

# Leaders' Perceptions of the Professionalization of Academic Advising: A Phenomenography

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*Through the professionalization process, an occupation transforms into a profession. Although much scholarship has situated academic advising as a professional endeavor, in the past few years, the authors of two papers posited that advising is not a profession, a contention not shared by all within the advising community. Despite much scholarly deliberation, advising and the role of it in higher education remains misunderstood by administrators, faculty members, staff, students, and some advisors themselves. Therefore, discussions of professionalizing the field remain both inevitable and imperative. To advance the dialogue, a phenomenography was used to explore the variety of perspectives that NACADA leaders shared about the professionalization of academic advising. Five attitudinal categories emerged: assumptive, presumptive, emerging profession, inferiority complex, and the need for further definition.*

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Professionalization, “the process by which a nonprofessional occupation is transformed into a vocation with the attributes of a profession” (Shaffer, Zalewski, & Leveille, 2010, p. 68), concerns many occupations in contemporary American society (Pavalko, 1988). Although fields such as medicine, theology, and law have long been associated with the status of a profession, some emerging fields failed to gain a societal seal of approval during the 20th and 21st centuries despite the related sought-after respect and influence it imbues (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998). People working in areas not yet deemed a profession face high stakes because “professionals wield great power in determining what goes on in our society” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 218). Professionalizing occupations improves the reputation and public understanding of the work undertaken in the field (Cervero, 1992). Those in occupations who seek to professionalize might experience professional marginality, a sense of inferiority as they

encounter “contradictions and inconsistencies in the extent to which [occupations] exhibit the characteristics of a profession” (Pavalko, 1988, p. 42).

Academic advisors are currently striving to attain professional status of their field (Aiken-Wisniewski, Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015; Johnson, Larson, & Barkemeyer, 2015; Shaffer et al., 2010). Although the practice of academic advising in American higher education has existed in some form since the Colonial Era, an organized movement to shape the field has only recently taken root (Shaffer et al., 2010). Seminal articles (Crookston, 1972/1994; O’Banion, 1972/1994) situated the emerging profession by laying some theoretical and philosophical groundwork through explanations of the meaning of “to advise.” Additional attention on academic advising as practice distinct from student affairs work led to the formation of the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) in 1979 (NACADA, 2004). The association published the first issue of the biannual refereed (ERIC-indexed) *NACADA Journal* in 1981. In 2003, Kansas State University developed an online graduate certificate and in 2008 offered a master’s degree program.

Although many scholars have described academic advising as a professional endeavor (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Habley, 2009; Kuhn & Padak, 2008; McGill, 2013; McGill & Nutt, 2016; Schulenberg & Lindhorst, 2008), in the past few years, the authors of two papers have posited that academic advising does not fit all the characteristics of a profession (Johnson et al., 2015; Shaffer et al., 2010). In analyzing academic advising through the lens of four stages of professionalization from Wilensky (1964)—creating occupations, establishing schools, forming associations, and ratifying codes—Shaffer et al. (2010) concluded that the chartering of NACADA (Stage 3) predated the establishment of the requisite schools and body of scholarly knowledge (Stage 2). Without a standard knowledge base to define the academic discipline, academic advisors face obstacles to the professionalization of their field. Other scholars have made similar conclusions about the knowledge base: The literature of academic advising does not

sufficiently meet the substantial, unique, or far-reaching quality of that associated with a discipline, and more graduate programs must be developed to produce the researchers necessary to create such a knowledge base (Kuhn & Padak, 2008). A content analysis of the *NACADA Journal*, The Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources, abstracts from conference presentations, and other journals, articles, and dissertations (using ERIC searches for *academic advising*) revealed that the field had not made substantial progress, since the early 1980s, in laying claim to a sufficient knowledge base (Habley, 2009). Without research substantiating the effectiveness of advising,

The case for the importance of academic advising can be neither built nor sustained. . . . Without the implementation of a plan to substantiate the claim that it makes a difference in the lives of students and thereby enhances institutional effectiveness, advising will most certainly remain a peripheral and clerical activity on many campuses. (Habley, 2009, p. 82)

Thus, Habley (2009) proposed focusing on the development of core graduate curricula distinct from higher education and student affairs so that future scholars are trained in a variety of research methods.

The suggestion that academic advising does not qualify as a profession does not usually sit well with those in the advising community. According to lead author Leigh Shaffer (personal communication, October 8, 2014), the article “The Professionalization of Academic Advising: Where Are We in 2010?” prompted an uproarious response, while others in the community took umbrage with the continued exploration of this topic (Shaffer et al., 2010). A recent conference reviewer for the project addressed herein stated: “[Advising as a profession] is a discussion that continues to be researched with no clear findings and changes in the outcomes. Our job as advisors would not change because of a decision on whether or not we are considered a profession” (Anonymous Blind Reviewer, personal communication, April 4, 2017). However, with many scholars continuing to pursue a consensus about the professionalization of the field, the topic begs for further investigation. In addition, although many conceptual articles on various aspects of the professionalization of the field have been published, only one research team has undertaken the few empirical studies published

on the professionalization of academic advising (Aiken-Wisniewski et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2015).

Despite much scholarly deliberation and sometimes contentious discourse, academic advising and the role of it in higher education remain misunderstood by university stakeholders, including faculty members and staff, students, and advisors. Therefore, discussions of professionalizing the field are both inevitable and imperative. Leaders in the field of advising can offer critical perspectives to studies of the phenomenon of professionalization. With a combined 328 years of NACADA membership, 402 years of advising experience, and 469 years of higher education experience, the leaders participating in this study have seen the field evolve over four decades. They have worked on a variety of college campuses in many different roles; hence, they have unique viewpoints on the development of the field. Many of them have offered these perspectives through scholarly contributions and presentations and through their efforts in building NACADA. They have served as leaders on their campuses for recognizing and further transforming academic advising from a transactional activity of course selection to one that changes the lives of students. Despite these long-standing and directed efforts, perceptions of academic advising as a transactional activity persist. Furthermore, the contested issue of professionalization in academic advising, from the vantage point of the leaders in the field, remains largely unexplored.

Therefore, phenomenography (Marton, 1981) was used to explore the variety of perspectives of NACADA leaders about the professionalization of academic advising. This study was guided by the research question: “In what variety of ways do NACADA leaders view the professionalization of academic advising?” The paper presents the study in five sections: professions and professionalization, method, findings, discussion, and limitations and future research.

### Professions and Professionalization

The study of vocations, occupations, and professions has transpired for over a century. Early in the 20th century, Flexner (1915/2001) questioned if social work had met the criteria to be considered a profession and outlined the ways in which several occupations could (or could not be) considered professions. Since the 1960s, the sociological literature has moved beyond discussions on the features that constitute a profession to

matters of the way occupations become professions and the process by which fields are professionalized. Although an extensive review of this literature extends beyond the scope of this paper, reviewing a few models helps to situate professionalization as a process.

Focusing on the *process* of professionalizing and considering strengths and weaknesses of occupation groups, in terms of professional characteristics, can improve the work life of practitioners, and by extension, the clients they serve. Despite a century of studying these processes, little consensus has been reached regarding the sociological features of the professionalization process (Shaffer et al., 2010). Although many models of professionalization have been put forth (Abbott, 1988; Goode, 1957; Moore, 1970; Pavalko, 1988; Wilensky, 1964), this study was informed by the models of Pavalko (1988) and Houle (1980), which were both developed after several years of study on a variety of occupations and teasing out the consistent features that characterize professions. Both authors emphasized the dimensions or characteristics of professions and argued that occupations do not exist in a binary arrangement of either *profession* or *nonprofession*. Hence, a focus on the process provides a framework for working groups to consider their assets in these areas and consider those they might seek to develop or professionalize.

Pavalko developed a model from the study of occupations between the 1930s and the 1970s by exploring the social phenomenon of work and noting the various roles work plays in life—as a link to the social structure and as a source of identity—to address the ability of an occupation to influence the power structure in society through social stratification. Pavalko (1988) was concerned with “understanding the sources of occupational differentiation, the motivations and strategies used by occupational groups in the quest for power and prestige in the workplace, and the consequences of achievement or failing to achieve collective power and prestige” (pp. 11–12). From the study of the sociological literature of professions, Pavalko developed eight dimensions of ideal professions: (a) theory and intellectual technique, (b) relevance to social values, (c) training period, (d) motivation, (e) autonomy, (f) commitment, (g) sense of community, and (h) codes of ethics. In the model, each of these dimensions is placed on a nonprofessional–professional continuum (Table 1). Thus, the consideration for an occupational group was

based on the degree to which an occupation exhibits qualities of a profession in each of these dimensions, rather than merely on a checklist of whether it meets the criteria or not.

The second model informing this study was described by Houle (1980). Though 20 years of research on 17 different professions, Houle distilled 14 characteristics that make up a profession. Table 2 shows these characteristics within each of the three larger categories: conceptual, performance, and collective identity.

The conceptual characteristic is primarily concerned with a professional group “clarifying its defining function(s)” (Houle, 1980, p. 35). A defining function is deemed essential for a profession to guide those working in the field. Those in a profession follow a clear mission and purpose so that nonprofessionals understand the responsibilities that professions undertake. Practitioners in long-standing professions may not think too deeply about the mission and function of their work, but this can lead to misguided, subpar, or even unethical practice (Houle, 1980). The performance characteristics—mastery of theoretical knowledge, capacity to solve problems, use of practical knowledge, self-enhancement—are interconnected so closely that they “often overlap in both theory and practice” (Houle, 1980, p. 40). Members of a profession are expected to apply practical and theoretical knowledge to solve the problems of the discipline creatively.

The last set of characteristics focus on establishing a collective identity that builds upon the “systems and structures that foster and maintain conceptual and competency characteristics” (Houle, 1980, p. 49). A collective identity of the profession is shaped by the ways it is viewed by those outside of the field. In some ways, public acceptance is at the heart of a working group’s desire to professionalize because as a collectively applied symbol (Becker, 1956), such recognition signals that the work of the profession is deemed valued to society. Houle (1980) acknowledged that public understanding—let alone acceptance—is very difficult for occupations to ever achieve.

In contrast to the early work of Flexner (1915/2001), who classified types of work as either occupations or professions, the models described herein emphasize, “the extent to which the criteria [for professionalization] are met” as a means of evaluating the field as a profession (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 219). Instead of focusing on whether or not an occupation is a profession, the framework is used for assessing the position of the

**Table 1.** Eight dimensions of the profession–nonprofession continuum of Pavalko

Dimensions	Ends of Continuum	
	Nonprofessional	Profession
1. Theory, intellectual technique	Absent	Present
2. Relevance to social values	Nonrelevant	Relevant
3. Training period		
Length	Short	Length
Knowledge	Nonspecialized	Specialized
Guiding ideas	Involves things	Involves symbols
Acculturation	Subculture unimportant	Subculture important
4. Motivation	Self-interest	Service
5. Autonomy	Absent	Present
6. Commitment	Short term	Long term
7. Sense of community	Weak	Strong
8. Codes of ethics	Undeveloped	Developed

Note. From Pavalko (1998), p. 29.

field in the process of professionalization and the extent to which the occupation can be advanced. This process proves critical to the status of academic advising because “an awareness of how professions are defined and how society views them can give us an understanding of what it means to professionalize” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 220). By considering various elements of professionalization, advisors in the field can determine the characteristics they possess and those they need to improve their professional status (Hughes, 1963).

### Method

#### Phenomenography

Phenomenography was developed in the 1970s by Swedish educational researchers (Marton, Dahlgren, Svensson, & Säljö, 1977; Säljö, 1979) to understand better the variety of perspec-

tives in student learning. It serves as a useful approach to understand “the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualize, perceive, and understand various aspects of, and various phenomena in, the world around them” (Marton, 1986, p. 31). Although often confused with the better-known approach of phenomenology—and indeed, both have at the core the understanding of a *phenomenon*—the approaches differ greatly. Whereas researchers use phenomenological studies to seek understanding of the *essence* of a phenomenon, they use phenomenography to address the relationship between the phenomenon and the various ways it is experienced or understood (Marton, 1981); therefore, knowledge is “understood in terms of the various meanings associated with the phenomena of interest, and the similarities and differences in those meanings” (Yates, Partridge,

**Table 2.** Houle model of professionalism

Conceptual	Characteristics	
	Performance	Collective Identity
Clarifying defining functions	Mastery of theoretical knowledge Capacity to solve problems Use of practical knowledge Self-enhancement	Formal training Credentialing Creation of a subculture Legal reinforcement Public acceptance Ethical practice Penalties Relations to other vocations Relations to users of service

Note. Based on Houle (1980), pp. 34–75.

& Bruce, 2012, p. 98). At the philosophical core of phenomenography, any phenomenon can be understood in a finite number of ways, usually between two and six (Uljens, 1996). Therefore, interviewing a few people in depth saturates the number of qualitatively different ways in which any given phenomenon is experienced; typically, fewer than 20 interviews prove sufficient (Tight, 2016).

Through phenomenography, the researcher can “make sense of how people handle problems, situations, the world” through understanding the ways participants “experience the problems, the situations, the world that they are handling or in relation to which they are acting” (Marton & Booth, 1997, p. 111). For instance, Larsson, Holmström, and Rosenqvist (2003) found four categories—in this case, metaphors—anesthesiologists used to describe the way they understood their work: as *professional artists* (seeing patients as projects); as *Good Samaritans* (guiding patients through operations); as *servants* (serving patients as their professional duty); and as *coordinators* (leading the team of surgeons to operate on the patients).

In an important methodological feature of phenomenography that differs from other qualitative processes, phenomenographers make use of quantitative aspects of the qualitative data (Burke, 2014). The quantitative measures help not only to “describe a number of different conceptions [but] also to identify the distribution, over the categories, of the group participants in the study” (Marton, 1981, p. 195). The addition of quantitative measures can reveal the pervasiveness of some aspect(s) of a phenomenon; in this study, the number of respondents who used the word *profession*, the number of times that they used it, and the context in which they used it were captured in the findings. Because of the contested issue of professionalization in academic advising and realizing that leaders can express drastically different feelings on the topic, phenomenography was a suitable method to explore these differing points of view.

### Sample

Seventeen NACADA leaders (7 men and 10 women) were interviewed. The leaders have served in a variety of advising positions and roles in the association; therefore, they offered information-rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Patton, 2002). All of them work in the field and have graduate degrees (many with doctor-

ates). Because leaders with particular knowledge were sought, qualified participants for this study had been involved in one of the following NACADA leadership roles: commission chair (now, *community chairs*), subject-matter expert published on the professionalization of academic advising, or position in a high office (e.g., presidents, board members, etc.). See Table 3.

First, NACADA offers 42 advising communities (AC) (formerly *advising commissions*) organized around topics of advising administration, advising specific populations, differing institutional types, and the theory, practice, and delivery of academic advising. Each AC has established a chair (2-year appointment) who guides members in achieving the goals of the AC. One community—Theory, Philosophy, & History of Advising Community—is dedicated to examining “the theoretical, philosophical and historical foundations of academic advising, in addition to supporting theory building initiatives and their applications” (NACADA, 2013, para. 1); leaders ( $n = 5$ ) from this group were targeted for this study because of their interest and intentional thinking about advising as a professional activity.

Second, because of their important scholarly contributions and knowledge of the professionalization of academic advising, 9 subject-matter experts were interviewed to discuss ideas from their published work. This group of participants included authors of book chapters and articles in the field and editors of the *NACADA Journal*. These individuals have thought about the obstacles the field faces and considered potential ways to advance advising toward professionalization.

The third group—NACADA leaders who have held high offices—were selected because of their wide perspective on issues of professionalization gained from years in leadership and service in advising. This category included members who served a term on the board of directors, a president or vice president, or as members of the NACADA executive office. Ten participants came from this group.

Although limited to experts in the field who have gained a meaningful number of years in advising and higher education, the sample showed more diversity than it might appear at a glance. These experts have worked in a range of roles (e.g., faculty advisor, primary-role advisor, advising administrator, high-level university administrator) in a variety of institutions (e.g., large 4-year state universities and community colleges) from across North America.



**Table 3.** Participant profile: position, years in NACADA, years in higher education, highest degree earned, years advising, past advising roles, and status as community chair, subject-matter expert, or NACADA office holder

No.	Current Position	NACADA (Years)	Higher Ed (Years)	Degree	Advising (Years)	Past Roles	CC	SME	Office
1	PA	12	15	PhD	15	FA; PA; AA	X	X	
2	UA	15	18	PhD	14	PA	X	X	X
3	AA	13	17	MA, MEd	15	PA; AA	X	X	
4	UA, FA	25	45	PhD	15	FA		X	
5	AA	23	40	PhD	40	PA; AA	X	X	
6	FA	15	19	PhD	19	FA; PA; AA	X	X	
7	AA	25	31	EdD	31	FA; AA		X	X
8	FA	11	36	PhD	30	FA		X	
9	AA	17	22	PhD	18	PA; AA			X
10	FA	12	17	PhD	15	PA; FA			X
11	UA	21	24	PhD	24	FA; AA		X	
12	AA	18	18	MS	18	AA			X
13	UA	22	26	PhD	26	PA; AA			X
14	AA	21	32	MS	23	PA; AA			X
15	AA	27	27	EdD	27	PA; FA; AA			X
16	AA	32	40	PhD	30	AA			X
17	UA	19	42	PhD	42	FA; AA			X
						Total	5	9	10

*Note.* AA = academic administrator; CC = NACADA community chair; FA = faculty advisor; Office = NACADA high office; PA = primary-role advisor; SME = subject matter expert; UA = university administrator

### Data Collection

The face-to-face or phone interviews, conducted from Fall 2013 through Fall 2015, ranged from 74 to 147 minutes and were recorded on two devices. An interview protocol was designed based on Knox and Fleming's (2010) analysis of the field of adult education (*vis-à-vis* Houle, 1980), examining the essence and distinctive nature of the field, the various roles performed by practitioners, the career stages of advisors, the role of scholarly literature and graduate curricula, the perceptions of advising that the respondents ascertained from stakeholders outside the field, and future directions. The protocol was designed in consultation with my doctoral peer group and reviewed and approved by my dissertation chair. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the flow of the conversation to dictate the order in which the questions were asked. The data were transcribed and sent to the participants to verify accuracy.

### Data Analysis

The data analysis consisted of three steps: reducing the data, finding relevant passages, and

constructing categories (Marton, 1994). Reducing the data involves identifying "what is immediately relevant . . . expressing a way of experiencing the phenomena in question, and that which is not" (Marton, 1994, p. 4428). All 17 transcripts were re-read in full to uncover evidence of participants' attitudes about the professionalization of academic advising. Because participants were not explicitly asked to share their feelings about professionalization, the search focused on latent content analysis, which reflects the underlying meaning of their words (per Boyatzis, 1998). Special attention was placed on the participants' use of the word *profession* and the implications of the usage about their attitudes toward the term. All interview transcripts contained evidence of attitudes regarding the professionalization of academic advising. Hence, relevant passages were selected and a description of all 17 participants was documented.

The second step involved comparing each perspective with all of the others until categories emerged. During this step, I aimed at gaining "as deep an understanding as possible of what has

**Figure 1.** Responses using *profession* by participant number and attitude category

Attitude	Participant Number																	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	Total
Assumptive												X				X		2
Presumptive		X	X		X	X			X	X			X	X			X	9
Emerging Profession								X		X				X			X	4
Inferiority complex							X						X		X			3
Need further definition	X			X		X		X			X				X	X		7

been said, or rather, what has been *meant*” (Marton, 1994, p. 4428). This compartmentalization results in “pools of meanings” (Marton, 1981, p. 83) in groupings of similar experiences with the phenomenon. In the third phase, the categories were fully articulated and representative passages were selected to provide nuance and detail. The categories expressed by each participant were tallied in the *outcome space* (per Marton, 2000, p. 105).

**Findings**

Five attitudinal categories regarding the professionalization of academic advising emerged: assumptive, presumptive, emerging profession, inferiority complex, and the need for further definition. Some participants expressed views of the two categories. Figure 1 shows a matrix of the participants’ attitudes by category.

**Assumptive**

Two participants responded to the question “what is a profession?” with consternation because they had assumed advising had already been established as a profession. Participant 16 explained:

This question was the hardest for me to conceptualize, because when I thought about academic advising, I’ve always thought of it as a profession. But I’m wondering if that isn’t colored in a way by the distinction that we certainly made on our campus, and most advising people make on their campus, is that adjective “professional,” you talk about “professional advising,” and if you do that it’s to distinguish our role from that of faculty advising. So in a sense, we defined

ourselves as a profession, but in contrast to a role that other folks on our campus have.

This response indicates that words such as *profession* and *professional* are used in various colloquial and academic ways that can create confusion at times. The colloquial use of the word perhaps prevails in people’s perception of academic advising. Participant 12 indicated disappointment, after reading the article by Shaffer et al. (2010), on learning that advising was not necessarily viewed as a profession by everyone. In 2011, this participant led a panel and began to think differently about the topic:

When we did that panel, I was like “of course we are a profession. Of course we need that in order to be respected.” I don’t really buy into that anymore. When you look at this, there are lots of occupations out there that are not professions according to that definition. Right? But they are still respected professional people. My misperception, that we were a profession, doesn’t mean that I am not a *professional*. It’s just the syntax and the context of how you use that [term]. I don’t think that we should give up on it, but I don’t think we should drive ourselves crazy. I don’t want us to limit what we can do as professionals because we are trying to get to that.

Both Participants 12 and 16 suggested that the failure of academic advising to meet the tenets of a given model of professionalization did not necessarily reflect on the professionalism of the advisors. Upon learning that academic advising was not unequivocally deemed a profession, both respondents indicated that they saw the value in

working toward professionalization. By the end of the interview, Participant 12 acknowledged that the process is complicated: “It’s a complex field, and that is why it is hard for us to professionalize it.”

### Presumptive

The second attitudinal category was based on participants ( $n = 9$ ) asserting that advising had been established as a profession. These participants seemed unfazed by a professionalization process, and throughout their interviews used the term *profession* to describe advising. Table 4 lists the number of times each participant referred to advising as a profession and presents examples of those statements.

Whereas others presumed advising was a profession and offered little explanation for this belief, Participant 5 articulated the reasoning for believing advising has been established as a profession:

What does it take to become a profession? I don’t know what sort of a hard and fast rule there is for that, but it seems to be we are evolving into one if we are not there already. It started out as a field of practitioners. We are getting to be a field that is worthy of scholarly inquiry. We’ve got two juried journals. A couple of graduate programs— inadequate, as we might find those to be. We *are* a profession. We are analogous to other professions.

Although the beginning of the response indicates the profession is still emerging, by the end, the participant seems certain that advising has been established as a profession. It is unclear if participants are intentionally positing advising as a profession or if they are using the term (unintentionally) in the colloquial sense.

### Emerging Profession

In the third category, participants ( $n = 4$ ) described advising as an *emerging* profession. Several short statements conveyed this: Advising is “evolving into a profession” (Participant 17), but “still a young profession” (Participant 10), and “in our infancy” (Participant 1). Participants used active language to describe the work people in the field are doing to “become a stronger profession” (Participant 10) and emphasized the role of NACADA in “building a profession”

(Participant 17). Participant 14 noted that much of this work has been done in the immediate past decade:

The progress for the professionalization has picked up immensely in the last 5, 7, to 10 years, and part of that is because the work that NACADA is doing, but part of it is we’ve got so many more people out there that are singing the same song, that it’s helping standardize what the profession should be, and I am very excited about that.

Participant 8 brought some ideas in the literature to bear in the discussion by outwardly wondering if there was “such a thing” as an emerging profession: “What’s that look like? What’s that process?” If a profession emerges, then “where can you say that something has crossed from being emerging to being a full-fledged profession?” This respondent’s commentary gave credence to thinking about professionalization as a process and how it can help an emerging profession to develop by thinking through assets and liabilities in whichever lens of professionalization is used.

### Inferiority Complex

Three participants described the inferiority complex underlying the discourse of professionalization in the field. Participant 7 framed the comment in the way that advisors, as part of a field, were behaving: “We’ve got to change our attitudes. We’ve got to quit whining about how nobody respects us, and why nobody likes us, and why we are treated as secretaries, because we are still acting like that. . . . Advisors have to make that shift.” Although stating, “It’s healthy and important to have discussions around this topic of advising as a profession,” Participant 15 was also skeptical about the advantage of a designation of profession for academic advising:

Let’s just pretend for a moment that all of the sudden some big organization announces: Academic advising is an official profession! . . . I’m not sure that some external or internal group saying, “Yes, we are now a profession,” really does anything for us, because most front-line advisors aren’t thinking about if this is profession or not. Sometimes we, as a professional group, come at this with a little bit of an *inferiority*



**Table 4.** Frequency of *profession* used by participants and example statements from interviews

Participant	Frequency	Examples
2	7	“We need to . . . examine ourselves as a profession, and looking at a career ladder. How do we support those who are practitioners in this field? How do we ensure that they can continue to see a trajectory in this profession?”
3	4	“Essential to the theory and philosophy of advising is that reflection is at the center. And we must be looking at what we do, and what the profession is doing to figure out how to do it better.”
5	9	“In terms of closest analogues to the field of academic advising, <i>the profession of advising</i> , I would say nursing is our closest example.”
6	8	“What the career ladder does, is it validates the profession.”
9	4	“...for the good of the profession, I believe that advisors should show mastery in a discipline.”
10	13	“There are lots of people working within the profession not taking classes that are that specific to advising, but they are getting trained and provided tools and apprenticeship-like models that gets them into the working profession and into the workforce successfully.”
13	15	“Advising and retention are being more and more linked, and that’s going to save us as a profession. . . . It’s going to add new life into the profession. The strength in our profession lies in the heart of what happens in that interaction.”
14	7	“One of the biggest challenges of our profession is that we do have these potentially different expectations coming from all of the different levels.”
17	6	“NACADA is looking at a document that was created some years ago as a way of updating it and making it more current and reflective of current practices and ideas and the type of state of where the folks are in the profession is part of that process.”

*complex* [emphasis added], and we are waiting for somebody to tell us, “Yes, you are important!” That’s a mistake. We need to act as *if* we are important, because we *are*. We are important in the lives of students, and we need to get better. We need to have more research. We need to grow. We need to engage. . . . But if we’re waiting for somebody to say we are important, people will forget that in five minutes. It’s never enough. . . . Is it because we are feeling insecure? That we are having to look to sociology and their definition of a profession to try and validate what we are doing? What happens if we could do all 5 of the things or all 14 of the things in the model that you are referring to? It doesn’t change anything unless we wake up and realize what we are doing is important.

This participant articulated the balance that advising needs to achieve: Although showing

impact through empirical research remains important, advisors must own the notion that advising is a worthy and important endeavor.

Participant 13 noted that the constant comparisons with other fields and the fear of clearly defining advising in unique terms shows inferiority:

We play a critical role in the success of our students. As a profession, by trying to constantly connect to other disciplines to compare ourselves, we are guilty of an expression of *inferiority complex*. By saying we are *this*, trying to legitimize what we are, when we need to go about it in a different way. That’s been the approach that academic advising has taken to become professionalized . . . instead of identifying and clarifying what we truly are and our value within higher education. . . . We don’t have to be teachers. We don’t have to be administrators. We can be *advisors*.

### Need for Further Definition

Seven participants explained that the primary concern for the professionalization of the field involved further clarifying and defining the field in a way that captures the essence and communicates the value of it such that practitioners are satisfied. Participants suggested that claiming academic advising as a profession proves a difficult task in the absence of a clearly articulated professional mission. Although NACADA members have attempted to refine the mission through documents such as the *Concept of Academic Advising* (National Academic Advising Association, 2006), some study participants remained skeptical about the ability of the *Concept* to convey the essence of academic advising:

[The *Concept of Academic Advising*] is a framework for what advising involves and what it does, but it isn't a definition. So, when it comes to claiming in that more academic, rigorous sense that advising is a profession, we really haven't made a lot of progress, because we still can't even define what is advising and what [it] isn't. And that's problematic. (Participant 6)

Until those in the field articulate a common purpose and essence, "There's a real limitation as to how much else you can flesh out" (Participant 8). Participant 6 argued, "At some point, NACADA or the advising profession has to finally take a stand and say here's what we include and what we don't." Others articulated the urgency to define the field:

If we can't define what academic advising is, then that makes it challenging to say that we are a profession even though, as I am talking to you, I am saying the word *profession* a lot. Within NACADA, we have called ourselves a profession for a long time, and we certainly talk about advising professionals, which is not the same as a profession obviously, but comes from that same loop. It's deep. This is a really complicated topic, and there can be some differences of opinion obviously about any of these topics, whether it's defining academic advising or whether we are a profession or not, but I would love to see NACADA come up with a one sentence definition of academic advising, because

advisors . . . need to be able to articulate what it is that they do in an elevator speech with a provost. (Participant 15)

Building and studying a knowledge base will help advisors articulate the value of academic advising to important stakeholders. Participant 16 discussed how a knowledge base can help to build field boundaries:

Theories can lead us toward that important distinction that makes academic advising unique, that makes academic advising a profession, as opposed to a role. As the field defines itself as a profession, it needs to come up with a way to address the current perceptions. What constitutes the *knowledge* of academic advising? What makes academic advising a unique service? There must be a body of knowledge, beliefs, context, attitudes, values. . . . But until we know what it is that we are defining as a profession of academic advising, it's going to be hard to get there.

In countering the perceptions of stakeholders who see advising as nothing more than a transactional, perfunctory activity, Participant 4 expressed the need to define the field in terms of disciplinary boundaries and searching for distinct ways of knowing:

The path to getting those people off of that lies partly in developing a separate identity that really focuses on being different from all those other fields. . . . It's also an important step for us to take, as a discipline to—oops I said *discipline*, didn't I?—to get away from looking at ourselves as being in the light of other areas, other fields. . . . Maybe the potential for us to be a discipline lies precisely in cutting those ties and looking for . . . maybe there actually is a distinctive way of knowing still out there to be developed and identified . . . , and we just haven't worked at it hard enough yet. We need to be vigilant about that and just be aware that we may be depriving ourselves of the ability to discover and articulate what's unique about advising because we want it to be our thing.

Some participants were more explicit in their reactions regarding the topic of professionalization. Participant 1 was irritated about the way the discussion had been framed by some, insisting that

We're asking the wrong question. . . . I really think the conversation needs to be about "what is academic advising? What do we accomplish with students? How will we know when we've accomplished that? What's the theory and philosophy that underlies this thing we think we're doing with students? How do we define that?" . . . and this conversation about what constitutes a profession—like really?—is that what we need to talk about? We should be talking about what we're actually *doing*. Maybe it's two sides of the same coin, and that's the one that landed up, and by getting there, we're going to get to the other side. We're having this conversation, so if that's what prompted it, then good. . . . I'm annoyed . . . but I can get over that to see the bigger picture.

Although this response most explicitly reveals a pessimistic attitude about the discussion of professionalization, this participant sees value in a discussion that brings those in the field closer to articulating the central mission and essence of advising. For Participant 15, the discussion "is provocative, and that's always good to get people talking and engaging in a critical discourse about what we do."

### Discussion

Five categories emerged: assumptive, presumptive, emerging profession, inferiority complex, and the need for further definition. Nine participants fit into just one category, the largest being presumptive ( $n = 4$ ), followed by the need for further definition ( $n = 3$ ). The responses of the other eight participants fell into two different categories. The responses of three participants fell into a combination of the presumptive and emerging profession categories; they identified advising as an emerging profession yet referred to it as a profession, indicating the use of *profession* in both colloquial and academic ways. The terms *profession*, *professional*, and *professionalization* are used in different contexts and with varying understandings of meanings (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998). These variations create confusion and convolute the discussions surrounding the professionalization of

any field. Colloquially, a *professional* is understood as someone who earns money for a task, while *unprofessional* is sometimes used as an insult, denoting behavior that is incompetent or inappropriate. *Professional* is often used as an adjective that defines practice (*professional behavior*) or authority (*professional judgment*) (Abbott & Meerabeau, 1998). In the context of these findings, the persistent use of *profession* may reflect participants' hyperawareness of the way they are using the terms during the interview on the topic.

Other interesting combinations of responses emerged in the findings. For instance, Participant 13 expressed sentiments of presumptive and inferiority complex categories, intentionally asserting that advising was a profession and indicating that advisors need to stop apologizing for their (professional) work. Participant 15 also spoke about the inferiority complex, but made other comments suggesting the need to define the field further. Three other participants combined the need for a refined definition of advising with other categories: Participant 16 assumed that advising was a profession, but pointed out that because the central mission had not received universal agreement, the field practitioners were tasked with creating the definition. Participant 6 also spoke to the critical need to delineate the field in more detail, yet also referenced advising as a profession. In a surprising finding, only one respondent (Participant 8) expressed the seemingly most logical combination: advising as an emerging profession that requires further definition. That is, although falling into distinct categories for this study, an emerging profession typically requires more definition before recognition as a full-fledged profession.

### Defining a Profession

The five attitudinal categories—although not necessarily characteristic of the entire advising community—also highlight some key issues for thought, concern, and future research for the field. What do these responses, separately and in collective, mean for advisors? What happens if academic advising does not become recognized as a profession? The conference reviewer referenced in the introduction explained:

Our job as advisors would not change because of a decision on whether or not we are considered a profession. I believe that if we call our job as an Advisor a *profession* that is what we are. I do not see how the

outcome of this impacts our students and the job that we provide to them and the University. I believe Academic Advising is a profession and I believe anyone in the field would agree with that. (Anonymous Blind Reviewer, personal communication, April 4, 2017)

This perspective certainly ties to the inferiority complex that some in this study articulated; however, the consequences for the field if professionalization is not pursued remain unaddressed. Do important university stakeholders, such as presidents and provosts, see advising as a profession? How do their perceptions affect resource allocation? Does the current visibility and recognition of academic advising draw top candidates to and retain them in practice? Do the current perceptions of a professional status color the way some young advising professionals view the field? Do they see advising as a stepping stone to a position or career perceived as better? Do students view advisors as professionals who can teach them, coach them, empathize with their struggles, or help them navigate complex systems? Or do they view advisors as providers of a course schedule for the next semester? With good reason, hard-working professionals who value their practice sometimes respond defensively when they encounter discourse challenging the degree of professionalization of advising. However, most of the models of professionalization focus on a process of becoming more professionalized and the benefits that occupational groups gain from increased professionalization. These models are less interested in policing who can (and cannot) be a profession. The reductive exercise of determining whether an occupation is or is not a “profession” is not productive in and of itself (Hughes, 1963). Instead, the principles and guidance that stem from that discussion matter.

### **Does Professionalization Matter?**

Participants in this study questioned whether advisors gain any advantages from increased professionalization. Participant 12—whose profile suggested a mostly assumptive view—asked, “If advising becomes a profession, will that garner better wages for advisors?” This question begs another: Does advising have to be considered a profession to be valued and respected by university administrators and faculty? Participant 12 further critiqued the current discourse that

continuously announces that advising is not a profession, leading to another question: How might advisors react if they did not feel compelled to define (and sometimes defend) their position? What would it be like to be so valued by university administration that it reduced caseload sizes so that advisors could develop deeper, more meaningful relationships with students? What other tangible benefits might enhance practice?

A few participants questioned the outcomes of advising that did not eventually align with models of professionalization. For example, how does status of a profession affect the expectations for and preparation of people who practice it, such as physicians going to medical school or lawyers going to law school and passing the bar? Furthermore, where does the practice fit in terms of position in an establishment? Depending on the campus, academic advising can be found in academic affairs or student affairs. On many campuses, advising is done only by faculty advisors. If professionalization means that practitioners need the same backgrounds and credentials, can advising ever become a profession? The same issue, having practitioners from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds, has plagued the professionalization of student affairs (Sandeen, 2011). Do student affairs and academic advising constitute new kinds of professions, which are not easily analyzed through traditional models of professionalization? Old paradigm or new, the professionalization of academic advising ultimately “matters because policy, practice, and rewards are at stake” (Huggett, 2000, p. 50).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This paper is part of a larger project examining the professionalization of academic advising. As such, it features a few limitations and leads to ideas for future research.

First, participants were not explicitly asked about their feelings regarding the professionalization of academic advising. However, the nature of the topic inspired strong reactions that provided evidence of participants’ views in the 17 different transcripts. To more clearly draw out these attitudes and define these aspects, researchers might more intentionally gauge the perspectives of people in the field. Such analyses might reveal issues and obstacles to professionalization that have not been discussed in the literature. A limitation related to the line of questioning reflects the views of the participants as limited to the time that they were interviewed. As Participant 12 suggested, “I don’t



really buy into [professionalization] anymore,” views evolve based on additional published research findings, experience in the field, or exposure to the literature. Therefore, the participant views represented in this paper will not likely remain stagnant.

Second, like most qualitative research, the findings represent a small group—in this case, of NACADA leadership—and therefore, do not necessarily represent the feelings of most people practicing in the field. In the future, researchers might engage in similar questions with a larger pool and with participants who do not necessarily represent NACADA leadership. For example, studies in other areas have relied on instruments built on attitudinal attributes of professionalization (Hall, 1968) to gauge the way practitioners in a field view their work. These attributes were cited as (a) the use of a professional organization as a major reference, (b) belief in service to the public, (c) belief in self-regulation, (d) sense of calling to the field, and (e) autonomy. Interview questions about the factors that encouraged advisors to enter the field and choose to stay could help to elucidate the meaning advisors give to their work (Hall, 1968, p. 93). For such a study, researchers might seek a wide swath of advisors working in a variety of settings to determine the way they view the professionalization of the field. Studies using quantitative or mixed methods to determine if positive perspectives on advising improved the retention of advisors in the field would also yield interesting and welcomed findings.

### Conclusion

Despite defensive objections to the discourse regarding it, the professionalization of academic advising continues to be a critical area of research. As advisors in the field grapple with the complications of 21st higher education, administrators must recruit and retain talented people working as advisors. Work dissatisfaction, poor professional morale, and resource depletion may continue to plague advising if these concerns are not adequately explored and addressed. By examining the views of NACADA leadership on the professionalization of academic advising, this study provided one barometer of the professionalization status of academic advising.

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- Author’s Notes**
- I dedicate this study to the memory of Dr. Leigh Schaffer: friend, mentor, teacher.*
- Craig M. McGill is a senior academic advisor for the Department of English at Florida International University, where he also teaches courses in musical theatre, film, queer studies and for the Honor’s College. He holds master’s degrees in Music Theory from the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and Academic Advising from Kansas State University, and a doctorate from Florida International University in Adult Education and Human Resource Development. Prior to his current position, he advised biochemistry and forensic science at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. An active member of NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising, he chairs the LGBTQA Advising and Advocacy Community and serves on the editorial board for the NACADA Journal. He has published papers within the fields of academic advising, adult education, higher education, gender and sexuality studies, and musical theater studies. This research was conducted under the approval the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Florida International University. Dr. McGill is completing a follow-up study of how characteristics of professionalization described by these same participants map onto the models of Houle (1980) and Pavalko (1988), and mapped to characteristics described by other sociologists of occupations and professions. Contact Dr. McGill at [cmmcgill@fiu.edu](mailto:cmmcgill@fiu.edu).*