

A Personal Interview with Virginia N. Gordon

Interviewed by Denise L. Rode



Dr. Virginia N. Gordon is pictured at the far right. To her right is Denise Rode, JCOT Editor, with other colleagues in Columbus, OH.

Although the history of academic advising dates back to 1869 when Charles Elliot, President of Harvard University, outlined the expansion of the elective systemic in his inaugural address, academic advising emerged as a “defined and examined activity” at the midpoint of the 20th Century (Cook, 2009, p. 22).

The last quarter of the century saw great strides in the development of academic advising as a specialization in higher education. The first national academic advising conference was held in Burlington, Vermont in 1977, and the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) was established in 1979 with 429 charter members (Cook, 2009, p. 23). NACADA has been described as having “a phenomenal impact on the perceptions of advising, the redefined role of advisors, and the means by which students have benefited directly and indirectly from the professionalism it has engendered” (Grites & Gordon, 2009, p. 41). NACADA now has over 10,000 members in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, Canada, and several other countries (Cook, 2009, p. 26) as well as a structure that supports 23 commissions, 18 interest groups, and several potential interest groups (Grites & Gordon, 2009, p. 46).

In many ways, the development of NACADA paralleled the growth of the National Orientation Directors Association (NODA), which was chartered in 1977. The two associations share a common mission in serving the needs of new students as they integrate into higher education and learn strategies for success in the collegiate environment. At approximately the same time, the first-year experience movement emerged, led by John N. Gardner at the University of South Carolina, becoming first a national and then international force in higher education.

One of the NACADA founding members was Virginia N. Gordon, whose name has been inextricably linked with the association from the beginning. Dr. Gordon is Dean *Emeritus* and adjunct associate professor at the Ohio State University. She has extensive experience in teaching, administration, advising, and counseling in higher education settings. Her bibliography includes books, monographs, book chapters, and journal articles on many topics in higher education.

Dr. Gordon has received national and international acclaim for her pioneering work in advising, particularly in advising the undecided student. Among her many honors is NACADA's naming of its award for outstanding contributions to the field of academic advising the Virginia N. Gordon Award. A non-traditional student herself, she returned to academia to earn a master's degree and began her career in higher education after raising three children. She is the proud grandmother of five, several of whom are college students.

Dr. Rode: Would you start off by telling a little bit about your story? How did you find yourself in the world of academic advising as your niche or specialization in higher education?

Dr. Gordon: Like a lot of things, it was an accident. When I was in my graduate program for counselor education, I received an assistantship as an academic advisor in Ohio State University's University College that was at the time the portal of entry for most students. We were responsible for advising new and continuing students until they were admitted to the college of their choice.

Rode: That was probably "cutting edge" at the time.

Gordon: It was. In the 1970's, Ohio State was one of the first universities to implement the concept. The trouble with the term "university college" is that there are many different types of university colleges with different objectives and functions. Ours was initiated shortly after the student unrest in the late 60s and early 70s. Students were demanding more personal attention and the concept of a university college in a large university was one way to provide that personal advising relationship, especially to first-year students.

While working in University College, I determined that undecided students were not being given the special attention they needed. We also had large numbers of "major-changers" who needed more focused advising attention. Seeing these needs

as a counselor, I wrote a 10-page proposal for establishing a full-time position in the area of academic and career advising. Fortunately, the dean and associate dean of University College also recognized the void, and hired me.

Rode: That might have been the first position created specifically for advising undecided students.

Gordon: I can't say that, but I wouldn't be surprised if it were one of the first. Very few institutions were devoting that kind of resources to undecided students at that time.

Rode: That was a very foresighted move, wasn't it?

Gordon: Yes. I learned so much about undecided students and studied what different advising approaches worked. I wrote the first book on the subject and it was published in 1981. John Holland was gracious enough to write the Forward to the book. The third edition of that book was published recently.

Rode: Over the years, there has been different terminology used for these students. Is there one particular term that you prefer?

Gordon: In the preface to the book, I noted that there were many terms used on different campuses for undecided students. For example, "uncommitted," "exploratory," "open major," to mention a few. I used the term "undecided" because over the years, the literature on this topic used that term and I wanted to be consistent. (By the way, the research on this group of students goes back to the 1920s).

I began to add to the research on undecided students because there was little being done at that time. I reinforced John Holland's notion that there isn't just one "undecided" group but students were at many levels of indecision. Within the group, I found a wide continuum of levels – from those who are totally undecided about an academic direction to those who are decided but for various reasons don't wish to make a commitment. Each of these levels of "undecidedness" requires a different advising approach.

Rode: It sounds like there are some parallels. When you talk about levels, I see similarities to student development literature.

Gordon: Yes. After all, these are individuals who are in an important developing period in their life. Choosing a major is just one task to accomplish...one decision to make. It is often noted that we ask traditional students to make career decisions when they are not developmentally ready. It takes more courage to admit to being undecided today since many academic programs require a student to follow a strict curricular program. I always made a point of telling parents at orientation that they

should relax and be proud that their students are willing to explore many options. It is also important, of course, to emphasize wise scheduling of courses so that many options can remain open. This is a critical task that advisors perform.

Rode: So advising undecided majors became your career path. You found that niche at an early age.

Gordon: I went back to school as an adult because I had three kids, and in my generation you stayed home and raised them. As soon as the last one was in high school, I went back to school. I always knew I was going to do that. My husband was a dentist with an established practice, so we weren't going to move. And I was fortunate to have a great university in my backyard.

Rode: What changes have you seen in students from the time you entered the profession until retirement?

Gordon: Technology—it's a whole different world. For advisors in particular, keeping up with technological changes on campus is extremely important. One offshoot of this is how technology has changed how parents and students communicate not only with each other but also with university administrators, faculty, and student services offices.

Rode: Does technology change the advising process?

Gordon: Yes and no. Students will always need that personal, one-on-one association with advisors. When technology began to be used more extensively in advising, the original thinking was that it was going to be great since students had easy access to information. When they visited their advisor, quality-advising time could be spent personalizing that information. I'm not sure it's worked out that way because you now have students who still do seek the information and when emailing or texting questions, expect immediate answers or explanations for problems that aren't always simple.

Rode: As you think about the multifaceted role of the academic advisor, what skill set do new advisors or advisors-in-training need to cultivate?

Gordon: The most obvious one is communication skills. That's at the heart of the interaction between the student and the advisor. Another is the ability to refer students to other resources effectively. There's also the career aspect since some students consider their academic and career choices the same. Every good advisor has to know the career implications for the area they advise. We've already mentioned the importance of technology. Advisors also need to be sensitive to how individual students approach decision-making since this process is so integral to the choices they make. Teaching decision-making is often a necessary part of advising.

Rode: Has the increasing diversity of the student body changed the nature of academic advising?

Gordon: That's another essential skill: recognizing cultural differences and the impact of how each student receives the advice given. I think many students today are more worldly and open to cultural differences than those in the past. Advisors must be aware of how some special populations such as older adult students and veterans have different issues affecting their college lives. There are also more diverse parents today and we need to listen carefully to their concerns.

Rode: I run that gauntlet on a daily basis when I find myself having more frequent conversations about family members going to academic advising with students, and deciding how I can respect the fact that this is a huge investment for their families. The stakes seem to be a little higher in the case of transfer students because perhaps things didn't go so well at the student's previous institution.

Gordon: This is not to say that there weren't parents like that 20 years ago. Now, the difference is that parents seem to be much more involved in their students' campus life. Before, they might have been involved in orientation, but after that it wasn't so easy since they had to use the mail or telephone. Now it is instantaneous.

Rode: We are seeing more students coming to college with serious mental health diagnoses. Some parents have a desire to be more involved because of those concerns. I can understand that they would want to make sure that there are services available for their students; I'm not sure how this plays into advising. In some cases parents look at college as a fresh start for their student, and they want to be sure the transition goes well.

Gordon: Many students are put on medication so much earlier now and that continues on into college. Students with mental health issues have always been in college, but survey after survey shows the numbers have increased. Advisors need to be more aware of these students' concerns since advisors are often the first professional contact and referral is critical. I think more advisor training is taking place in this area today.

Rode: As someone who teaches on two large college campuses, I have watched the work of academic advisors become more important and valued over the years.

Gordon: I don't think there's any question that overall, advising has become recognized as a more important function in higher education. NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) has had a great influence in this regard. First of all, NACADA started a journal in the early 1980s. We've tried to make our Journal academically sound so that faculty members would feel free to submit articles. (Some years ago, we did an analysis of the NACADA Journal and found that a majority of the articles were submitted by faculty members.) The goal of

professionalizing advising has been accomplished over the years through expanded training opportunities in addition to a wide range of resources. Advising is a complicated task and I don't think a lot of people understood or appreciated it in the past. The expanded literature and research of the past 40 years has helped to professionalize the field and both advisors and students have benefited from it.

Rode: I see the same phenomenon happening in the first-year experience movement. We are starting to see a body of research and literature that shows the value of what we do.

Gordon: Yes, much to the benefit of those working in many areas of higher education.

Rode: In academic advising, as with the first-year experience, there is greater concern for retention. Advising is a major part of an institution's retention strategy.

Gordon: Good advising can make a difference in retaining students. For example, there was a time when administrators realized that large groups of undecided students on their campuses were high risk for dropping out. They started looking for ways to improve retention and began providing more focused advising and career services for this group. Another risky group are those who need or want to change majors. We were among the first to create a special advising unit for these students and our research indicated that targeting them with more concentrated academic and career advising made a difference in retaining them.

Rode: From the studies I've seen on my own campus, and from the research of Vincent Tinto and others, students who are committed to a major and to the institution, are much more likely to be retained. Also, student satisfaction and time to graduation are greatly impacted by advising experiences. It makes sense to direct resources towards academic advising, especially for undecided students.

Of the various models that you've seen for advising or various philosophical approaches, are there any that have particular merit, in your opinion?

Gordon: It's impossible to say any one theory or philosophy is better than another when it comes to advising. However, student and career development theories were recognized as important by advisors years ago and are included in many advisor-training programs. Today broad theoretical frameworks from many disciplines are advanced and advisors are encouraged to implement those that seem appropriate for their situation. As for advising delivery models, each institution is unique in its need to provide effective advising. An advising delivery system that works in a large institution may not, for example, work in a small liberal arts college. Probably a combination of faculty advisors and professionals is most common. There is enough research on advising systems available now to help institutions create one that serves their students best.

Rode: Looking through the 30th anniversary NACADA Journal [Fall 2009], I was interested to see how academic advising came from the deans of men and deans of women and the pioneering work that they did a century ago.

Gordon: The first advisors, of course, were presidents of the colonial colleges. Student affairs professionals have played an important part in advancing advising.

Rode: You were a charter member of NACADA. Take me back to the dynamics and mindset of that time.

Gordon: Most of the people in those early years who were invested in advancing academic advising were full time professionals with student affairs or counseling backgrounds as well as some faculty advisors. They saw the need for recognizing this function as an important part of higher education and establishing a national organization seemed like the logical way to start. Through the years, NACADA has spearheaded this effort to improve advising on many fronts. In addition to providing information about every facet of advising, it has developed training opportunities and support services. Placing emphasis on academic research and expanding the literature has made the field of advising more effective and respected.

Rode: Academic advising is truly part student affairs and part academic affairs, isn't it?

Gordon: Yes. Academic advising and orientation are two functions in higher education that cut across both areas. Many of our professional advisors come from student affairs backgrounds but advisors also come from a variety of academic disciplines. This forms a great pool of talent.

Rode: I'm now seeing graduate students going into student affairs or related fields who are looking at academic advising as their first choice for practice. That's relatively new and speaks well to the professionalization of the field.

Gordon: I taught a graduate-level course in academic advising for many years. At the time I had to gather material from many sources since there was no one source that encompassed all the vital parts of the field. This prompted me to write a textbook to introduce graduate students to the many facets of advising. Now there are not only voluminous resources (e.g., the Clearinghouse for Academic Advising, national and regional advisor development opportunities), but NACADA now offers graduate level courses and a master's program in academic advising through Kansas State University.

Rode: You've had an impact around the world because of your pioneering research and publication in advising.

Gordon: I've been privileged to be part of advising as it has developed over the years into an important function in higher education. I am impressed with the number of requests for information and resources that I receive from advisors in other countries as well as international graduate students. For example, I am currently in an e-mail conversation with a woman in Beijing, China who is researching and writing her dissertation on academic advising. These contacts are amazing and we learn so much from each other. NACADA has surely become part of "The Global Community for Academic Advising." There are advisors all over the world now who are using NACADA resources.

Rode: That has to be very rewarding to see that happen from being a charter member, not many more than 30 years ago.

Gordon: I'm constantly amazed at how much progress has been made in the field and continues to evolve. We have come from a perception that advising is strictly selecting "a class schedule" to a much more encompassing function.

Rode: What do you think orientation professionals or orientation directors should know about academic advising? How can we be good partners with advising since we work so closely together and our missions complement each other?

Gordon: Personal relationships are important because they allow you to appreciate each other's expertise and understand that the student is at the heart of the enterprise. We have the same goal—to make transitioning to the campuses as comfortable and as rewarding as possible. When I was writing the history of advising for Ohio State, I remember seeing a picture of orientation from around 1930. Freshmen were all wearing beanies. Like advising, orientation has come a long way. Good coordination between orientation staff members and academic advisors is a critical part of a successful program. Training together also helps each group understand their common goal.

Rode: We are all on the same team, even if we might have a slightly different perspective.

Gordon: Regular interaction between student affairs/orientation and advising is critical. We are all spokes in the wheel.

Rode: What do you see for the future of academic advising? What issues are on the horizon?

Gordon: Technology will continue to have an impact. The international aspect of advising is continuing to develop. Understanding cultural differences continues to be important since increasingly our students are coming from many different social and economic backgrounds. Career exploration, choice, and placement will be more critical as graduating seniors have a harder time finding jobs. How

can we prepare them for such a future? Even the value of a college education is being questioned relative to the cost and preparation for the real world. There will be a wave of veterans, and their needs are going to be very different. Advisors in community colleges are going to receive the brunt of this influx. Budget problems will always be a concern and advisors (as well as orientation professionals) must be proactive in showing that what they do makes a difference in the bottom line.

Rode: Where do you think the advising profession is going to go from here?

Gordon: I am your eternal optimist. Advising will continue to perform an important function in colleges and universities. It will become more responsive to each generation's special needs. The ability to adapt to change will be important for advisors and advising administrators. In the end, however, it all boils down to that one-on-one relationship between the student and the academic advisor where the focus is on helping students derive the most benefit and success from their college experience as they prepare for their personal and working lives.