faculty members. These administrators believed that advice from knowledgeable persons, in this case faculty members, could help students craft more meaningful and coherent educations for themselves.

As curricula evolved to include general education, electives, minors, and the need to go outside the standard course of study with remediation and internships, for example, the demand for academic advisors grew. When World War II veterans joined the student body, it was clear that these heroes deserved special interventions from academic advisors, especially those veterans struggling with their chosen course of study. Adult students and students whose families had not previously accessed higher education were likewise provided with academic advisors. While the bulk of the work performed by academic advisors might seem to have been delivered on demand and without any substantive theoretical underpinnings, this period of academic advising represents the advent of significant antecedents and foundational influences.

In 1970, I was hired as a psychological counselor at the small regional campus of a state university. At that time, I had no doubt that I was part of the counseling profession. Then, within a few days of starting, I was informed I had the responsibility to advise undecided students. The goal was to help these students declare majors within a specified time period. My sense of what an academic advisor did was limited to my own undergraduate experience. If I had an advisor, I certainly didn't know it, although I did have to stand in a line at the end of my sophomore year to have a faculty member (my advisor?) sign me into my chosen major. I made all the decisions on what courses I would take by reading the course catalog, and I do not recall if anyone at the arena registration where I picked up the IBM punch cards for each course even signed off on my choices.

Now, three years after earning a master's degree, I had to advise students who did not know what they wanted to study. But there was help! I had learned from my colleagues that indecision was considered a psychological state ranging from mere indecision to persistent and debilitating indecisiveness. Interventions to help students move from undecided to decided involved talk therapy and administering career inventories and instruments measuring occupational indecision. The basis for much of this theory and practice came from the field of career and vocational guidance but was now being applied to choice of major.

It became clear to me that academic advising—at least the kind of advising I was expected to do—did not mean telling a student what courses to take. Such an approach (later labeled prescriptive advising) would have been counterproductive and resulted in either active pushback or passivity on the students' parts.

The next few years saw momentous events and included the publication of the Crookston article in 1972 by the *Journal of College Student Personnel*. This article proved to be a watershed moment when academic advisors recognized that what they wanted to embrace was something more than the limited vision of advising that Crookston labeled "prescriptive advising." Suggesting that prescriptive advising ever really existed as the primary advising approach isn't quite in sync with the history of academic advising. Certainly, the job of Johns Hopkins advisors was to help students select meaningful electives.

As the curricula continued to evolve, using a prescriptive approach to advise became an even less viable option. Certainly, my work with undecided students was not prescriptive. Each student took a different set of courses each semester to meet their own educational and career

goals; advice was given if their choices were off the mark, e.g., not scheduling necessary prerequisites. The reality is that most students do not experience the curriculum like any other student, even when enrolled in the most regimented of curricula. The unique experience of each student can include failing a course, dropping a course, repeating a course, and getting out of sequence. The selection of electives and general education courses also calls for a different type of advising that engages students in an introspective examination of their choices.

At this time, the unit I worked for was moved from student affairs to academic affairs. My move to an academic affairs division acknowledged the *academic* in academic advising. This welcomed change expanded practitioner exploration of theories of learning and student development. Perhaps precipitated by the move to academic affairs, students reinforced the transition as they expressed the notion that their indecision was not an undesirable psychological state but rather normal development for any 18-year-old entering college. They did not want the "service" of a psychological counselor but rather the input of a knowledgeable academic advisor.

In 1977, the first national academic advising conference was held in Burlington, Vermont, and it proved so popular that potential registrants had to be turned away. A few years later, NACADA was established, recognizing that academic advisors across the country wanted to affiliate with each other to discuss issues of mutual concern.

It is only natural that the professionalization of the field of academic advising should eventually become a topic of discussion and begin with an examination of the literature on professionalization. Much of this discussion has been driven by what sociologists theorize as the components of a profession. Currently, it appears that while the criteria for academic advising as a profession does not completely meet the sociological standards, many academic advisors do not hesitate to call academic advising a profession.

Scholarship and Definition

An examination of the standards for the professionalization of academic advising is necessary to understand why academic advisors call their chosen field a profession. It has been posited that before there can be scholarship there needs to be a single, universally understood definition of academic advising. The fact that NACADA proffers a "Concept of Advising," rather than a one-sentence definition, provides an argument for the absence of this critical component of a profession. As someone who participated in the development of the "Concept of Advising," I should note that this option was chosen not because a one-sentence definition was not possible, but because a document such as the concept statement was more detailed and nuanced and would give those who want to know about advising a more substitutive foundation than any terse dictionary definition.

Despite this lack of definition, scholarship in academic advising has persisted, continues to be promoted, and has produced a body of knowledge which has allowed the field to move beyond the developmental advising paradigm promulgated by Crookston, ultimately leading to the *advising is advising* paradigm. This scholarship has also brought academic advising out from the shadows of counseling, tutoring, coaching, and teaching metaphors.

Advising Effectiveness

Measuring effectiveness is a vexing endeavor for any field that focuses on individual interactional relationships. Outcomes must be designated, instruments must be designed, and data collected responsive to the complexities of those individual relationships. Depending upon the clientele, the goals for advising may vary, including: successful change of major and continued persistence in a new field of study; retention of students in the institution or a major until graduation; increased knowledge of the university's rules, regulations, and curriculum; the ability to make informed decisions; success with job placement; etc. Research is being done in this arena that is more sophisticated than relying only on student satisfaction with advisors or the advising program.

Effectiveness, and its measurement, is the ultimate test for any field. Doing such research using control group models poses all sorts of ethical challenges. Academic advising receives little guidance from other helping professions, which continue their own struggle to demonstrate their worth, including such long standing fields as clinical psychology, psychiatry, and social work.

The effectiveness of academic advising is measured in terms of intended outcomes. In a serendipitous turn of events, as higher education in the United States takes a closer look at its retention rates, often quality academic advising is cited as one of the major variables that could increase graduation rates. The prima facie evidence to move

in this direction seems obvious—the assumption being that the more interaction academic advisors have with students, the more likely students are to remain in the institution. Now that some of these advising/retention programs have been up and running, data are starting to indicate that in some cases, although not all, academic advising has had a positive effect on retention rates. Doing away with academic advising (i.e., leaving all students to their own devices) is not a risk that universities and colleges are willing to take—even by the skeptical or those who look to cut budgets.

Graduate Programs

A hallmark of any profession is that education (including supervised practica) is the means by which individuals gain the fundamental knowledge to practice in a chosen field. In terms of formal master's and doctoral programs in academic advising, the numbers are sparse. But does this mean that having more master's and doctoral programs available will bring the field closer to professionalization? Is there a number that must be met?

It is certainly reasonable to regard graduate programs as a requisite for professionalization, and as more programs are created there will emerge more theoretical and curricular differences. No doubt an academic advising program offered through a counseling or student affairs perspective might look different than one offered by a department of higher education. Such diversity is beneficial and certainly a move in the right direction. More foundational courses in academic advising are being offered, and more certificate programs are being contemplated which can easily lead to more master's and doctoral programs.

The question remains for now: does the relatively small number of formal degree programs in academic advising serve as a disqualifier for the field's designation of profession? As is often the case, the answer is: "depends upon whom you ask." Following the sociological approach to checking off criterion boxes, academic advising is not yet a profession. To many academic advisors and HR classifiers, however, academic advising is already a profession at colleges and universities.

What appears to be missing from the professionalization discussion and what the sociologists do not provide a box for is the question: what is the impact on a student and the institution should an advisor engage in "malpractice?" The outcomes of advisor "malpractice" can be quite serious: students' graduations might be delayed, causing significant extra costs; job offers might have to be declined until the students graduate; students can be mislead about educational opportunities, and certain desired majors may no longer be available to students. When discussing the critical aspects of professionalization, this question seems to be missing though it may be one of the most important boxes to be checked off.

The Role of a NACADA

NACADA, to a certain extent, is the only "game in town." This is not literally true, as other professional organizations provide development opportunities for academic advisors and encourage advisors to join their associations, but the founders of NACADA either had the good luck or foresight to be there at the right time. Just when academic advisors across the country were looking for others doing similar work, there developed a desire to form an organization that exclusively addressed the field of academic advising. Established in 1979, NACADA has been growing ever since.

There is little doubt that NACADA is intimately linked with the practice of academic advising. Despite this, there is nothing that precludes any other organization from addressing the needs of academic advisors or advancing the field of academic advising.

NACADA's relationship with Kansas State University is equally unique. How much of an obstacle this poses to the professionalization of academic advising is speculation at best. There is little doubt that the master's and doctoral programs in academic advising would not have come into existence without NACADA's affiliation with Kansas State. Likewise, the research initiatives in academic advising might not have developed without the support that emanates from the NACADA/Kansas State relationship. Both initiatives have moved the field of academic advising forward. It is not clear that their existence and Kansas State's position as the "first on the scene" has been or is a deterrent for research initiatives or graduate programs in academic advising at other universities. When Kansas State was the only institution offering a degree in academic advising, it could be construed that NACADA's mention of this degree in its materials constituted an endorsement. At the same time, part of NACADA's role is to make its members aware of resources that might be of benefit to them and a mention (not an endorsement) of Kansas State's degree programs would constitute no more than the dissemination of useful information.

The offering of degrees as a criterion for professionalization raises the question of whether a degree in academic advising is necessary at all. Certainly, a degree demonstrates that there is a body of knowledge deemed appropriate for the education of academic advisors. We do know that academic advisors with many differing educational backgrounds have been able to perform their work successfully. But as the field continues to evolve and more research is conducted by scholars and practitioners, we may come to better understand the uniqueness of the advisor-student relationship and that this interaction is different from the types of interactions students have with other university personnel. Academic advisors bring to bear in their work knowledge and skills acquired from several educational and work experiences. It is now the job of the academic advising community to consolidate these experiences into a curriculum to prepare academic advisors. Yet the question remains: because this consolidation has not been fully realized, does that preclude academic advising from being considered a profession? It may not yet be a box checked, but it may not mean disqualification either.

Professional Autonomy

Academic advising functions in all types of higher education institutions from community colleges to doctoral granting universities. In addition, academic advisors work with students in every major, each field having its own goals for students over and above the institutional mission. Advisors also work with all types of students: honors, unprepared, first-generation, athletes, and all sorts of combinations. Unless an academic advisor is working freelance (i.e., outside of the institutional structure), any employee is subject to the regulations established by the institution and is expected to work within the parameters of the institution's mission and goals. Such constraints do not preclude advisors from doing the work that has been assigned to them. The same can be said for faculty members, employees of counseling centers, and all student affairs personnel who, while performing their assigned professional responsibilities, still must abide by the institution's rules and regulations.

Ironically, there appears to be little discussion of certification and licensing as criteria for professionalization. NACADA has not taken on this responsibility, and it appears that no institutions that hire academic advisors have asked for such credentials. Perhaps this is because university administrators are happy with the work of their academic advisors.

Administrative Home

Differences in how academic advisors approach their work may, in part, reflect where academic advising is organizationally located; some programs are housed within academic affairs and some in areas such as student affairs. Organizational reporting should not interfere with the professional behavior of advisors. Even within academic disciplines, there is placement in various colleges within universities. Psychology, for example, might be in a science-oriented college but could at other institutions be a part of a social science cluster. Landscape architecture might find itself in an arts college or an agricultural college. Hearing and speech pathology might be in an education college or a human services college. As these programs move around, certainly their professional status is not jeopardized.

Obstacles Versus Alternatives

This essay is not meant to be a critique of Dr. McGill's article. It is a commentary on the pathways to professionalism identified in his research. Using a familiar metaphor, the goal of professionalism might be likened to grabbing the golden ring at a circus carousel. When professionalism is bestowed upon the field of academic advising, when all the boxes have been ticked off, will the conclusion be as satisfying as we hope for? My sense is that reaching the golden ring does not grant academic advising the respect it would like, nor does it enable the field to claim its critical role in academe.

Rather than striving for this elusive prize, the academic advising community needs to think of itself within the parameters of how faculty roles are defined. Typically, faculty members have three responsibilities: to teach, to conduct and publish research, and to engage in community service. An academic advisor can achieve all of this in academia. Certainly, academic advising duties can substitute easily for teaching (remember that the metaphor *advising is teaching* still resonates). Academic advisors, in fact, perform classroom teaching when they are assigned responsibilities for courses such as first-year seminars. Research and publishing are now an imperative for the field, and the opportunities continue to abound. Lastly, academic advisors should be engaging in community service by sitting on university-wide committees and committees within their own units.

If academic advisors were to see their roles in this light and take on these responsibilities, the benefits to them within the institution would easily accrue and ultimately spread to the entire field. Perhaps by then the debate of when academic advising is deemed sufficiently mature to be called a profession will be rendered moot.

Author's Notes

Eric R. White earned his B.A. in history from Rutgers University and his master's and doctorate in counseling psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. He served as the executive director of the Division of Undergraduate Studies and Associate Dean for Advising at The Pennsylvania State University. He retired in 2012 with emeritus status. White was the president of NACADA in 2004-2005, president of the Deans and Directors of University Colleges and Undergraduate Studies in 1993, and an affiliate assistant professor of Education at Penn State. He was the 2002 recipient of NACADA's Virginia N. Gordon Award for Excellence in the Field of Advising and Penn State's Administrative Excellence Award in 2005.

White can be reached at erw2@psu.edu.