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The Pros and Cons of Consolidating Rehabilitation Counseling Associations: A Qualitative Analysis of Views From the Field

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The potential for unification of rehabilitation counseling professional associations has been a conceptual debate for the past several decades. In a previous article of this special issue, Phillips et al. (2022) provided quantitative data to capture the opinions of professionals on the issue of consolidation. The present study builds on those findings by providing a qualitative analysis of the rationale provided for each response from not only professional association members, but the broader rehabilitation counseling community. The analysis provides clarity about stakeholders' rationale regarding their beliefs on rehabilitation counseling professional association consolidation. Responses were analyzed by group according to whether participants were in favor of, opposed to, or uncertain about consolidation. The majority of respondents supportive of consolidation felt it offered a pathway toward internal unity and external validation of the profession, while the main rationale from those opposed to consolidation centered on loss of distinctiveness of individual associations. Overwhelmingly, those who were undecided on consolidation cited lack of familiarity as a barrier to providing a decisive response. Implications for these results are presented.

Dwindling membership and fragmentation of rehabilitation counseling (RC) professional associations have been cause for concern for well over a decade. As warned by Leahy and Tarvydas (2001), "These weaknesses make us vulnerable to the whims of legislative bodies, the encroachment of other professional groups who have recently discovered disability issues, and increasingly to state-level regulatory bodies who control the practice of counseling and related activities" (p. 3). Twenty-one years later, these same issues are still prevalent, while association membership remains stagnant and even in decline. Tansey and Garske (2007) went so far as to suggest that RC professional associations are in a state of decay, citing symptoms of organizational decay including decreasing efficiency and satisfaction, self-defensive diagnoses of organizational problems, and failure to successfully address these concerns.

This current state of the associations, combined with mounting legislative and professionalization issues (e.g., reduced qualifications for providers in state vocational rehabilitation through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; WIOA 2014), has rekindled questions related to the consolidation of RC professional associations. Many scholars have argued the importance of reimagining our professional associations through some type of restructuring or consolidation to reduce a perception of fragmenta-

tion (Leahy et al., 2011; Leahy & Tarvydas, 2001; Shaw et al., 2006). Notably absent from existing research has been the perspectives of the professionals working in RC either as a practitioner, administrator, or educator. In this special issue, Phillips et al. (2022) have been able to show that the majority of professionals surveyed were either in favor of consolidating the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA), the National Rehabilitation Counseling Association (NRCA), and the Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Association (RCEA) into a single association representing RC or were uncertain of whether to consolidate or not. A critical next step comes in attempting to contextualize this quantitative data through the qualitative responses provided by participants. Within the study survey, participants were first asked: "Do you feel that the general rehabilitation counseling association and divisions (ARCA, NRCA, and RCEA) should be consolidated into one professional association?" They were then prompted, "Please provide a rationale for your response." It is this rationale that is the focus of the present study, with the aim of better understanding the reasons participants gave for being in favor of, opposed to, or unsure about the potential for consolidating RC professional associations. As valuable as it is to know that 46.7% of respondents favor consolidation, at least equally important is understanding the motives for

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feeling that way. Although only 6.9% of the sample opposed consolidation, it is critical to allow the voices of this group to be heard and weighted alongside those favoring it. Finally, a substantial 46.4% reported being unsure about whether to consolidate or not. The qualitative analysis that follows provides a critical context for this group and the motives driving their uncertainty.

Method

This study describes data that was collected as a part of the broader study and survey as described in Phillips et al. (2022). The data collection methods, instrumentation, and quantitative procedures are identical. Please reference Phillips et al. (2022) for a detailed overview of these pieces. All survey respondents were required to state a position on consolidation of RC professional associations (*Yes, No, Unsure*), but were given the option to provide a rationale for their response, resulting in variable response rate. For this component of the study, the sample sizes can be found below. A detailed description of the survey instrument is provided in the Phillips et al. (2022) article. Data analysis techniques for the qualitative analysis can be found below.

Procedure

The researchers have close ties to professional associations and the topic of unification in the rehabilitation counseling profession. As such, they engaged in active and ongoing dialogue regarding their relationship to the data and went through three rounds of revisions to establish the final codebook. These three rounds involved researchers independently coding 10% of the data using the drafts of the codebook, and then adjusting as necessary to ensure clarity and fidelity (Campbell et al., 2013; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). The final iteration of the codebook included kappas from 0.85 to 1.0, indicating strong to near perfect reliability (McHugh, 2012).

Results

Survey participants were able to endorse their opinion on whether consolidation of the three rehabilitation counseling professional associations should occur, indicating whether they were in favor, not in favor, or undecided. Each was also asked to provide a rationale for their choice. The responses for each response group (*Yes, No, Unsure*) were analyzed separately to better understand patterns of reasoning within each group.

Participants in Favor of Consolidation

Those in favor of consolidation accounted for 1,033 open-ended responses. Five major themes, with corresponding subthemes for two, emerged from this group: (a) internal unity for the profession, (b) external voice and strength, (c) economic and management rationale, (d) reduced confusion, and (e) generate greater membership. Lower incidence responses were classified as "Other." These included a desire to consolidate that was accompanied by apathy or pessimism ($n = 3$) and responses generally assert-

Table 1. Opinions of Participants Favoring Consolidation ($n = 1,033$)

Theme	<i>n</i>	%
Internal unity for the profession	448	43.4
External voice and strength	384	37.2
Economic and management rationale	343	32.2
Reduced confusion	116	11.2
Generate greater membership	94	9.1

ing favor for consolidation ($n = 12$). The final Other comments ($n = 51$) were tangential to the topic of consolidation, reflecting opinions on accreditation, licensure/credentialing, and practice issues. Table 1 provides more details for these major themes.

Internal Unity for the Profession

Comments related to increasing internal unity for the profession centered around four subthemes: (a) associations are "more alike than different", (b) opportunity to solidify consistent identity, (c) increased engagement, and (d) professional development benefits. Respondents noted many similarities across the associations, particularly in relation to mission, goals, agenda, and members served. As one respondent noted, "three organizations competing for membership and having different governance is unnecessary if they have the same mission and ethical standards." By "collecting under one name," consolidation would create a "stronger and more unified professional identity." This was seen as a catalyst for unity across the profession, since "for years we have suffered from a fragmented identity, which has represented bits and pieces of our larger rehabilitation counseling identity...time to add the parts and become a stronger and unified voice." Consolidation was viewed as having the potential to increase "collaboration," "knowledge sharing," and "networking across members." This type of engagement was seen as a vehicle for dialogue and the development of research and evidence-based practices that would better support clients with disabilities. Reciprocally, members could receive training and professional development in one place, as a "stronger platform can provide stronger training and prepare stronger rehabilitation counselors." Overall, this theme was summarized best by this respondent:

I see it as an ecosystem of a common stakeholder audience, shared values, and shared intended outcomes. Consolidation, in theory, should reduce silos and foster greater unity, and enable enhanced networking benefits under one umbrella. To this extent I see it as an opportunity to enhance and maximize our impacts and enable greater return on investment from the membership.

External Voice and Strength

Not only was the internal perspective captured by respondents in favor of consolidation, but also external validation and influence. This theme was best described as

“strength in numbers” for pursuits in lobbying, advocating for professional issues, and raising collective voices. Consolidation was argued by many to create “better representation” in political, professional, and legislative realms. Credentialing and insurance reimbursement were two areas noted by respondents where consolidation would make a significant impact, particularly in gaining parity with entities like social work and mental health counseling. Having the CRC credential and professional training of rehabilitation counselors “recognized and respected” would open up job markets and “help the human services industry know that there is a profession/education that is more aligned with some of the employment opportunities out there.” Some respondents even reflected a sense of resentment and frustration over remaining on the professional margins because the fragmentation of RC associations impeded the effectiveness of lobbying efforts, as one respondent reflected: “It’s just time. Stop the infighting. We need a unified voice, not a disjointed one. There is strength in numbers, and we presently cannot leverage strength due to a watered-down voice.”

Economic and Management Rationale

While the “bottom line” concerning expenses is a legitimate factor in organizational membership, respondents were not solely concerned about personal cost in their opinions toward consolidation. Subthemes within the economic and management rationale theme arose, including: (a) cost savings to individuals, (b) streamlined processes, and (c) fiscal management and resource combining within the association. Respondents were overtly concerned about the personal cost of membership, advocating for consolidation to avoid the necessity of paying restrictive fees: “it becomes quite expensive and exhaustive when trying to maintain memberships to multiple associations, particularly when most employers do not offer financial assistance.” But most responses in this area were focused on the cost and effort savings associations could achieve through consolidation. Marketing and messaging, leadership, and processes could be streamlined within a single “clearing-house” association, leading to “efficiency” and “less bureaucracy.”

Reduced Confusion

Competition among professional associations was seen by respondents as a cause of confusion for potential members and parties external to the associations’ purpose. Fragmentation made the purpose and benefits of joining unclear, leading some professionals to forego membership altogether. This was also seen to hinder efforts to attract early career professionals, as it can be “intimidating” for new graduates to choose which association is “best” for them: “It gets a bit confusing knowing whom to turn to for guidance on things.” Even those with more experience and knowledge on professional associations found it difficult to advocate toward the “right” choice, with one respondent noting, “It is impossible to explain to students why they would want to join any of these associations.” Through con-

solidation, there would be “fluidity and clarity of what the organization does, what ‘power’ it holds, and what authorities it provides to the associated professionals.” Without more unity, it makes the field of rehabilitation counseling “seem less qualified than the others.”

Generate Greater Membership

As a natural outgrowth of the themes presented thus far—unity, external recognition, combined resources, and less confusion, a consolidated professional association has the potential to attract a greater number of members, as “our field is spread thin enough as it is.” In one respect, there would be a pooling of existing members from each association, while some respondents felt “consolidating into one would make it more likely that I join.” One respondent, who noted being opposed to consolidation efforts in prior decades, felt because of declining membership, “I am now thinking it is a great idea...to advocate for legislation matters, as well as attendance in conferences.” The following response represents a culmination of these themes:

There have been issues with duplicity within the profession from my perspective. It’s difficult to recruit future counselors into the master’s program and teach future counselors what the profession is when it is easily conceived as a profession that is falling apart due to dwindling membership counts...I think those who may be interested in joining a professional association are looking for a “home” that they can call. For me, if I were going to look for a professional “home,” I would look for growth, professionalism, vitality, prestige, and political representation. Furthermore, it will be easier to stand as one solid body if the resources are combined and members feel a greater sense of cohesion, uniformity, and unity within the profession. It’s also easier to attract other professionals into the profession if it doesn’t look like it’s on life support. I know that those who don’t want to consolidate the profession fear that they may lose their professional identity, which is a valid concern, but the consequence of this stance is much more detrimental to the future of the profession than having to consolidate the profession.

Participants Opposed to Consolidation

Of the participants not in favor of consolidation, 138 provided a rationale for their choice. Four main themes emerged for this group: (a) distinctness in identity, purpose, or membership; (b) contentment/apathy; (c) benefits of choice; and (d) concerns about identity or confusion. Lower incidence responses were classified as “Other” ($n = 10$); these included economic reasons, pessimism consolidation could work, and lack of knowledge. A number of responses ($n = 14$) were not related to the topic of consolidation of rehabilitation counseling professional associations. [Table 2](#) provides more details for these major themes.

Distinctness in Identity, Purpose, or Membership

As opposed to the gain in identity projected by those in favor of consolidation, a large proportion of respondents who opposed this decision felt it would lead to diminished

Table 2. Opinions of Participants Opposing Consolidation ($n = 138$)

Theme	n	%
Distinctness in identity, purpose, or membership	47	34.1
Contentment/apathy	18	13.0
Benefits of choice	16	11.6
Concerns about identity or confusion	8	5.8

identity and distinctiveness of the professional associations. Respondents perceived a uniqueness of “ideas,” “perspectives,” “focus,” and “purpose” among the existing associations. One respondent noted, “I believe each organization serves as a valuable and independent entity to support the work and learning of the rehabilitation professional. Although some endeavors of the organizations focus on similar areas, the entire mission of each is different.”

Contentedness/Apathy

The second largest proportion of responses reflected a contentment with the current structure or apathy toward a change. Some respondents felt that consolidation would not bring about change, as has been shown through “history,” but others felt the current structure promoted “accountability” and were happy with being “autonomous.” Those reflecting apathy toward the effort indicated a lack of caring or interest in the matter.

Benefits of Choice

Availability of choice was seen as a driving factor for some to oppose consolidation efforts. Options would lead to “more specialized experiences,” where a “monopoly” could impact progress if the one association in control discourages “diversity of thought and innovation.” One respondent clearly summarized the benefit of choice in professional associations:

I believe having multiple organizations allows professionals to select the one with focuses and activities consistent with their own interests and priorities. Diversity encourages greater participation, as more professionals within rehabilitation counseling are likely to find an organization consistent with their interests. Each organization offers opportunities for networking and growth, so the more organizations, the more opportunities and benefits the profession reaps from them. Many professions have multiple organizations relevant to them, so why should rehab counseling be different?

Concerns About Identity or Confusion

A smaller proportion of respondents indicated consolidation would result in a loss of identity or increased confusion among professionals. Some respondents felt this would change the “emphasis on disability” or take away from the important focus on “the vocational side,” which could “detract from the local topics/focus.”

Table 3. Opinions of Participants Unsure About Consolidation ($n = 833$)

Theme	n	%
Lack of familiarity	697	79.0
Opinions with no position	95	10.8
Want more information	68	7.7
Neutrality	51	5.8

Participants Unsure About Consolidation

A total of 883 participants who were unsure about whether to consolidate rehabilitation counseling professional associations provided open-ended comments. Four major themes, with corresponding subthemes for two, emerged from this group: (a) lack of familiarity, (b) opinions with no position, (c) want more information, and (d) neutrality. Lower incidence responses were classified as “Other,” including, but not limited to, indicating a distinctness among the professional associations ($n = 24$), concerns about losing identity ($n = 20$), and dislike/no perceived benefits of professional associations ($n = 20$); however, a number of responses ($n = 46$) referenced general uncertainty that was too vague to be classified or comments tangential to the topic of consolidation. [Table 3](#) provides more details for these major themes.

Lack of Familiarity

Overwhelmingly, respondents in this group provided responses that focused on one theme: *lack of familiarity*. This theme reflected five subthemes, indicating lack of familiarity (a) with the associations, (b) with the issue of consolidation, (c) with personal benefits to consolidation, and (d) with organizational benefits to consolidation, as well as (e) an unclassified lack of knowledge. With regard to the associations, respondents indicated not knowing enough or appreciating the differences among them, or reported having never personally heard of the associations, even with experience in the field. A number of respondents from diverse service settings, such as independent living and higher education counseling, did not feel they were as connected to RC professional associations. On the issue of consolidation, many respondents noted having never learned of prior efforts toward consolidation, nor the current discussion. While noting the newness of the topic to them, one respondent felt intrigued, noting “I do feel strongly that something needs to be done to enhance the Rehabilitation Counseling profession.” Absent information on the personal implications or benefits to the profession, many respondents felt they were not in a position to have an informed opinion on the matter. Respondents did not seem willing to rush to an opinion without more information, as one stated, “I suppose that together we are stronger, yet I am not a fan of change for the sake of change. How this would benefit us and our clients would be my main concern.” Most respondents falling into the unclassified responses indicated more generally “not knowing enough” to

form an opinion, but did not state the source of the missing knowledge.

Opinions With No Position

Despite maintaining uncertainty about their position on consolidation, there were a number of respondents who provided cogent opinions about benefits and/or drawbacks to the decision. Subthemes in this area included: (a) opportunity to be stronger, (b) contingent on how consolidation is done, and (c) pros and cons without a decision. There was a prospective benefit or positive connotation offered toward a consideration of consolidation, such as making the process “simpler,” working toward “the same goal,” and an opportunity to “increase membership and add diversity.” Some respondents cited the approach to consolidation as a concern preventing a decision on the subject. Hesitations included how service sectors and subspecialty areas (e.g., educators, private vs. public sector) would be represented, and the impact to state chapters of the individual associations. Still, some respondents wrestled with both the pros *and* cons, without proffering a decisive vote on consolidation. There was an interest toward the “focus,” “purpose,” and “principles” that would result from consolidation. One respondent captured this:

The specialties of each make sense, to some degree, to not be consolidated on one hand. On the other, I think that it makes a lot of sense for there not to be fragmentation so that we are addressing and coming at things from a singular voice. Still thinking that through, but I would (at this point) side with the singular voice side of the argument.

Want More Information

A smaller proportion of respondents indicated not having enough information to form an opinion on whether to support or oppose consolidation, but indicated a need for or active plans to seek out additional information. Some of the reasons cited included determining if the association would “assume the role of CRCC,” what “the impact” would be on the profession, and the “risks and benefits” associated with consolidation.

Neutrality

A position of neutrality on the issue was offered by some respondents, as they did not perceive the decision to consolidate as bearing on their professional practice. Reasons for these positions included nearing retirement, practicing out of the country, not maintaining active membership, or not being “part of those circles.”

Discussion and Implications

While understanding the size of the “camps” in the discussion of rehabilitation counseling professional association consolidation provides information on the volume of support for each option, examining the reasoning behind stakeholder opinions offers a more compelling level of analysis for conceiving the issue. This manuscript provides

a qualitative analysis of respondents grouped by their viewpoint on consolidation: in support, opposed to, and uncertain. While those with formed opinions may remain entrenched in their position, there was evidence indicating some respondents have altered their stance over time as the professional climate has changed. However, there is still a large proportion of respondents who are uncertain on the topic, presenting an opportunity to focus greater discussion.

Overall, the variety and volume of responses were greatest for those supporting consolidation. An overarching theme was around strength and opportunity—for identity, stability, facilitating change, and promoting visibility. Combining resources and streamlining processes would allow the associations to leverage their position. Consistency of message and mission was seen as a way to decrease confusion and increase the membership body. Though lesser in number, there was an overriding theme of interest in maintaining distinctness among those opposed to consolidation. Each association was seen as serving a different need, allowing for broader perspectives and a variety of thought to remain. With 79% of uncertain respondents citing lack of familiarity or confusion with RC professional associations and the topic of consolidation, the impact of these associations is not being felt strongly in the field. This resulted in more superficial, rather than constructive responses from this group and greater homogeneity among responses in each theme. Some in this group offered rationale that aligned with that offered by consolidation supporters (e.g., opportunity to be stronger) and opposition (e.g., maintaining specific identity), but some could not reconcile the pros and cons to make a decision. Lack of certainty on the issue of consolidation points to the need for continued collegial dialogue. This will require frank and objective discussion on consolidation, with an honest and grounded focus on current professional realities and threats, rather than the prior efforts to achieve this goal.

Borrowing from the fields of marketing research and social psychology, individuals feel more certain about their opinions if data is presented in a way that demonstrates both benefits and limitations have been taken into account, *even if only the benefits are described* (Tormala & Rucker, 2015). Information and opportunity can be used as “levers of certainty” to direct people toward solidifying an opinion on a particular viewpoint. These levers include consensus, repetition, ease, and defense, and could be used as guideposts for addressing the precarious situation in which the rehabilitation counseling profession and its professional associations find themselves.

While the focus of this analysis was objective interpretation, the mere presentation of this information is likely to change perceptions, especially among those who remain uncertain on the topic of consolidation. Presenting *consensus* of opinions will naturally allow others to gauge their feelings against those of others (Tormala & Rucker, 2015), perhaps persuading them toward a particular stance as they see emerging opinion patterns from others in the field. This also provides information for individuals to determine levels of support for their own opinion, and the validity of

the opinions of others. *Repetition* is another powerful lever, where you provide more frequent opportunities for people to express positive opinions about a collective goal. This study should not be the only opportunity to engage on the topic of consolidation and the potential for the voice of the RC profession. Continued sharing of constructive opinions can move the profession closer to focusing on shared needs, goals, and principles, over barriers and differences. With quality information, people who are more frequently allowed to reinforce their position will increase their certainty for it.

The final two levers of certainty—*ease* and *defense*—are posited here as aspirational byproducts of what a more cohesive RC profession could provide. In the first, the tenet is: the more easily brought to mind an idea is, the more confident people are in it (Tormala & Rucker, 2015). If the field of rehabilitation counseling was a more solidified “brand,” then it would come up more often in interdisciplinary and professional spaces, and in conversations of parity, licensure, and employment opportunities. A cohesive group would more easily be brought to mind. And to the latter, people are likely to defend positions they feel certain about, and they are more certain about positions they have had to defend (Tormala & Rucker, 2015). However, in this

case, substitute “identity” for position. By finally defining and strengthening RC identity, this can serve as the catalyst and foundation for sustained professional advocacy and growth.

Conclusion

A partnership across professional organizations has the potential to create the conditions for consistency in RC identity, despite practice settings and populations served. This can create a buffer against external threats, but more proactively, create a medium for advancement of our field. The opinions of rehabilitation professionals have been presented here for consideration about the future of RC professional associations. Therefore, while the information in this manuscript is meant to be an objective presentation of the rationale for consolidation, readers are challenged to assess their own personal opinions on the topic. From there, continue to seek opportunities to move closer to the principles, identity, and action needed to ensure the profession of rehabilitation counseling remains strong, healthy, and viable well into the future—for our livelihood, but more importantly for inclusion, equity, and improved outcomes for people with disabilities.

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