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# Predicting Membership in a Consolidated Association: If We Build It, Will They Come?

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Rehabilitation counseling professional associations have experienced decades of declining membership. Efforts to increase the value of membership, to this point, have not reversed these trends. Some have argued for the consolidation of rehabilitation counseling associations as a strategy for increasing membership numbers, but no empirical studies have been conducted to assess whether consolidation could have a positive impact on membership. The purpose of this current study is to use net promotor scores to predict how membership numbers would be affected by consolidating to a single association. Net promoter scores from rehabilitation counseling professionals were used to assess the likelihood of recommending association membership for the current rehabilitation counseling associations and a hypothetical consolidated association. Results indicate that consolidation to a single rehabilitation counseling association would be accompanied by a substantial increase in its initial promotion compared to the promotion of current associations. Although not guaranteed, this data suggests that consolidating rehabilitation counseling professional associations would produce an initial increase in membership that could strengthen the position of the discipline.

Professional associations exist to support the disciplines they represent. The degree to which an association can fulfill its mission is dictated, largely, by the size of its membership (Brabham, 1988; Mills, 1980; Oliverio, 1979; Patterson & Pointer, 2007; Phillips & Leahy, 2012; Whitten, 1961). In 2022, membership numbers across the American Rehabilitation Counseling Association (ARCA), the National Rehabilitation Counseling Association (NRCA), and the Rehabilitation Counselors and Educators Association (RCEA) are at 1,043 combined. This number is far below the membership numbers from the 1970s and 80s and represents only a small fraction of practicing rehabilitation counselors (Phillips, Boland, et al., 2022). There is a desperate need to increase association membership if rehabilitation counseling is to be represented in these turbulent times of professionalization and deprofessionalization. However, answers for reversing a decades-long trend in declining association membership have been hard to come by.

The most proposed solution for declining membership has been to seek and promote a benefit that will entice membership (Phillips, Boland, et al., 2022). However, this quest has proven elusive for associations that rely on membership numbers for generating value. The other potential solution for declining membership is to consolidate reha-

bilitation counseling professional associations. Research described previously in this special issue suggests that most rehabilitation counselors are either in favor of consolidating to a single association or too unfamiliar with the associations to have an opinion (Nerlich et al., 2022; Phillips, Walker, et al., 2022). However, a strategy that relies exclusively on combining current members into a single association is not sufficient to create a robust external presence for the discipline given current membership numbers (Brubaker, 1981). Consolidating with the goal of regaining a strong source of representation hinges on attracting and retaining professionals who are not affiliated with one of the current associations. Therefore, a critical question in the consolidation debate is whether consolidating associations would compel more professionals to join, thereby generating the value needed to represent the discipline externally and meet professionals needs internally. This study is aimed at predicting the effect consolidating to a single association would have on membership numbers. We use *net promoter scores*, a common form of assessment in the business literature, to accomplish this purpose.

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## Net Promoter Score

Net promoter score (NPS) is a marketing metric that measures customer perceptions of a given company, brand, or service through a single question: How likely are you to recommend this company, product, or service to someone else (Owen, 2019)? The NPS was first conceptualized by Frederick Reichheld (2003) and the essence is that "positive word of mouth is highly beneficial, and that negative word of mouth is detrimental" (Grisaffe, 2007, p. 36). According to Reichheld's conceptualization, word of mouth, or the likelihood that one will recommend a given company, product, or service to another, is the single most important marketing variable to track when measuring customer satisfaction, loyalty, and potential growth of a company. The question is rated on a 10-point Likert scale (0 to 10). Participant ratings between 0 and 6 are considered unlikely or less likely to provide a positive recommendation and are labeled *detractors*. Participant ratings of 7 or 8 are labeled as *passively satisfied*. Finally, participant ratings of 9 or 10 are labeled as *promoters* (Grisaffe, 2007). An entity can calculate an aggregate NPS by subtracting the total percentage of promoters from the total percentage of detractors, with scores potentially ranging from -100 (when all respondents are detractors) to 100 (when all respondents are promoters). As Reichheld (2003) put it, "This number is the one number you need to grow. It's that simple and that profound" (p. 54). The NPS has been adopted and utilized by many businesses and corporations, both large and small, with an estimated 66% of large businesses using the metric (Baehre et al., 2022; Pogrebniak, 2019). The aim for companies is to have more promoters than detractors (indicated by an NPS above 0), the higher the NPS the better.

The NPS is considered to be a metric more consistent with customer *loyalty* than customer *satisfaction* (Owen, 2019). A person may be satisfied with their experience without feeling compelled to recommend a product, service, or company to another person. As such, the NPS represents a relatively high standard of marketing metrics when compared to satisfaction alone (Owen, 2019). Reichheld (2003) argued that it is exactly this level of loyalty that spurs growth. Companies that generate a high proportion of promoters are, according to Reichheld, the drivers of that growth through their recommendation of the product or service to others.

It is worth noting that the NPS is not without its own critics and detractors. For example, Fisher and Kordupleski (2018) identified five limitations to the NPS: (a) it lacks data on what to do to improve; (b) it tends to focus on keeping customers, not cultivating new ones; (c) it does not factor the passive customer into the promoter score; (d) it omits data from people who have sought other services or companies; and (e) it has an internal focus (customers or members of a given company) without consideration of external influences (e.g. market forces). These limitations have resulted in a growing consensus that relying on the NPS of existing customers as the sole source of data is insufficient for predicting growth (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018; Mandal, 2014). In other words, the NPS is a useful tool, but alone is not sufficient for predicting and planning for growth.

A review of the five major limitations suggests that the most significant can be overcome by accounting for the needs and perspectives of potential customers. In the current study, we use the NPS with a sample of current and potential members for the three primary rehabilitation counseling associations (i.e., ARCA, NRCA, and RCEA). As demonstrated by Bahre et al. (2022), considering the NPS of potential rehabilitation professional association members alongside current members addresses the most serious limitations of the NPS. Using the NPS, rather than a satisfaction survey, allows for a deeper consideration of whether or not rehabilitation counseling professionals promote the current associations and, perhaps even more importantly, whether they would promote membership in a consolidated rehabilitation counseling professional association.

## Research Questions

We address the following two research questions in this study:

1. How likely are rehabilitation counselors to promote the current rehabilitation counseling professional associations?
2. How likely are rehabilitation counselors to promote a consolidated rehabilitation counseling professional association?

## Methods

Because the data for this article was generated through the same survey used in Phillips, Walker et al. (2022) and other articles within this special issue, much of the methods for data collection, instrumentation, and procedures for this study are identical. Therefore, we refer the reader of this article to Phillips, Walker et al. (2022) for a more complete description of these methods. All questions were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the basic computations described previously for calculating the NPS. For Research Question 1, which focused on the promotion of the current rehabilitation counseling professional associations, participants were asked slightly different questions depending on their reported identification with ARCA, NRCA, or RCEA. Respondents who answered previously in the survey that they did not identify with any rehabilitation counseling association ($n$ = 1,553; 59.0%) were asked the following: "How likely are you to recommend membership in any of the three rehabilitation counseling associations or divisions to a colleague?" Those who identified closely with ARCA, NRCA, or RCEA ($n$ = 1,053; 41.0%) were asked, "How likely are you to recommend membership in the [association they most closely identified with] to a colleague?" For the hypothetical consolidated association in Research Question 2, all participants were asked the following question: "How likely would you be to recommend membership in a single, consolidated rehabilitation counseling association to a colleague?"

**Table 1. Promoter Scores for Any of the Current Rehabilitation Counseling Associations**

| Grouping (*n*) | Detractors (*n*) | Passives (*n*) | Promoters (*n*) | NPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No identification (1,513) | 84.9% (1,285) | 10.6% (161) | 4.4% (67) | -80.5 |
| At least one identification (1,053) | 45.0% (478) | 30.5% (324) | 24.6 (261) | -20.4 |
| Member in at least on association (315) | 42.7% (111) | 33.8% (88) | 44.6% (116) | 1.9 |
| All participants (2,576) | 68.4% (1,763) | 18.8% (485) | 12.7% (328) | -55.7 |

Note. NPS = net promoter score.

## Results

To answer Research Question 1, we considered promoter scores across the following groups: (a) those who do not identify with any of the three rehabilitation counseling associations, (b) those who identify with at least one of the three rehabilitation counseling associations, (c) those who are a member of at least one rehabilitation counseling association (regardless of identification), and (d) all respondents (combining identifiers and non-identifiers from a and b). Results can be found in Table 1.

Of the 1,513 who do not currently identify with ARCA, NRCA, or RCEA, 4.4% (*n* = 67) were promoters, 10.6% (*n* = 161) were passives, and 84.9% (*n* = 1,285) were detractors. The NPS for this group of professionals was -80.5. Respondents who identified with at least one of the three rehabilitation counseling associations had higher net promoter scores. Of the 1,053 currently identifying with ARCA, NRCA, or RCEA who provided a response, 24.6% (*n* = 261) were promoters, 30.5% (*n* = 324) were passives, and 45.0% (*n* = 478) were detractors. The NPS for this group of professionals was -20.4. Among the 316 current members of at least one rehabilitation counseling association, 315 reported their likelihood of recommending a current rehabilitation counseling association. For current members of at least one of the three associations, 44.6% (*n* = 116) were promoters, 33.8% (*n* = 88) were passives, and 42.7% (*n* = 111) were detractors. The net promoter score for this group of professionals was 1.9. When combining those who did and did not identify with a rehabilitation counseling association, 68.4% (*n* = 1,763) were detractors, 18.8% (*n* = 485) were passives, and 12.7% (*n* = 328) were promoters, for a promoter score of -55.7.

## Promoter Scores for a Hypothetical Consolidated Rehabilitation Counseling Association

Research Question 2 focused on how likely rehabilitation counselors are to promote a hypothetical rehabilitation counseling professional association. Among the 2,558 respondents who responded to the question of how likely they would be to recommend membership in a consolidated association, 48.2% (*n* = 1,233) were detractors, 25.1% (*n* = 642) were passives, and 26.7% (*n* = 683) were promoters. To

draw an accurate comparison, we break down NPS scores in Table 2 by those used in Table 1.

Considering both research questions together, we note that the one group with a positive promoter score for the current associations were current members of at least one of the three primary associations, with a promoter score of 1.9. For a hypothetical consolidated association, positive promoter scores existed for both those identifying with at least one association (NPS = 4.3) and for current members of at least one association (NPS = 20.5). Figure 1 provides a comparison of the NPS for each group to contrast the NPS for current and consolidated associations.

## Discussion

Previous research highlights how important it is to promote professional associations from within the ranks, such as between co-workers or from direct supervisors (Phillips & Leahy, 2012). With limited membership numbers, resources are likely insufficient for an extensive marketing campaign to alter the status quo for the current associations. A base of engaged promoters may be the only way for the discipline of rehabilitation counseling to create new and meaningful growth. In this study we have used the NPS to assess loyalty to current rehabilitation counseling professional associations and to forecast what levels of loyalty may initially exist for a single, consolidated professional association. As discussed in the introduction, promoter scores matter because they give an indication of future growth. In our case, they provide an indication of whether a consolidated association would initially entice membership beyond the promotion of existing rehabilitation counseling associations. NPS for the current rehabilitation counseling associations of ARCA, NRCA, and RCEA are concerning by any measure. Among 2,576 respondents, 87.2% fell into the NPS categories of detractor or passive for the current associations. The -55.7 NPS from across all participants implies weak prospects for future growth being generated from promotion by rehabilitation counseling professionals.

Results comparing the promotion of a consolidated association and the existing associations do not suggest consolidation as a panacea to longstanding membership issues, but offer hope for reversing membership decline. NPS scores increased substantially across those who do not identify with an association, those who do, and even across

**Table 2. Promoter Scores for a Consolidated Rehabilitation Counseling Association**

| Grouping (n) | Detractors (n) | Passives (n) | Promoters (n) | NPS |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| No identification (1,492) | 58.6% (874) | 22.5% (336) | 18.9% (282) | -39.7 |
| At least one identification (1,053) | 33.5% (353) | 28.7% (302) | 37.8% (398) | 4.3 |
| Member in at least on association (313) | 28.1% (88) | 23.3% (73) | 48.6% (152) | 20.5 |
| All participants (2,557) | 48.2% (1,233) | 25.1% (642) | 26.7% (682) | -21.5 |
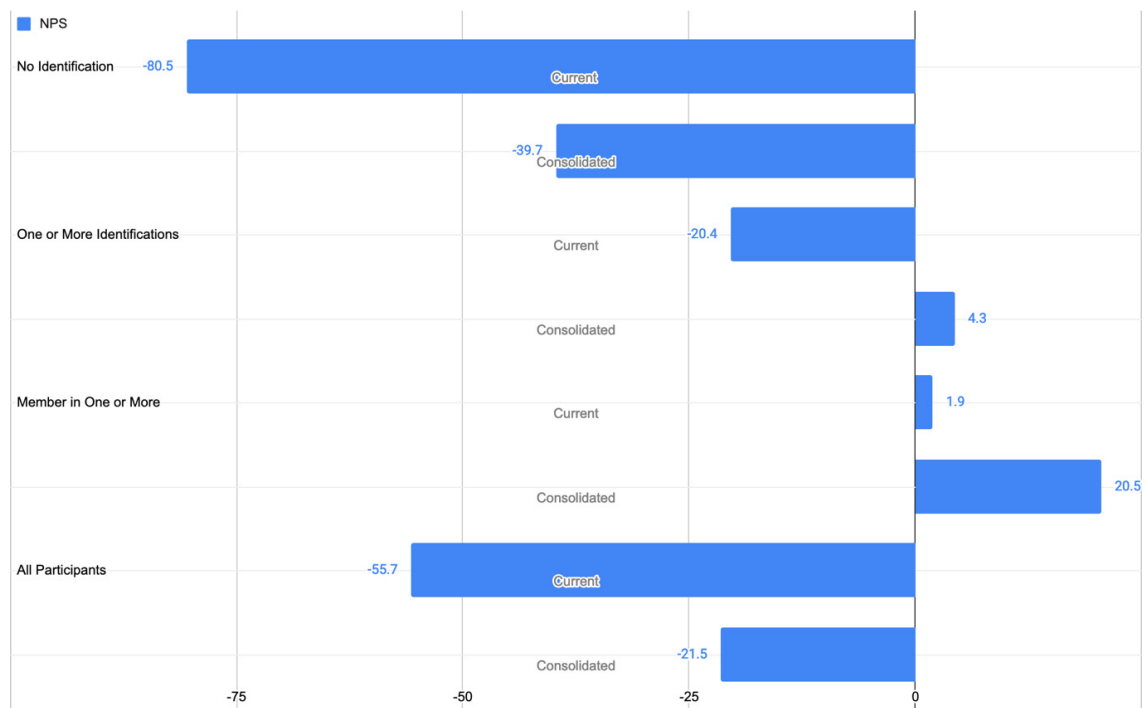


**Figure 1. NPS for Current and Consolidated Rehabilitation Counseling Associations by Group**

current members of one of the three associations. In the business world where NPS originated, increases like those reported for the consolidated association equates to future profits. For associations, such an increase can equate to greater representation and professionalization of the discipline.

To highlight the powerful potential of these findings, we consider the implications for the number of promoters in the current associations versus the number of promoters in the hypothetical consolidated association. Currently, there are 67 promoters among those who do not identify with ARCA, NRCA, or RCEA and 261 among those who do, for a total of 328 promoters. If each of these promoters recruited two new members, there would be 656 new members split across the three associations. Split evenly, this would equate to roughly 218 new members per organization. In comparison, there are 682 promoters for a consolidated association. If each of these promoters recruited two new members there would be 1,366 new members, all adding value to one single association. This amounts

to a gain of over a thousand additional new members in the consolidated association compared with relatively small membership increases in any of the three current associations. If these findings are representative of rehabilitation counseling professionals generally, the impact could be decisive in shaping a stronger future for rehabilitation counseling professional associations and, thereby, for the discipline.

## Limitations

These results and their implications must be considered in light of their limitations. The recommendation of a hypothetical consolidated association provides room for participants to envision the association as they think it would be (for good or for bad). For this reason, promotion of a hypothetical association is likely to only be as accurate as the predicted association participants envisioned. If consolidation of rehabilitation counseling associations really occurred, those who were overly pessimistic about its creation would likely have elevated promotion scores, while those

who were overly optimistic about its creation would have lower promotions scores than what was reported. Also, while this data provides understanding about the initial promotion of a consolidated professional association, the long-term performance of that association would ultimately dictate the growth of the association over time. Less of a limitation, this fact highlights the importance of maximizing any initial growth through effective and inclusive management of the association. Finally, despite the sizable sample, it is also possible that those who completed the survey are not representative of rehabilitation counseling professionals generally.

## Conclusion

Brubaker (1981) argued that failure to reverse a trending decline in rehabilitation counseling membership may mean that there is nothing left to consolidate. While the structure of rehabilitation counseling professional associations has proven resilient enough to withstand predicted membership declines, a strong external voice and representative-ness that comes only from large membership is all but gone. Findings from this study suggest that hopes for dramatic growth within current professional associations is unfounded, with an aggregated promoter score of -55.7. Additionally, the state of our current associations severely limits the amount of marketing and promotion that associations can conduct. Results indicate that a consolidated association would have a significantly higher NPS, representing a significant increase in the number of rehabilitation counseling professionals who would voluntarily promote its membership. As stated earlier, no one can guarantee the future success of a consolidated rehabilitation counseling association. However, given the membership numbers of ARCA, NRCA, and RCEA, combined with the limited promotion of these associations, consolidating the associations may offer the only viable solution for establishing a strong representation of rehabilitation counseling in the increasingly competitive professional services landscape.

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