

In Memory
Virginia N. Gordon
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Virginia N. Gordon, Senior Editor *NACADA Journal*

It was the early 1970s, and she had just begun her new role as the Academic Advisement and Career Development Coordinator in the University College at The Ohio State University. At her first administrators' meeting, she entered the conference room, took her seat, and got herself prepared for the meeting to start. The room soon filled with other coordinators of advising, assistant and associate deans, and the dean of the college. Before the meeting began, one of the male colleagues asked her, the only female in the room: "Are you going to make the coffee?" Several different renditions of Dr. Virginia N. Gordon's responses have been offered, most of which conveyed by her. The replies ranged from "No, but I can teach you how to make it" to "No, you can make it yourself." The spirit revealed between these two replies shows why so many came to love this distinguished woman and why we can embrace both possible retorts with a smile.

Virginia was born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1927 to Milo and Irma Niswonger. In 1927, Dayton was the epitome of the prosperous, midsized, industrial city in the Midwest. One day, Virginia got permission to leave her elementary class and go to her father's dentist office to meet the most distinguished citizen

of Dayton: There, sitting in the dentist's chair, getting his checkup, was Orville Wright. Her father passed away early in her life, and although she never discussed the situation much with colleagues, the three daughters and mother bonded their energies to support one another within the family. Perhaps this was the circumstance from which Virginia learned that challenges would not stop her.

As a young adult, she became a dental hygienist. She must have been an excellent one, because she became an instructor at The Ohio State University in the College of Dentistry. There, she met her future husband, George Gordon, who was studying to become a dentist. She and George had three children: two boys and one girl. Virginia beamed when asked about her children. She was proud of them and all they accomplished. As her children were completing high school and heading to college, Virginia was completing her master's degree, to be followed by a doctorate, in Counselor Education, at Ohio State. The timing is important to note because Virginia's contributions to the field of academic advising began when she was in her late 40s, showing that it is never too late to follow one's professional passions.

Virginia's work spanned four decades. She was one of the most creative practitioners and prolific scholars in the field of academic advising. She was the first to recognize the importance of advising for exploring or undecided students and for those who were changing majors or not making progress toward competitive majors and needed to change paths. She created both the General Baccalaureate Advising Area for exploring students and the Alternatives Advising Program for major-changers in the University College, and she developed advising and teaching strategies to guide these students toward new majors and careers. The latter program is now called *University Exploration* at Ohio State, and almost 2,500 students each year are advised through it to find majors that align with their interests, abilities, and values.

Virginia approached training new advisors from a teaching-learning perspective that was intentional, organized, and thorough. She was able to integrate theory into the practice of advising in a

way that was understandable and intuitive, which formed the foundation for the understanding of the “world of advising, according to Virginia.” In the late 1970s, because the processes and ideas for it had become second nature to her, Virginia wrote the pre-service training manual for academic advisors in the University College. Much of the design and content of that model has been used (and continues to be used) by those who learned from Virginia. Five sections of the manual (Setting for Academic Advising, Interpersonal Dynamics of Advising Process, Advising Tasks in University College, Career Advising, and Advising Special Populations) align closely with the 2017 *Academic Advising Core Competencies Model* developed by the NACADA Professional Development Committee. Virginia’s vision for advising and what advisors should know have been realized through the University College advising manual and has stood the test of time.

Virginia strongly believed in the relationship between academic and career advising. The section on career advising in the University College training manual emphasized the importance of career development theories to help students choose careers and gain an understanding of how a career develops over a lifetime. In the advising manual, Virginia’s model, “Making Satisfied Career Decisions—What Questions Do I Ask?” was instrumental in helping advisors guide conversations about what students need to do to make a major or career decision. Through the model described, to ascertain and develop student self-knowledge, Virginia suggested that advisors ask advisees about their interests, aptitudes, values, and goals. In the description of occupational knowledge, she focused on the nature of work and through a discussion of educational knowledge she posed questions about academic programs. Finally, in the model, Virginia presented principles of decision-making knowledge to facilitate the integration of self-knowledge, occupational knowledge, and educational knowledge. The synthesis of all of the student learning outcomes outlined in her model could be posed as one general question for students: Can you integrate this information about yourself, majors, and careers and make a realistic decision that will guide you toward success? Each step in Virginia’s model included interview questions for the advisor to ask and career advising resources for students who need help. Although modifications and adaptations were made to this model over the years, the foundation remains

mostly unchanged and essential to the way students are advised today.

Virginia once said, “If you are a perfectionist, advising is not for you.” This statement can be taken at face value: There is so much information that advisors deal with every day that they are bound to make mistakes, and those who are not okay with not being right all the time could struggle as an advisor. After getting to know Virginia a bit better, her comment took on a different meaning: Using all the tools and knowledge advisors have to help students does not mean the end result will be that *perfect* major or that *perfect* career choice. However, advisors can teach students how to reflect on who they are and what is important to them, show them how to make decisions and find resources, and most of all, show them we care about who they are and the choices they make.

As a scholar, Virginia wrote more than 50 books, monographs, book chapters, and journal articles on career and academic advising. The volume of her efforts is a testimony to her dedication to the scholarly ideal. She contributed a solid foundation of research and practical theoretical models to the creation of the field of academic advising. When viewed from a holistic perspective, some very important details about her scholarship could be missed. By examining her work closely, one can only be impressed by the breadth of methodological approaches she employed; they ranged from the use of quantitative experimental design methodologies (“The Retention of Major-Changers: A Longitudinal Study” [Steele, Kennedy, & Gordon, 1993]), historic research (e.g., “The Evolution of Academic Advising: One Institution’s Historical Path” [Gordon, 2004], and “*NACADA Journal* Authors: 20 Years of Contributions” [Gordon & Grites, 2001]), and application of theory (“The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator: A Resource for Developmental Advising” [Gordon & Carberry, 1984] and “Developmental Advising Revisited” [Gordon & Grites, 2000]).

Virginia’s most lasting scholarly contributions came from her ability to review voluminous amounts of professional literature and offer a synthesis of it in the form of a new theoretical perspective that advanced the knowledge for the advising profession. Certainly, her passionate work in the area of studying the undecided college student is illustrative of the many examples of her skill at distilling the essence of an idea. Her 1998 “Career Decidedness Types: A Literature Review”

was critical in contributing to the understanding of a special population of college students: those that Virginia described in her much quoted statement, “‘students undecided, unwilling,’ or unable to make appropriate academic and vocational decisions” (e.g., Gordon & Steele, 2016, p. vii). Her key insight was that decidedness and undecidedness were not dualistic states but rather points on a continuum of decidedness and undecidedness. She concluded that many decided students need assistance with their academic and career planning, similar to that offered to undecided students. Furthermore, the review supported her long-standing belief that the undecided college student did not represent people with problems but rather young and maturing adults grappling with common personal and developmental issues that could be resolved with the assistance of well-trained advisors. She expanded on her description of working with undecided students in her still-classic book *The Undecided College Student: An Academic and Career Challenge*, first published in 1984 and updated to a recent fourth edition (Gordon & Steele, 2016). No publication delves deeper into the characteristics of the undecided students and how to advise them.

Virginia’s clear writing style contributed to her influence and accessibility. Her description of the need for students to be actively engaged in their own planning, found in the foreword of the book, *The Undecided College Student* (Gordon & Steele, 2016) offers insight into her writing style:

The progressive ideas of the theorists and researchers of the 1950’s to current post-modern theorists and research that yields new constructs about indecision, offer a picture born of changing times and perspectives. This has not altered the need of undecided students, however, to learn the basic knowledge and skills necessary to make timely, realistic and satisfying academic major and career decisions. (p. viii).

In two sentences, she synthesized over 70 years of research and emphasized her belief that the exploration and decision-making processes for academic and career planning could be taught to college students. In addition, in the short passage presented herein, she explained that advisors have a responsibility to help create and guide this process while encouraging and expecting students’ active participation in making their own decisions about their plans. Furthermore, a brief review of

the citations she listed at the end of each chapter in the book, as with all of her writings, demonstrated how she drew on studies and reports from multiple fields of study, ranging from counseling and psychology to educational philosophy, research, theory, and assessment.

As a charter member of NACADA, Virginia viewed her contributions to advancing scholarly inquiry as an obligation that extended beyond her own research interests. She showed this commitment in two distinctive ways. First, her active participation and willingness to engage in leadership roles manifested in service on various committees and projects. A short list of these enterprises includes the following: member of the NACADA Editorial Board, the *NACADA Journal* Advisory Board, and the NACADA Monograph Editorial Board; creator of the National Clearinghouse for Academic Advising; and service as a senior editor, with Tom Grites, of the *NACADA Journal*. Second, she collaborated with distinguished colleagues throughout her career, such as with Tom Grites and Wes Habley for both editions of *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook*, a seminal publication that provided those in advising with a single source that addressed research, theory, and best practices (Gordon & Habley, 2000; Gordon, Habley, & Grites, 2008).

Virginia’s selflessness in participating as an editor and writer in the creation of a new advising handbook for NACADA eclipsed her own excellent advising handbook she had written a decade earlier (Gordon, 1992). Because of this type of professional behavior, NACADA established the Virginia N. Gordon Award for Excellence in the Field of Advising, which is annually presented to a NACADA member who has made significant contributions to the field. This award is a fitting tribute to a loyal and ardent advising professional and leader who will always be remembered for her dedication and service to academic advising.

As demonstrated by her scholarly pursuits, Virginia’s leadership style included both collaboration and accountability. Virginia was President of NACADA twice (the second woman to have served in the position). She acted as a role model and mentor for many in NACADA leadership positions. Virginia’s inclusive style was balanced by her expectations that those working on projects with her be focused and productive. Meetings for which Virginia was in charge were goal oriented, and expected outcomes were addressed and follow-up activities identified. She maintained her democratic style, sometimes in the face of participants who

valued their roles and ideas above all others; individuals with high opinions of themselves quickly learned that she would not indulge self-centered behavior, but she also defused potential conflicts without embarrassing or belittling offenders. Her aura was such that participants came prepared to work because they did not want to disappoint Virginia.

No one doubted that Virginia, with her energy, would out-work everyone. In such a positive setting, working with Virginia was a much sought-after professional and personal experience. She had a rare gift in that she made work challenging and fun, an outcome, in part, because Virginia was exceptionally bright and extremely organized. She would have a project worked out in her head (including the elements and order for the written proposal) before anyone else could envision a plan. Virginia not only understood what students needed to be successful but also grasped these needs long before most of her colleagues. Many outsiders to NACADA were also fortunate to fall under her time-to-get-to-work spell. Members of both The Ohio State University Retirement Association and Mortar Board Scholarship can attest to her leadership and personal style.

If Virginia's work ethic and productivity were legendary, her impact as a mentor was equally admired. Virginia was the reason so many chose academic advising as a profession, and as result, can proudly claim to be her mentee, colleague, and friend. When she started her career in the early 1970s, few women held leadership roles. However, Virginia truly believed that through hard work and dedication she could make an impact. Hence, she went about becoming a leader in advising by putting her head down, plowing through obstacles, and finding solutions to problems that others could not address. Because of her intelligence, vision, passion, and energy, one wanted to be mentored by Virginia. With plenty of work to be done, she willingly took many along to help—graduate students, advisors, administrators, faculty members, and NACADA leaders. It is fair to say she treated them all the same—friendly, directly, and supportively—as she encouraged those being mentored to participate in the project at hand while developing and achieving their own goals.

At her memorial service in December 2017, the presiding minister noted that Virginia enjoyed reading Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays. Within the essay *Compensation*, Emerson wrote a statement that best describes Virginia as a teacher, mentor, scholar, and leader: "In the order of nature

we cannot render benefits to those from whom we receive them, or only seldom. But the benefit we receive must be rendered again, line for line, deed for deed, cent for cent, to somebody." Virginia always paid forward and we are the fortunate recipients. Her example will always inspire those in the field of academic advising.

George Steele
Melinda McDonald

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