

Academic Advising as a Field of Inquiry

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In this article, I examine the degree to which academic advising has met the scholarship and research standards necessary to lay claim to designation as a discipline or as a profession. I include a review of 3 decades of observations on advising scholarship and research, a review of NACADA's efforts to advance research, and an analysis of trends in scholarly productivity in academic advising. In addition, I address the current state of inquiry (scholarship and research). Finally, I include suggested actions necessary to expand the quantity and enhance the quality of advising as a field of inquiry.

KEY WORDS: advising profession, history of advising, NACADA

Introduction

In many respects the qualities that describe a discipline are parallel to those that define a profession. The *Miriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Profession) defines a profession as “a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods.” While several additional qualities characterize a profession (e.g., certification, continuing education, code of ethics, etc.), both a discipline and a profession require specialized knowledge, extended training, and systematic scholarship and research that leads to a body of knowledge specific to the field.

The Call and the Criticism: 1980-1989

Although calls for research and scholarship related to academic advising predate the first national advising conference in 1977, the chartering of NACADA¹ in 1979 brought an increased interest in validating the work of academic advisors. In 1979, Grites, writing in *Academic Advising: Getting Us Through the 80's* (p. 54), suggested, “Research studies must be designed to determine the relative worth and adaptability of advising practices. Most research consists of surveys. More experimental studies should be undertaken.” Writing

in a 1981 volume of the *NACADA Journal*, Polson and Cashin (p. 43) stated, “We should advance the field of advising with sound principles of research design and with appropriate inferences from research findings, ultimately increasing the level of knowledge and understanding of the field.” I added my observations to those of Grites, Polson, and Cashin. In the article (Habley, 1986), a transcript of a keynote address delivered at the Region 7 conference, I cited several challenges to the future of academic advising: a) develop a body of research that enhances understanding, assists in planning, and guides decision making; b) provide evidence that advising produces specific and positive outcomes; c) defend the value of advising during a predicted period of decline and retrenchment; and d) elevate the status of advising among faculty. The degree to which each of these challenges could be successfully accomplished, I offered, required an increased focus on scholarship and research.

As these exhortations to increase advising scholarship and research were being made, criticisms of existing advising scholarship were also surfacing. In the earliest comprehensive review of the advising literature, McLaughlin and Starr (1982) studied more than 150 articles on academic advising cited in *College Student Personnel Abstracts* from 1965 through 1981. They summarized their findings by stating, “Research is characterized mostly by surveys and reports of innovative practices. Studies correlating techniques to outcomes and effectiveness are scarce” (p. 15). Their sentiment was echoed in a 1983 article in the *NASPA Journal* by Kramer and Peterson: “There is very little research upon which to build a case for the importance of academic advising” (p. 44), and again in the book *Developmental Academic Advising* (1984, p. 546), where Winston, Miller, Ender, and Grites pointed out: “Most attempts at research on academic advising have been handicapped by narrowness and parochial orientation.” As the 80s drew to a close, the criticism continued with Stage's terse comment in the *Review of Higher Education Research* (1989, p. 286), “Advising research has failed to evaluate advising processes.”

¹To avoid potential boredom with the repetitive use of *NACADA*, I have used it synonymously with the terms *academic advising* and *field of advising* throughout this article. Because no professional association so thoroughly represents a field of endeavor, *NACADA* cannot be adequately separated from either *academic advising* or *field of advising*.

The Call and the Criticism: 1990-2000

Incisive criticisms on the quality of research and scholarship in the field of academic advising continued into the 90s. The first examination was offered by Vorhees (1990) in a chapter on academic advising in *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, under the auspices of the Association of Institutional Research and the Association for the Study of Higher Education: “Scant research has been done to evaluate the effectiveness of academic advising” (p. 286). In their well-known book, *How College Affects Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, p. 404) concluded, “Our own review of the evidence (on the impact of academic advising) suggests little in the way of methodological rigor to differentiate those studies that yield a positive association from those where the link is trivial and statistically non-significant.”

The exhortations continued. As the decade of the 90s came to an end, McGillin (2000) issued a clarification call, “the research agenda for academic advising must become a national priority” (p. 374), in her chapter on research in *Academic Advising: A Comprehensive Handbook*. She stated, “The field can no longer afford to stand outside the national demand for documented outcomes in higher education” (p. 374). She offered six recommendations to expand the scholarship and research in academic advising (pp. 374–75):

- Clarify what advising is and is not by generating a theory of academic advising.
- Study what advisors do.
- Document the link between advising and retention.
- Conduct research on advisors, not just advisees.
- Take the lead in establishing collaborative research projects.
- Establish research projects within the academic disciplines.

In a plenary session at the 2000 NACADA National Conference, I reiterated the remarks I had made 14 years earlier (Habley, 1986) on the importance of scholarship and research. I then offered five reasons why research was critical to the advancement of advising and success of NACADA: Research a) is the primary way to achieve the vision statements offered in NACADA’s strategic plan, b) is the coin of the realm in higher education institutions, c) is the only way to affirm the work of advisors, d) guides advising decisions, and e) validates (or invalidates) theory (Habley, 2000, p. 7).

The Call and the Criticism: 2000-Present

Since the new millennium, both the call and the criticism have continued unabated. In volume two of *How Colleges Affect Students*, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) eased the criticism offered in volume one, citing 18 studies that suggest advising can play a role in student success. Yet, their analysis of advising research occupies a scant two paragraphs in a book that is more than 800 pages long. I had suggested that despite the increased visibility of it in higher education than in previous decades, academic advising was not guaranteed a place at the core of the institutional mission (Habley, 2004). I believe that the this unfortunate position of advising was the result of advising proponents continually asserting that it makes a significant contribution to student success and institutional effectiveness when only a limited body of quality research substantiated that claim.

NACADA’s Response to Calls and Criticisms

Thirty years have passed since Grites (1979) implored the field of advising to focus on scholarship to determine the value of advising and guide advising practice and since the McLaughlin and Starr (1982) issued the first criticism of advising scholarship and research. In this article, I have documented both the calls for and criticisms of research heard over 3 decades. In response, NACADA has made research to advance the body of knowledge of advising an important goal in its strategic plan. While the following narrative focuses specifically on NACADA’s efforts to advance scholarship and research in academic advising, I made no attempt to chronicle the significant contributions NACADA has made to professional development of the membership through conferences, institutes, seminars, Webinars, publications, and other services.

NACADA Journal

“This first issue of the Journal of the National Academic Advising Association heralds a new era for academicians, students, and all higher education.” With those words, NACADA’s first President Toni Trombley, introduced the first issue of the *NACADA Journal* (1981, p.ii) just 15 months after the association was chartered. From the very first issue, Editor Edward Jones sought to establish a journal that increased advising visibility and both stimulated and supported scholarship and research on academic advising. The academic integrity of any higher education professional association is greatly enhanced by the existence of a juried journal and such was the case with the *NACADA Journal*.

The first issue featured an article establishing

research priorities for academic advising (Polson & Cashin, 1981, p. 34–43). Through 28 volumes and seven editors and co-editors, the *Journal* has been the primary purveyor and disseminator of scholarship and research in academic advising. In fact, the *Journal* exists to advance scholarly discourse about the research, theory, and practice of academic advising in higher education. Although early submissions to the *Journal* were more focused on concepts and practices, the authors' contributions slowly shifted to more scholarly and research-based articles. The first issue included eight pieces of which only two were research based and one of the two was a survey of NACADA members. In contrast, the fall 2008 issue of the *Journal* included six articles, four of which were based on research. In addition to promoting scholarship and research, NACADA uses the *Journal* to increase research literacy among *Journal* readers. Beginning in 1990, the *Journal* featured annotated bibliographies on research related to academic advising, which continue as a regularly published feature. By any standard, the *NACADA Journal* has made a significant contribution to the body of knowledge of advising.

Research Grants and Scholarships

Just as NACADA recognized the significance of publishing the *NACADA Journal*, the early leadership exhibited great forethought in initiating programs to support individual research on advising. In 1983, NACADA established the Student Research Award, which is open to any NACADA member enrolled in a master's or doctoral level program. Since 1983, the award has been given to 22 individuals.

In 1988, the NACADA Board approved the NACADA Research Grant. The grants range from \$500 to \$5,000 and are intended to facilitate research related to academic advising. Those who submit proposals are asked to describe the development, implementation, and reporting of rigorous inquiry in one of the following areas (National Academic Advising Association, 2008):

empirical studies; evaluation or analysis of advising practices, models or systems; development, evaluation or analysis of advising-based theory; studies of the history, evolution and future of the field; empirical research related to the advising process (inter- and intrapersonal dimensions); and, qualitative research on advising practices.

The association has identified 10 areas as critical to the success of advising. Those areas can be reviewed at www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/

[Research_Related/researchagenda.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Research_Related/researchagenda.htm). Since the inception of the program, NACADA has awarded 67 research grants for a wide variety of studies.

Clearinghouse on Academic Advising

Perhaps no tool is more useful to scholars and researchers than a comprehensive, well-organized, and thorough collection of resources. The National Clearinghouse on Academic Advising was founded by Virginia Gordon at The Ohio State University in 1989. The Clearinghouse served as a repository for advising resources. Clearinghouse staff prepared annotated bibliographies, conducted searches for materials, and responded to requests for assistance in seeking information on academic advising topics. The Clearinghouse at Ohio State closed in 1999, but in 2002 Clearinghouse materials were transferred to the NACADA Executive Office where resources were expanded and original materials solicited for inclusion. The mission of the NACADA Clearinghouse is to promote the advancement of academic advising (i.e., explain and improve practice) by providing members with electronic access to a) member-suggested topics for advisor professional development and the advising of students; b) practitioner-authored overviews of relevant advising topics; and c) references that support member research for the betterment of the field, advising programs, advisors, and students.

The Clearinghouse is organized under two broad headings: a) working with students and b) advisor and system-related topics. Categories found in the working with students category include student population groups (over 35 topics), resources helpful in advising students (35 topics), delivery methods and modes (12 topics), and ethics and legal issues (2 topics).

Under the category advisor and system, topics include administrative and professional issues (46) and history, theory, philosophy, and values (7). An overview of the Clearinghouse can be found on the NACADA Web site at www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/overview.htm#mission.

Workshops and Conferences

In 1995, under the aegis of the NACADA Research Committee, a series of pre-conference workshops and concurrent conference sessions were introduced at both regional and national conferences. These sessions were intended to engender a better understanding of research, stimulate interest in research, and assist individuals who were conducting research projects related to advising. Research presentations, offered by members of the

research committee, are now standard fare for regional and national conferences.

Preparation Programs

The terms *discipline* and *profession* both are characterized by specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation, including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods. Several definitions of profession suggest that such knowledge and intensive preparation is acknowledged only when an individual completes a terminal degree in a field of study. In conjunction with Kansas State University, NACADA has introduced an on-line graduate level certificate and a master of science degree in academic advising. The certificate consists of five courses (15 graduate credits): Foundations of Academic Advising, Multicultural Aspects of Academic Advising, The College Student and the College Environment, Trends in Career Development, and Learning Principles. Since 2002 when it was initiated, 118 students have completed the certificate program. The 30-hour on-line master’s program includes the courses listed above and offerings in college student athletes, research methods, and learning principles, as well as seminars in interpersonal relations and in students with special needs. One hundred thirty-eight students were enrolled in the spring of 2009.

Measuring the Progress

At first blush, one would assume that advising as a field of inquiry has grown and expanded significantly as a result of NACADA’s efforts. However, one wonders at the extent to which all of NACADA’s efforts over the past 30 years have affected higher education and resulted in appreciable changes in the scholarship of academic advising, the research that advances the field, and the body of knowledge that defines it. To measure the degree to which these areas have changed requires the use of fairly traditional measures of intellectual scrutiny: journal articles and documents that focus on (or at least mention) academic advising, graduate programs or courses in academic advising, and graduate theses and dissertations that focus on (or at least mention) academic advising.

Journal Articles and Documents

One measure of the efficacy of a field of study can be drawn by reviewing the scholarship and research that appears in professional journals and other published documents. The Education

Resources Information Center (ERIC) system provides the opportunity to conduct such a literature search (www.eric.ed.gov). Prior to 1990 a search for journal articles and documents about (or mentioning) academic advising was fairly difficult, but thanks to the efforts of several members of the NACADA leadership, ERIC included *academic advising* as a search descriptor in 1991. Therefore, researchers can now follow the changes in the prevalence of academic advising in articles and documents. Table 1 provides an overview of the trend in the number of articles and documents that mentioned advising in the text or in the title. The 2000-08 search included articles and documents through June of 2008.

Table 2 provides an overview of the sources in which the 2000-08 articles and documents appeared. The 2000-08 search included articles and documents through June of 2008.

In addition to categorizing articles and documents by descriptors, ERIC also identifies the publication type for each entry. ERIC defines a number of publication categories, but for the purpose of this exploration, three categories characterize nearly

Table 1 ERIC hits on academic advising

Mentions	Year			
	1965-80	1981-89	1990-99	2000-08
Text	14	43	47	386
Title	5	12	14	51

Table 2 Percentage of ERIC hits that mentions *academic advising*, 2000-08

Source	% Mentions (N = 386)	% Titles (N = 51)
<i>NACADA Journal</i>	17	45
No source available	8	8
On-line submissions to ERIC	8	6
<i>College Student Journal</i>	5	4
<i>Journal of College Student Retention, Research and Theory</i>	4	4
<i>Journal of College Student Development</i>	3	4
<i>About Campus</i>	3	0

Note. One-third of all the articles mentioning academic advising, came from journals and documents where, during the period surveyed, only one article included the term *academic advising*.

all articles and documents related to advising: descriptive (project descriptions, program descriptions, reports of organizational activities); evaluative (studies in which research, alternative courses of action, or merits of a particular process or program are evaluated); and research (original research designed to seek facts or generalizable principles). Table 3 provides the percentage of 2000-08 articles and documents in each of the three publication types.

One can easily draw superficial conclusions from Tables 1, 2, and 3. From 1990-99 to 2000-08 the mention of *academic advising* increased fairly dramatically in the journals and documents included in the ERIC system. In addition, from 2000 to 2008, the *NACADA Journal* was the primary source of text and titles that include *academic advising*. Also, ERIC articles and documents categorized as research constitute less than one third of the entries.

These data raise several critical issues. First, from 2000 to 2008, the number of ERIC descriptors for college student development (4,668), student persistence (1,129), college counseling (2,013), and for educational vouchers (513) is greater than for academic advising (386). This information suggests that although interest in advising, as measured by text citations, is increasing, it has not reached the level of other educational topics.

Second, although the mentions of academic advising in the text have increased, no concomitant rise in the appearance of *academic advising* in article or document titles is found. From 2000 to 2008, article and document titles accounted for only 13% of the text mentions. Those percentages were 36, 28, and 30% for the periods 1965-80, 1981-89, and 1990-99 respectively. This suggests that increased interest has not been manifested in a significant number of articles or documents in which advising is the central theme.

Third, while the *NACADA Journal* is unsurprisingly the primary source of both text citations and article titles, one third of the citations appear in journals or documents only once in the period studied. Also, 16% of the instances of *academic advising* are not accompanied by an appropriate source or are sub-

mitted directly to ERIC; that is, the term was used in works that have not been subjected to a critical review process. Finally, only three juried journals include academic advising more than a handful of times: *The College Student Journal*, *The Journal of College Student Development*, and *The Journal of College Student Retention, Research and Theory*. Indeed, between 2000 and 2008, these three juried journals accounted for only seven articles with an advising focus, so one can conclude that, with the exception of the *NACADA Journal*, few juried journals place any emphasis on academic advising. In addition, because only 95 academic libraries subscribe to the *NACADA Journal*, one can argue that the academic community does not recognize the intellectual validity of academic advising.

The evidence on journal articles and other documents leads to two plausible conclusions. First, strides in advancing the body of knowledge of academic advising are evident. The mention of academic advising in ERIC text and articles with advising as a central focus has increased since the beginning of this millennium. For those predisposed to make value judgments based on improvement, they have much of which to be proud. Second, the strides made in establishing a scholarship of academic advising mark the beginning of the journey. Advising still has some distance to travel before one can claim it on equal footing with other areas of higher education inquiry. It is yet to be recognized as a branch of learning, a field of study, a discipline, or a profession.

Graduate Programs and Courses in Academic Advising

To satisfy the definition of a discipline and a profession, a branch of knowledge must be formally taught in an intensive preparation curriculum. Therefore, the veracity of academic advising as a field of inquiry can be measured by the degree to which graduate programs provide individuals with the opportunity for intensive consideration of academic advising and that lead to an advanced degree or certificate. The exploration of this issue begins and ends with the on-line advising certificate and the master of science degree in academic advising at Kansas State University. The Kansas State offerings constitute the only graduate program available to students who wish to further their education in academic advising. In addition, recent attempts to identify NACADA and ACADV (the academic advising network for professionals and faculty) members interested in developing graduate courses or degrees in academic advising resulted in only a

Table 3 ERIC publication types 2000-08

Publication Type	% Mentions (N = 386)	% Titles (N = 51)
Research	30.1	27.1
Descriptive	39.3	41.2
Evaluative	22.0	19.6
Other publication types	8.6	12.1

handful of responses, most coming from individuals who had either taken or taught a course in academic advising. A group of individuals formed by NACADA for developing graduate courses or programs was disbanded because of insufficient interest in the topic.

NACADA and Kansas State should be commended for establishing the certificate and the degree program in academic advising. Enrollment figures provide testimony to its value and to the interest in the program. The dearth of other advising education programs illustrates that advising as a branch of learning is not yet acknowledged as a field of study, a discipline, or as a profession equivalent to others that characterize higher education.

In a recent survey of approximately 2,000 NACADA full-time advisors (not advising administrators) 70% reported holding a master's degree. If extrapolated to the entire membership of NACADA (approaching 11,000), a conservative estimate of individuals with master's degrees would be 5,500 to 6,500. None of those individuals earned a master's in the field of academic advising, and these NACADA members are a subpopulation of all academic advisors. If advising is to advance as a field of inquiry, the existence of a single on-line preparation program cannot possibly meet the demand for individuals who wish to engage formally in extended instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles that constitute the field of academic advising.

Graduate Dissertations and Theses in Academic Advising

The attention given to a subject area in graduate student dissertations and theses measures the integrity of a field of study. Table 4 includes data on dissertation text and titles that use the term academic advising in the periods 1990-1999 and 2000-2008.

A cursory review of Table 4 shows that an average of 1-2 dissertations focusing on advising was offered per year during the 90s. The rise to 3-4 dissertations per annum in this decade fails to excite. In addition, the abstracts of the 33 dissertations from 2000-08 that included advising in the title indicate that 11 of the dissertations were based

on survey research of student satisfaction with advising and 3 of the dissertations featured case studies. In addition, over the same period, 1 in 680 doctoral dissertations in the field of education included a text mention of academic advising and 1 in 3,030 dissertations included advising in the title, an indication of central focus of the dissertation. Based on these data, one must conclude that the field of academic advising has not risen to any degree of prominence among individuals earning a doctorate in education.

From Here to There: Next Steps

Gains in visibility in the higher education community, the knowledge base, and intellectual rigor could lead some to the conclusion that academic advising has established itself as a bona fide and recognized field of inquiry. Such an assessment is based on the quality of NACADA's efforts to enhance a scholarship of advising and expand the research base that supports advising. Advising, at least by the traditional measures of publications, graduate educational options, and dissertation research, is more viable than it was at the turn of the millennium.

Define a Core Graduate Curriculum

A graduate-level advising curriculum must be developed. The field of advising has never really engaged in a serious dialogue on the specialized knowledge, skills, methods, and scholarly principles required for academic advisor or advising administrator proficiency. Such a curriculum should include a set of core courses that are specific to the field of advising and would be augmented by a set of courses common to other graduate programs focused on higher education or student development. In addition to such courses, I envision the possibility that tracks of study could be developed for students interested in further specialization (e.g., community college advising or a specific student subpopulation).

Expand Graduate Programs

Unless and until more universities offer advanced degrees in advising or with an advising emphasis, the field will not achieve the status of a discipline or of a profession. In addition, if advising is to represent a common set of skills (gained through a defined curriculum), then those skills must be taught in more than one graduate program. An expanded number of in-residence and on-line graduate programs would also add to the body of knowledge that generates an increase in scholarly

Table 4 Advising dissertations

Citations	Study Period	
	1990-99	2000-08
Text	103	145
Title	14	33

publications, both in journals and in theses and dissertations. Finally, the growth in NACADA (now approaching 11,000 members) indicates a great demand for academic advisors, which translates to a likely demand for graduate study. A review of the curriculum of the Kansas State on-line master's degree program indicates that, with the exception of one course (Foundations of Advising), which is specific to advising, the core of the program closely parallels those of higher education or student development master's degree programs. Therefore, a defined curriculum offered through graduate study at many institutions is imperative. Otherwise, *advisor* is no more than a job title and advising may never lay claim to being a discipline or a profession. To promote the development of graduate programs, NACADA could launch a marketing effort to graduate departments and provide a curriculum guide and consulting, as needed, to support program implementation.

Reconfigure and Expand the Student Scholarship Program

The current student-scholarship program is open to NACADA members of 2 or more years and who currently serve as an advisor and are enrolled in a master's or doctoral degree program. To maximize the impact of the program, I recommend expanding both the number and the size of the awards, provide for a second year of renewal for master's degree students and a third year of renewal for doctoral students (provided the student has made sufficient progress in the endeavor), open the program to non-NACADA members, and advertise the scholarships to higher education and student development graduate programs across the country. Application and renewal requests should include a statement indicating how proposed study will increase (has increased) individual skills and understanding of the advising process. Additional scholarship money should be awarded to individuals who complete a thesis or dissertation that focuses on the field of advising.

Increase Outreach Efforts to Faculty

Just as faculty members are critical to the development of an advising curriculum and increasing the number of graduate programs in advising, they will ultimately stand in judgment of and recognize academic advising as a field of inquiry (or a discipline or a profession). Faculty members are the arbiters of elements of quality scholarship and research. If advising does not gain credibility with and the advocacy of faculty members, the field

stands little chance of being elevated in status among intellectuals. At the micro level, advisors need to reach out to faculty members on a routine basis. In addition, advisors should seek collaboration with the faculty on association presentations, research, and other campus-based projects. At the macro level, NACADA should assertively seek collaboration with scholarly associations in the form of cooperative advising research funded by NACADA as well as shared conference participation and presentations. Also, NACADA could develop a faculty-written monograph on advising in the disciplines.

Expand Research Emphasis

Beginning with Grites in 1979, the call for quality research to support the field has been unrelenting and has taken on increasing urgency now that academic advising is far more visible on the higher education scene. In 2000 and 2007, I offered a blueprint to expand the NACADA research agenda (Habley, 2000, 2007). Significant components of the plan included the suggestion to organize and fund a national research summit involving both advising scholars and other prominent researchers in higher education. The summit could be used to establish a 5-year plan for funded research, provide a forum for collaboration among other professional associations in the implementation of the 5-year agenda, and seek grant support through foundations and other funding sources. Additional recommendations for expanding the research effort include placing increased emphasis on student research awards through expanded funding, opening the program to nonmembers, and advertising the award to higher education and student-development graduate programs across the country. In addition, NACADA should reestablish the national award for an organization, institution, or individual who makes outstanding contributions to advising research. The award has only been given twice since it was established in 1983.

Conclusion

In reality and in spite of NACADA's efforts, the overall scholarship has advanced little since 1979 when Grites intoned, "Research studies must be designed to determine the relative worth and adaptability of advising practices" (p. 54). However, to date, a unique and credible body of knowledge is nonexistent, evidence supporting the impact of advising is insufficient, and a coherent and widely delivered curriculum for advising is currently unavailable. I contend that without this basic frame-

work, the case for the importance of academic advising can be neither built nor sustained. Implementing the plan of action set is critical if advising is to be at the core of the institution's mission of teaching and learning. 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.

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