

## **Conversations on Choice: Advising Undergraduate Majors Who May Demonstrate Identity Foreclosure**

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### **Abstract:**

*In this paper, the factors that influence the choice of major are examined. Current research is expanded by discussing how choice of major may be negatively affected by issues in identity development, specifically the identity crisis of foreclosure. Recommendations for successfully advising criminal justice students who exhibit identity foreclosure are provided.*

### **Key Words:**

Advising, Identity Foreclosure, Choice of Major, Career Choice.

### **Introduction**

Academic advising is a critical function of every discipline in academic institutions. A significant challenge to academic advisors are students who are undecided, change majors frequently, or students who are not satisfied and express that their major is not the right "fit." Alternatively, those who initially appear very confident in their choice of major may also pose unique issues that need to be addressed by the effective advisor. Students who present themselves as certain of their choice major are often viewed as mature and the ideal student. However, educational and psychological research over the past 35 years suggests that those confident in choice of major may represent a student, "whose certainty of commitment to a major and career may make an illusory and unsatisfactory state of identity development" called a foreclosure (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011, p. 62). Students undergoing foreclosure are common in research

samples of traditional-aged college students, so academic advisors are likely to encounter them during their careers and should be informed on what the students are experiencing (Petitpas, 1978).

While extensive research has been done on the academic and psychological development of students experiencing the identity crisis of foreclosure, little attention has been given to the challenges posed by these students to academic advising (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011). To fill the gap in the literature this paper examines how a student's choice of major may be affected by the identity crisis of foreclosure. This paper begins with a review of the function and role of advising for most academic programs. Next, the role of advising in guiding students to an appropriate choice of major is discussed. Using advising practices grounded in developmental theory, a discussion is provided of how issues with identity development, specifically foreclosure, may challenge advising interactions. Recommendations for advising students who demonstrate aspects of foreclosure are addressed at the conclusion of this paper.

### **Advising and Developmental Theory**

The primary avenue for students to receive information about fields of study, as well as, direction in course selection and sequencing is through the academic advising process. In a survey of criminal justice department chairs, advising was rated as important responsibility by a majority of the faculty (Flanagan, Gerber, Hertenstein, & Foster, 1998). General conceptions of advising in most academic disciplines tend to follow three trends: 1) dissemination of information about the curriculum and career, 2) planning of academic degrees and introductory career tracks, and 3) personal and career counseling. Currently, however, advising goals for most programs are centered on increasing retention and increasing diversity in the major (Flanagan et al., 1998). Yet, despite the emphasis on advising in the academic setting, both traditional and nontraditional students consistently rate their advising experiences as unsatisfactory and insufficient (Fielstein, Scoles, & Webb, 1992).

Perhaps the principle reason why students are dissatisfied with current advising experiences is that a majority of academic departments view advising from an informational perspective. Most advisors report that the bulk of their time is spent dealing with course selection and scheduling while focus on improving students' decision-making skills or assisting with personal problems are reported as less important (Flanagan, et al., 1995). The emphasis and time commitment to scheduling issues runs counter to the perspective of developmental theories which are predominant theoretical perspectives regarding academic advising. Developmental theories focus on individual characteristics and suggest that academic advising should consider personal development issues (Salinas & Olga, 2015). This can be especially problematic in larger programs with high advisor/advisee ratios.

While routine scheduling and curriculum advisement is necessary, ideally advisors should give attention to personal and situational factors. Many students are dealing with personal issues and family/work obligations. While the advisor can be a good "sounding board," there are specific issues unique to some fields, such as criminal justice, which may warrant specific dialogue. For example, due to the nature of the criminal justice careers, students and advisors may need to recognize, address, and prepare for

additional job requirements such as physical fitness tests, psychological interviews, criminal background checks, and credit checks (Flanagan et al., 1998). These aspects of advising suggest that advisors be prepared to advise and counsel in a wide range of issues, specifically those examined by developmental theory.

Advising approaches that incorporate developmental theories can be divided into three categories: cognitive-developmental theories, personal preference or type theories and psychosocial-identity formation theories (King, 2000). Cognitive-developmental theories refer to how individuals perceive vocational choices and interpret life experiences, personal preference theories focus on how personality type influences career decisions, and psychosocial-identity theories focus on how stages of identity development guides career development. For this paper, the psychosocial-identity theory of Erik Erikson (1963, 1968) will be the focus. Erikson's theory of ego identity development is selected because effective career decision making is one concomitant of ego identity development.

Erikson proposed eight stages of ego identity development. Five stages are experienced during the first 18-20 years of life. At each stage a certain developmental task confronts the individual that results in a crisis. The stages are; trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, industry versus inferiority, identity versus identity confusion, intimacy versus isolation, generativity versus stagnation, and ego integrity versus despair. In each of these stages outcomes may be less than ideal. Unsuccessful resolution can occur at any stage, but problems in the fifth stage mark the transition from childhood to adulthood and may specifically influence career decisions. Erikson's term to describe an unsuccessful resolution in this stage refer to a condition in which an adolescent enters adulthood with underdeveloped personal, social, emotional, and vocational abilities that limit the ability to function positively in adulthood. This is popularly termed an "identity crisis." If an identity crisis is faced with minimal defensiveness, and adolescents can overcome the stress and discomfort, they most often achieve reasonable success. Erikson suggests that many adolescents will try to minimize the anxiety caused by the identity crisis by attempting to resolve it prematurely. Erikson termed this premature and incorrect resolution as identity foreclosure (1968).

The concept of identity foreclosure emerged when psychologist James Marcia (1966) developed a research program to examine how adolescents form an inner sense of identity, or ego identity. While Erikson's theory of identity formation is broad based and comprehensive and includes development in the areas of ethnicity, gender, religious beliefs, and political identities, it is the processes of identity formation that affect one's vocational development. While the existing body of research predominantly focuses on the impact of foreclosure on choice of "vocation" (Blustein, Devenis, & Kidney, 1989), this paper attempts to advance the literature by suggesting it can also be applied to choice of major.

Marcia (1967, 1980) developed four identity statuses. The first typology is by those who have experienced a crisis, undergone explorations and achieved a commitment to a career or role. Second, identity moratorium is the status of those individuals who are experiencing a crisis and have no commitments, but who are actively exploring alternatives. Third, is diffusion, which is characterized by those adolescents who have

not made commitments nor explored any options across career defining areas. Adolescents experiencing diffusion may or may not have experienced an identity crisis. Last, “identity foreclosure” is marked by a commitment to a career without exploring any alternatives. Often these premature commitments are based on parental or societal influences. Adolescents experiencing foreclosure can be characterized as youth who have adopted a strategy of settling for feeling safe, secure, and being approved by others rather than taking risks and seeking self-actualization. Njus and Johnson (2008) describe foreclosure as distinct from those that have already achieved an appropriate identity by stating:

People who have committed to an identity without active exploration – that is, people who have committed to someone else’s values, beliefs and roles – are in the identity foreclosed status. At first blush, identity foreclosed individuals may appear to have an achieved identity. However, because their identity is not based on self-exploration, but rather on someone else’s views and beliefs, these people-although adamant about what they believe-tend to be less secure in their identities than are achieved people (p. 646).

A principle cause of foreclosure is society itself. Society, in general, expects young people to search for ways to meaningfully contribute to society, which is usually through some type of vocation. Many young people will settle upon a career that may not be the correct “fit” and be an immature decision, but serves in a self-protective manner. Marcia (1966) describes foreclosure as follows:

A foreclosure subject is distinguished by not having experienced a crisis, yet expressing commitment. It is difficult to tell where his parents’ goals for him leave off and where his begin. He is becoming what others have prepared or intended him to become as a child. His beliefs are virtually “the faith of his fathers’ living still.” College experience serve only as confirmation of childhood belief. A certain rigidity characterizes his personality one feels that if he were faced with a situation in which parental values were nonfunctional, he would feel extremely threatened (p. 552).

Two extreme situations that can lead to identity foreclosure are family career traditions and the opposite situation where choice of undergraduate major is viewed as completely unimportant to the family structure. Career traditions, or legacies, are strong in military families, family businesses, and family farms (Petitpas, 1978). Students aware that a career tradition runs in their family learn that planning to enter that profession is socially acceptable and answers many questions about their future plans. The choice is reinforced by family members in both direct and indirect ways. The repetition of positive messages is a form of positive reinforcement over a career plan. The opposite situation that can lead to foreclosure stems from the belief that choice of major at the undergraduate level is relatively unimportant. In some instances, family and peers express a belief in “credentialism” or the belief that earning a college degree is enough guarantee of success in employment (Collins, 1977). Those who share this perspective acknowledge choice of major is a necessary requirement for earning a degree, but not as important as degree completion. Other undecided students may simply copy the choices of their friends, or select the major to please significant others.

In addition to individual characteristics, there are several processes and traits of colleges and universities that reinforce foreclosure. First, the practice of encouraging and sometimes requiring students to declare a major during the college selection process pushes some students to make premature decisions. Second, most universities and programs are motivated by retention since budgets for programs and majors are driven by numbers of declared majors. Because institutions and departmental programs appreciate the declared majors that quickly fit into the institutional structure, academic advisors are typically going to work towards the goal of retaining students even when it may be apparent that the student would be better served in another program (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011).

### **Students Experiencing Foreclosure: Possible Traits and Behaviors**

In this section, we discuss possible traits and behaviors of students who may potentially be experiencing the identity crisis of foreclosure. These examples are theoretical constructs based on our review of the literature on Erikson's theory of identity development. While these concepts have not been empirically tested and should be reviewed with caution, we nevertheless suggest that they have a reasonable probability of application to a variety of majors as demonstrated through testing in other undergraduate populations (see Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011). It is intended that these examples will foster a dialogue among advisors about strategies to help these students be academically successful and satisfied with their choice of major. We caution advisors from erroneously concluding that students experiencing foreclosure traits are students who have little ambition and are primarily seeking to avoid hard work and academic challenges. Research finds students expressing foreclosure traits in a range of majors across colleges and universities. According to Schwartz (2001), "foreclosures can be the medical student who come from three generations of doctors, or the young man who steps into the family business...foreclosed individuals uncritically adopt someone else's standards, rules, career choices, religious belief, and so forth without first examining or questions these ideal" (p. 13). However, this state of identity development does not make them incapable students.

Students demonstrating foreclosure score high on measures of locus of control (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011; Waterman & Waterman, 1976). Locus of control refers to beliefs in one's own ability to control life and facilitate important life goals. People with a strong sense of self-efficacy are noted as having an internal sense of control, while those individuals who lack such a sense of self-ability are said to have an external locus of control. Students who may be experiencing foreclosure are more likely to view the world using an external locus of control perspective. They report feeling little control over important life events and circumstances. Consequently, students demonstrating foreclosure viewpoints see little reason to invest themselves in identity decisions or career searches because they believe their efforts are unlikely to bring success (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011).

Students who may be experiencing foreclosure also report high levels of authoritarianism (Orlofsky, Marcia & Lesser, 1973; Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011). They are more likely to express conventionality in decision-making, meaning that tended to follow family, peer and societal standards in problem solving. These students are reported to

be more subservient in stance towards family members, teachers and respected others and to hold rigidly to shared attitudes and behaviors while expressing themselves in a close-minded manor (Jespersen, Kroger, & Martinussen, 2013; Schwartz, 2001).

Students who may be experiencing the identity crisis of foreclosure also often describe idealized relationships with their parents. These students can be subservient to parents' wishes about career choice and this subservience may overflow into other areas of their lives (Griffith & Griggs, 2001). If the students remain in a situation where they are dependent on their parents then they tend to be successful. However, if they are removed from this social situation, for instance, by relocation, they soon report problems of making decisions and living completely independently (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011).

The combination of lack confidence about being in control, being closed to new ideas and ambiguity, and being somewhat subservient to authoritarian parents suggests that some students may be unsuccessful and struggle with academic success. Alternatively, the conformist nature and traditionalism of foreclosure students also means that they are often evaluated as good students who are well behaved. Students who experience foreclosure are often conscientious which often interpreted as being academically successful. Because these students have these characteristics and can be organized to follow an academic plan associated with a major they are often successful. One issue worth consideration is that the success can depend on the situation. While students facing foreclosure may achieve success in familiar environments, when in new and unfamiliar circumstance, or when faced with an unfamiliar means of success, they may struggle and be at risk for failure (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011).

### **Advising Majors who Demonstrate Identity Foreclosure**

Advising based on an identity development model is characterized by a set of goals for students that correspond to the psychological characteristics of individuals who have reached an identity-achieved status through an effective self-exploration process (Shaffer & Zalewski, 2011). This may not always be the case however. Given the emphasis on identity development, and not just on scheduling classes, the role of the advisor is not that of a counselor, but rather a teacher. In the one of the most influential and cited sources on developmental academic counseling Crookston (1972) notes that teaching, not counseling, is the essence of the developmental approach. Crookston described the academic advising process as, "concerned not only with a personal and vocational decision but also facilitating the student's rational process, environmental and interpersonal interactions, behavioral awareness, and problem-solving, decision-making and evaluation skills" (p. 14). Attention to these processes, behaviors and skills do not detract from the need to focus on the curriculum and course schedules, but rather aid the advisor in better assessing the specific and general academic needs and concerns of the students.

To begin and prepare to work with foreclosure students we suggest following a developmental style of advising. The developmental approach to advising has dominated educational literature on advising for three decades. Developmental advising refers to an advising style where the advisor develops more of exchange relationship

with the student as opposed to prescriptive styles of advising where the advisor merely provides information and tells the student what to do. The developmental model is considered an ongoing process where students are encouraged to share responsibilities for their choices and decisions. One of the most influential and widely accepted models of developmental advising is O'Banion's (1972/1994) five steps of academic advising. The steps to the O'Banion (1972/1994) model and subsequent skills and knowledge required by advisors are:

1. Exploration of life goals
2. Exploration of vocational skills
3. Program choice
4. Course choice (p. 64).

O'Banion's (1972/1994) model does not confine the advising process to only the advisor-advisee relationship. It also relies on other aspects of campus life including the classroom teacher and counseling and career service offices. In most university settings the first two dimensions are most often addressed by professionally prepared counselors in settings such as orientations and career and professional development classes. The third and fourth steps in the model incorporate what historically most faculty view as their contribution to academic advising. The final dimensions could be addressed by a student assistant that is trained to lead undergraduate students through the mechanics of scheduling and registering for classes.

While the stages of advising presented here suggest that students should move fluidly through each step, most often advisees transverse between stages, especially during the exploration dimensions. Since the steps are not completed in a series of subsequent steps, faculty advisors are likely to encounter students who range from undecided or confused about choice of major to those students who are overly committed to a major without completing adequate exploration and identity development, e.g. foreclosure students. Following Shaffer and Zalewski (2011), we suggest the following questions or probes to students who express an overly sure or certain commitment to the criminal justice major as an example.

"Can you imagine any circumstance or experience that would change your mind if another respectable choice of career came along?"

Followed by: "So, how did you decide you wanted to be a FBI special agent?"

Answers such as: "I have always wanted to be a federal agent in something like FBI, CSI, or Forensics," should always be followed further by: "What did you experience that let you discover what being an agent was like?" or, "How do you know you will like being an agent?"

If the student's response to any of the follow up questions indicates, a lack of exploration of career options then there is at least some suggestion that perhaps the student made a decision before the student sufficiently researched among reasonable alternatives. This does not mean that the student's decision was unequivocally incorrect, but rather a premature or ill-informed choice. Advisees may reveal or display anxiety during discussions of career options, so faculty advisors may help advisees

seek further support from career and counseling offices on their campus. While the vast amounts of research now available to students, a beneficial practice is to encourage students to probe for more accurate information and self-exploration. Advisors should communicate that there are multiple possible answers to issues encountered when selecting a major, and suggest that uncertainty is a valued characteristic of advanced thinkers (Laughlin & Creamer, 2007).

## Conclusion

In closing, because research using detailed data from faculty and students is lacking, it is challenging to speculate about an absolute “best practice” when it comes to advising foreclosure students. Perhaps an essential first step is for faculty to be better informed about developmental issues such as identity foreclosure. Academic advising is a complex process because of the diverse backgrounds of advisors and advisees alike. Awareness of where the students are coming from is important. How students have gotten to the place where they have decided on criminal justice as a major is worthwhile information for the advisor to have. Understanding developmental theory is an added tool. While our discussion was limited to the role of the developmental perspective, we encourage academic advisors to draw on a multiple theoretical constructs and perspectives to best serve the academic and personal needs of students.

Anyone taking time to read this article is probably interested in effectively advising students. Perhaps an effective first step in the advising process is to develop a dialogue with students that helps them first understand the job responsibilities and roles of professionals at every level, then have the students debunk myths, stereotypes and misconceptions associated in the chosen field, which are often erroneously perpetuated by the media (Salinas & Ross, 2015). Ultimately, the students need to venture through the self-exploration and self-awareness process. The end goal is to empower the student to find reliable information where they can begin to make informed decisions about their own lives. The principle role of the advisor is to help students “own” his or her educational outcomes through both selection of major and then career choice.



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