“It’s What I Have Always Wanted to Do.” Advising the Foreclosure Student

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Foreclosure students have prematurely committed themselves to academic majors and future careers, but present themselves to academic advisors as very decided. From a developmental theory perspective, foreclosures represent an immature identity status and include students whose failure to explore their personal and vocational identities and achieve a mature identity threatens their academic success. While this category may be new to academic advisors, foreclosures have been the object of extensive psychological and educational research. We review the literature summarizing the identity development and the personality characteristics of foreclosures, and we also review the available evidence concerning the academic performance of these students. We conclude with some recommendations for successfully identifying and advising these students.

KEY WORDS: academic major, career advising, decision making, identity crisis, overchoice syndrome, psychosocial moratorium

Undecided students and frequent major changers present problems that are often frustrating or challenging to new and experienced academic advisors alike (Steele, 2003). For that reason, students who apply to college with definite choices about potential majors and who present themselves to advisors as having already made up their minds about their preferred area of study are often a welcomed site. Indeed, advisors may see undergraduates committed to an academic major and career as representing a mature or ideal student (McCollum, 1998). Mayhall & Burg (2002, p. 76, emphasis added) offered the following description of the ideal college experience:

Tommy, a healthy 18-year old, had always known he wanted to be an engineer, just like his dad. Tommy had earned average to above average grades in a public high school and planned to attend one of the finest engineering schools….After 4 years, Tommy graduated with a bachelor’s of science in engineering and immediately accepted a high-paying position with terrific benefits in a company that employed him for life.

Mayhall and Burg quickly dismiss the reality of Tommy’s story as a fairy tale. However, we want to suggest a different reason to be concerned with cases like the one Mayhall and Burg described. Tommy may actually represent a category of students that psychologists call a foreclosure, a student whose certainty of commitment to a major and career may mask an illusory and unsatisfactory state of identity development. In fact, a foreclosure’s choice of major may turn out to be self-defeating and lead to academic failure. Foreclosure students are relatively common in empirical studies of high school and traditional-aged college students (Petitpas, 1978), and, therefore, academic advisors will likely encounter a number of foreclosures during their careers.

While academic advisors, who may not be familiar with the characteristics of foreclosures, may struggle in recognizing and serving students who have prematurely committed to the pursuit of a specific life path, those in educational and psychological research have contributed to the literature on foreclosures for more than 30 years, and much is known about the academic as well as the psychosocial development of these students. In this article, we review the available literature on foreclosures and make some concrete suggestions about how academic advisors can identify these students and help them make the most productive decisions about their education and their lives.

Identity Development Processes and Foreclosure as an Identity Status

We follow the conventions of the current literature in education and psychology and refer to students with unexplored yet confident and committed future plans as foreclosures. The term was originally suggested by Erik Erikson (1958, 1959, 1963, 1968), who introduced it in reference to an undesirable—and typically unsuccessful—approach taken by adolescents to address their problems in forming a personal identity. According to Erikson’s theory of personality development across the lifespan (1958, 1959, 1963, 1968), adolescents and young adults struggle to develop a sense of per-
personal identity to guide them in their life course, and his famous term for this struggle was the identity crisis. In Erikson’s theory, the term crisis is used in its medical sense, referring to a period of conscious questioning and active struggle to form a coherent identity (Erikson, 1958, 1959, 1963, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Waterman & Waterman, 1976).

For most of human history, individuals were born into a world where adults’ social roles were predetermined by the circumstances of their birth (Baumeister, 1987; Jorgensen, 2006; Livesley, 2006; MacKinnon & Marcia, 2002). The social mobility that permitted individuals to leave their homes and seek their fortune became much more commonplace as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. For the first time in history, the development of the self became a problem for a majority of people; individuals had to make something of themselves through education or vocational training (Baumeister, 1987).

Modern societies recognize that adolescents will need time for this exploration, allow for a certain level of experimentation with lifestyles and social relationships, and tolerate the inevitable awkwardness, inconsistencies, and reversals of direction that characterize these tentative efforts at self-direction. Erikson referred to the period in which societies will evince a tolerant stance toward adolescents making something of themselves as a psychosocial moratorium. If this stage goes well, the adolescent will emerge from the period of crisis with a stable, internally consistent sense of self, recognized as one with an achieved identity. Among other characteristics, this identity includes a set of commitments to relatively permanent orientations toward family; friends; the larger society and its institutions, beliefs, attitudes, and values; and means of making a living. In the end, the crisis is resolved with the young person establishing a set of commitments that provide a sufficient platform for living a meaningful and productive life.

As with each stage in Erikson’s conception of development throughout the lifespan, however, outcomes may be less than ideal. Erikson’s terms to describe an unsuccessful resolution in this stage are either identity confusion, or more commonly, identity diffusion, which refer to a condition in which an adolescent enters adulthood with a set of underdeveloped personal, social, emotional, and vocational abilities that leave him or her unable to function long-term in the adult world. If adolescents face their identity crises with minimal defensiveness, then advisors can encourage them to explore the world for an identity that will meet the challenges of living, and students can search with a minimum of discomfort and find reasonable success. However, in exploring the dynamics of ways adolescents handle the psychological and social pressures associated with planning for themselves and their lives, Erikson recognized that many adolescents minimize the anxiety caused by the identity crisis by attempting to resolve it prematurely. While he did not explore this outcome in great detail in his own work, Erikson left behind the seminal concept of an identity foreclosure (Tobacyk, 1981).

Erikson’s suggestions about the dynamics of adolescent identity development lay largely unexplored until psychologist James Marcia made them the focus of his research agenda beginning the 1960s. Marcia (1966) developed a program of research to study this and the other possible identity states posited by Erikson. Marcia’s work has resulted in steadily accumulating empirical literature on the adolescent ego’s trajectory through the identity crisis. We draw upon this literature selectively to summarize the emerging portrait of foreclosures and the challenge that these young people pose to postsecondary academic advisors. Erikson’s conception of identity formation is comprehensive and includes ideas (among other notions) of individuals’ development of ethnic, gender, religious, and political identities. However, because empirical research on identity status, and particularly on identity foreclosure, focuses on career selection more than any other topic (Blustein, Devenis, & Kidney, 1989), we direct our attention on the processes of identity formation that affect an adolescent’s sense of occupational, or career, identity.

Following the usage of the term established by Marcia (1967), individuals are classified vocationally as foreclosures if they have never experienced a crisis but are nonetheless committed to one occupational choice (see also Waterman & Waterman, 1976). Foreclosures report being committed to one career path without ever having seriously considered any other career choices (Waterman & Waterman, 1976). Marcia’s mature formulation of identity status (see Marcia, 1980) distinguishes four possible identity statuses based on the presence or absence of two variables: exploration, the deliberate and conscious search for a satisfying set of life goals, beliefs, and values, and commitment, the conscious acceptance of a set of goals, beliefs, and values as one’s own (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). The least mature status, called diffusion, is characterized by the absence of both exploration and commitment. The next status is foreclo-
sure, which represents a premature commitment to a set of life goals, beliefs, and values without much demonstrable prior exploration. The third status is moratorium and refers to the condition of students currently engaged in exploration but are noncommittal. The most mature status is identity achievement and reflects students’ substantive commitments to life goals, beliefs, and values upon completion of a conscious exploration and their characterization of themselves as settled comfortably into a sense of identity.

A few facts suggest that academic advisors should expect to work with foreclosures on a regular basis. In preparing this essay, we found that every published author citing Marcia’s methodology to assess the identity status of participants reported at least some foreclosures in the sample, and the proportion of the samples classified as foreclosures regularly exceeded 25% of the sample. Furthermore, two studies based on sample sizes of more than 1,000 respondents showed that the majority of participants were classified as foreclosures (Petitpas, 1978). Many of the personality traits of foreclosures are consistent with those reportedly common to Millennials, the cohort of traditional-aged college students who have been enrolling in colleges and universities since the year 2000 (see Keeling, 2003; Koring & Reid, 2009).

Identity formation does not occur in a once-and-for-all fashion, and students can move through Marcia’s four identity statuses in varying orders. Neither do foreclosures fit neatly into Gordon’s influential taxonomy of types of decided and undecided students (Gordon, 1998; see also Steele, 2003), probably because her taxonomy is constructed without the intent to look into the psychological states of consciousness.

A comparison of Marcia’s four identity statuses with Gordon’s subtypes of student career decidedness (Gordon, 1998; Steele, 2003) illustrates that academic advisors can expect to work with students in all four identity states. Gordon’s category of very decided corresponds most closely with Marcia’s identity achievement status in that these students display signs of career commitments after extensive explorations of both themselves and their potential career paths.

Gordon’s categories of chronically indecisive and seriously undecided both correspond to Marcia’s identity diffusion status because students thus described present themselves with anxiety as well as low levels of both self-esteem and vocational identity. Gordon recommends counseling in addition to career advising for both of these subtypes of students. Gordon’s category of developmentally undecided corresponds most closely to Marcia’s moratorium status because students identified in this category are aware of their need to make informed career decisions and do not present themselves to an academic advisor with either self-defeating resistance to exploration or anxiety levels that prevent progress.

Finally, Gordon’s categories of unstable decided and somewhat decided correspond most closely to Marcia’s foreclosure status because these students’ career decisions may prove, upon further examination, to be prematurely fomented without serious career or personal exploration in the past. Students in this stage also express anxiety and resistance at the prospect of engaging in serious exploration in the present.

In summary, foreclosures seem to share characteristics of both Gordon’s very decided and somewhat undecided types because they present themselves as belonging to the very decided category. However, their motive involves mounting a defense against the anxiety Gordon describes as the expected consequences of having made premature career choices as categorized in the somewhat decided category. Presented with the developmental task of forming an identity, foreclosures can be described as young people who have adopted a strategy of settling for feeling safe, secure, and approved by others (especially significant others) rather than taking risks and seeking personal freedom and self-actualization (Marcia, 1967; Petitpas, 1978).

Foreclosures, especially on a first-impression basis, may be very hard to distinguish from individuals characterized by Gordon’s very decided subtype and Marcia’s identity achievement status. Njus and Johnson (2008) expressed the distinction this way:

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)

However, the evidence suggests that once foreclosures experience an identity crisis, they never
return to the foreclosed state (Marcia, 1967; Petitpas, 1978). If an academic advisor can encourage student exploration of options and provide a safe environment for the student to express the uncertainties associated with questioning their presumed solid choice, students will not go back to being foreclosed again.

What factors cause young people to develop in the direction of identity foreclosure? While theorists have emphasized that society as a whole may expect young people to search for meaningful career choices and provide a period of moratorium, many learn that having no direction in life is unacceptable to the adults in their lives (Baumeister, 1987). Therefore, many settle upon a career direction prematurely for defensive reasons. However, the family can be both a source of career anxiety and for anxiety resolution. In his first formulation of his research agenda, Marcia described foreclosures 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 experiences serve only as a confirmation of childhood beliefs. 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. (Marcia, 1966, p. 552)

Marcia linked foreclosure to the desire to fulfill family expectations about career. This can be especially strong in families where career choice demonstrates the characteristics of a family tradition or legacy, including military service, professions, family businesses, family farms, and so forth (Petitpas, 1978; Waterman & Waterman, 1976). Children who grow up to discover the career legacy that runs in their family quickly discover that planning on entering the legacy career is the socially acceptable answer to questions about future plans (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994), and verbalizing these plans is highly likely to be reinforced by family members. In operant conditioning terms, such reinforcement can be both positive and negative. Any behavior that is followed by pleasant or rewarding consequences becomes more likely to be repeated in the future; the strengthening of a response through the consistent result of a rewarding outcome is called positive reinforcement (Dinsmoor, 2004).

Also any behavior that reduces an unpleasant motivational state, such as anxiety, will also be strengthened in a process that is called negative reinforcement (Dinsmoor, 2004). Thus, if a child or adolescent avows the intention to follow the family tradition and enter the legacy career path, she or he is likely to receive both types of reinforcing social approval from adult family members (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994). If the expressed desire to follow the family legacy has not resulted from any kind of exploration of options, the choice will not necessarily result in a poor career decision, but it is premature as the young person has ceased to search among reasonable alternatives. The result of settling on a pre-approved answer to future plans is foreclosure.

In addition to family members, significant others or the community at large offer social approval that contributes to foreclosure (Rysiew, Shore, & Leeb, 1999). Gifted students are often pressured by the community to enter “important” occupations such as physician, lawyer, engineer, or business leader (Greene, 2006). Young women have often been limited in their range of choices because of societal expectations to be “culture bearers” (Dignan, 1965; Petitpas, 1978; Rysiew et al., 1999). When students make premature commitments to socially acceptable career choices, the social approval that reinforced their choice often makes changing paths later doubly difficult as the person anticipates the loss of those reassuring expressions of approval and acceptance. For example, one of our students, who matriculated to the university in the pre-medicine program, spoke of the difficulty of considering a change of major because of the community approval that accompanied the public declaration of her intention to become a physician. She recalled the assembly for graduating seniors in her high school where school officials announced the students’ accomplishments (such as being admitted to a college or for accepting a scholarship supporting one particular field of study) and students received applause from gathered family and friends. These types of public ceremonies celebrating declared intentions create pressure for students to maintain their announced career plans even when they later seem to be poor choices. Our student reported that she had feelings of being a failure each time she contemplated changing her major, even though her new choice involved pursuing graduate education and a subsequent professional career.

Of course, pressure to reach a premature identity
commitment, and to persevere in the pursuit of that choice, can be affected by the promise for or threat of the withdrawal of financial support (Simmons, 2008). Pizzolato (2006), for example, reported one student’s account of parental influence that reinforced a foreclosed identity choice:

I’ve been going to be a microbiologist for my whole life. That’s what my parents really wanted. Who really knows why?! The idea of getting a degree and working in a lab for the rest of my life didn’t seem like a good life. I wanted to work in inner city schools, but my parents said they’d stop paying my bills if I wasn’t going to be a bio major. (Pizzolato, 2006, p. 37)

Identity status has been studied among students from Belgium (Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, Beyers, & Vansteenkiste, 2005), Cameroon (Hofer, Kartner, Chaisiotis, Busch, & Kiessling, 2007), Canada (Petitpas, 1978), Germany (Hofer et al., 2007; Krettenauer, 2005), Sweden (Bergh & Erling, 2005), and Turkey (Cakir & Aydin, 2005; Uzman, 2004), where patterns similar to those of U.S. students are often reported. International students, for example, often appear to fit Pizzolato’s definition of foreclosure if their opportunity to attend college is sponsored by their family or the government of their home country. A woman, for example, may receive a sponsorship to train as a nurse and return to her home country to meet the need for nurses. One study with students in a Turkish university found that, for fear of being rejected, foreclosures accept their parents’ values (Uzman, 2004).

Ironically, foreclosure can also result from pressure to choose a major coupled with the belief that this choice is relatively unimportant. Many significant others (e.g., peers, parents, and community members) articulate a belief in credentialism, Collins’s (1977) term for the belief that obtaining a college degree is a sufficient guarantee of success in getting a job. Those who believe in credentialism acknowledge that choosing a major is a necessary requirement for earning a degree, but the choice of major is not as important as acquiring the degree (Shaffer, 1997). Undecided students feeling this type pressure may make a premature and superficial choice. They often copy the choices of their peers, choose a major in which they feel certain to be successful, or select a program of study that will please significant others in their lives (Rysiew et al., 1999). One of our students, in a journal log for an introductory sociology class, captured this type of pressure with these words:

….I find that many of my friends and people in my classes, choose majors out of nowhere. For example, a friend of mine is a Theatre major with a concentration in dance. She has danced her whole life, but when I asked her what she plans on doing with that major, she couldn’t give me a single option. She complains daily about how much she hates her classes and has no idea what she would do with a dance major, however she is paying thousands of dollars to attend college to achieve this degree. I find this same kind of behavior with other students in my classes. When asked about why they chose their major and what they love about it, most times, they seem to panic a little bit and can’t answer the question. I understand that many people are still in the decision making process of what they want to do with their lives, but I often find that most people make big life decisions, like major choice, on a whim. This may be a strange thing to question, however I would love to figure out how students make these choices. Is it because of self-pressure, family pressure, or just because they feel they have to make a quick decision? Choosing your major in college is an important life decision, because it is something you will carry with you forever. So, once again, what are student’s primary reasons for choosing majors they do? (Personal Communication, February 10, 2010; used by permission)

Postsecondary institutions maintain a number of policies and practices that reinforce identity foreclosure. The practice of encouraging and often requiring students to declare a major during the matriculation process encourages many students to make premature decisions. These policies are justified on the grounds that enrollment management and budgeting must be maintained, and students and parents rarely challenge such policies because the cultural images of selecting, and competing for placement in, the best colleges suggest that applicants are committed to the career and major that inspired the choice of institution. Just as members of campus leadership are motivated by considerations of “program availability” during recruiting, they are also motivated by concerns for retention once students have matriculated. Not only do they want to retain matriculated students, but budgets for programs and majors are often driven by numbers of declared majors. Institutions appreciate students who fit into preexisting institutional structures (Schein & Laff, 1997); therefore, academic
advisors ordinarily work toward the goal of retaining students and avoiding attrition, even when they recognize signs that advisees may be foreclosures.

The NACADA Statement of ’s Core Values of Academic Advising (National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 2005) makes clear that advisors are responsible to seek resolutions in the best interests of both the institutions and the students who they serve when these needs are in conflict. Therefore, encouraging academic advisors to develop concerns for identifying and serving the best interests of foreclosures may mean that they must work creatively to meet these Core Value standards.

However, if college administrators, faculty members, and professional academic advisors choose to acknowledge the presence of foreclosures and to prioritize their interests, college can provide the haven that foreclosures need to experience the psychosocial moratorium Erikson described and engage in identity exploration (Berger, 2001; Lounsbury, Huffstetler, Leong, & Gibson, 2005; Luyckx et al., 2005; Marcia, 1976).

Because academic advisors will likely encounter foreclosure students, they need to understand the attitudes and traits associated with this identity status.

**Portrait of the Personality of a Foreclosure Student**

We hope that our choice of examples as well as our narrative will prevent readers from falling victim to the common misconception that foreclosures lack ambition, seek relatively simple vocational goals, and avoid hard work and challenges. Foreclosures are found in the full range of possible majors and programs that any college or university offers. Schwartz (2001) has captured this point in vivid terms:

As Archer and Waterman (1990) described, foreclosure has many faces. Foreclosure can be the medical student who comes from three generations of doctors, the young man who steps into the family business just as soon as his father is ready to retire, or the Army drill sergeant who angrily reprimands recruits in the same manner he endured during his own training. In any case, foreclosed individuals uncritically adopt someone else’s standards, rules, career choices, religious beliefs, and so forth without first examining or questioning these ideals. (p.13)

Depending upon other, relatively less important personality factors, foreclosures can make either a favorable or an unfavorable first impression. The apparent certainty of an advisee’s decision on a major or a career can come across either as quiet, self-confidence or as smug and rigid self-satisfaction (Marcia, 1980; Schwartz, 2001). In terms of foreclosures, academic advisor must keep in mind the route students have taken to reach their current life plans rather than how appealingly or convincingly they can present themselves.

Advisors can identify foreclosures by the intersection of personality traits and cognitive style they exhibit. As identity development theory is based in a psychosocial context, we offer some evidence from this field of psychology as a guide for recognizing foreclosures. Many have searched for evidence of an association between foreclosure and one or more of the *big five* personality traits (Lounsbury, Levy, Leong, & Gibson, 2007). Factor-analytic studies of personality have consistently identified five factors that appear to be the most basic—perhaps even universal—dimensions of human personality: agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (sometimes called neuroticism or adjustment), extraversion, and openness to experience (Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Muck, Hell, & Gosling, 2007). Identity affects personality development through exploration and commitment (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006), and the desirable process of identity exploration thrives when adolescents are relatively open to experience, low in neuroticism, and conscientious (or ambitious, as the term applies in a positive sense) (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Of these three desirable traits, openness to experience may be the most important personality trait that affects identity development (Duriez, Soenens, & Beyers, 2004; Helson & Srivastava, 2001). However, in terms of these five personality traits, foreclosures tend to score low on measures of openness to experience, high on conscientiousness (including being perceived as reliable and trustworthy by “following the rules” of conventional community and family life) (Lounsbury et al., 2005), and relatively high on measures of adjustment (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; Luyckx et al., 2005). The evidence that foreclosures tend to report relatively high levels of psychological well-being on a variety of measures probably reflects their lack of awareness about the limitations of their identity search to date and their feelings that foreclosure “is an acceptable endpoint of identity development” (Meeus, Iedema, Helsen, & Vollebergh, 1999, p. 429).

Low scores on the openness factor are an impor-
tant clue to the thoughts of foreclosure students because openness, as defined in this context, seems necessary for serious identity exploration. Low scores on the openness factor of the big five means being relatively closed to change, innovation, new experiences, and the learning process (Lounsbury et al., 2005).

Research on the relationship between cognitive style and identity development documents a link between student learning styles and identity foreclosure. Njus and Johnson (2008) found an association between students’ identity status and need for cognition (NFC), a personality variable that measures an individual’s desire to engage in effortful thinking. Persons with high scores on measures of NFC have active minds, enjoy trying to make sense of the world, and reflect upon the meaning and significance of daily events. Persons with low NFC scores tend to avoid effortful, reflective thought and try to rely on others’ advice and opinions about the world. Njus and Johnson found that foreclosures had significantly lower NFC scores than other students whose identity status scores indicated that they had experienced an identity crisis in their lives. They suggested that persons with low NFC scores tend to be defensive in their thinking and reluctant to face problems and conflicts. These results are consistent with Marcia’s notion that the indecision associated with identity crisis is anxiety provoking and that foreclosures may seek to avoid such anxiety by making premature commitments (Waterman, 2007). Thus, foreclosures seem to have less interest in, and, often, show some level of resistance for, the type of effortful exploration of self and career options that seem essential to a meaningful, and successful, transition to identity achievement status.

In addition to specific ratings on the big five traits of personality, foreclosures tend to differ from many other students by typically scoring high on measures of locus of control (Waterman & Waterman, 1976), which refers to beliefs concerning an individual’s own ability to control life and facilitate important life goals. People with a strong sense of personal efficacy are said to have an internal locus of control, while people who lack such a sense of self-efficacy (and who feel that their lives are strongly subject to uncontrollable forces such as fate, luck, or chance) are said to have an external locus of control (Rotter, 1966). Foreclosures view the world through the lens of an external locus of control (Kroger, 2000; Marcia, 1967; Petitpas, 1978), and they report feeling little control over life events and important outcomes, believing that life’s rewards come to them as a matter of chance (Petitpas, 1978; Waterman & Waterman, 1976). As a result, foreclosures often see little reason to invest themselves in identity or career searches, thinking that their efforts are unlikely to bring them happiness or ultimate success in life.

High levels of authoritarianism is another personality trait that has been associated with foreclosure status (Orlofsky, Marcia, & Lesser, 1973). Foreclosures were found to be the most authoritarian of the four identity statuses studied by Marcia, and they give the impression of being the most rigid (Orlofsky et al., 1973). Foreclosures were significantly more likely to express conventionality than any of the other identity statuses, meaning that foreclosures tend to follow family, group, and societal standards in personal problem solving and decision making more than do those with other identity statuses (Kroger, 2000; Marcia, 1966). Perhaps more than any other single indicator, foreclosures tend to adopt a subservient stance toward respected authorities (including family members, teachers, and others), and, consequently, to express closed-mindedness, holding rigidly to transmitted attitudes and behaviors and appearing conventional (Schwartz, 2001).

Indeed, foreclosures often report unrealistically idealized relationships with their parents (Schwartz, 2001). Foreclosures’ subservience to parents’ wishes often go beyond simply following parents’ career directions for their lives; Griffith and Griggs (2001) provide this detailed account of parental influence on a child’s religious self-identification:

In eighth grade, my spirituality began to evolve from the primitive superstitions of the Diffusion status to a more formal and institutional belief system of Foreclosure. The catalyst for this change was my father’s recent “born again” experience. He was determined to bring everyone kicking and screaming to the bosom of Jesus, especially those in his family. From this point in my life until college, my parents made sure that I was in church every time the doors were open….My parents demanded perfect obedience, since my behavior was not only a reflection of their parenting, but also a barometer of their godliness. So in an effort to keep the peace, I passively accepted their beliefs as my own. During this time in my life, I worked hard to be the perfect Christian girl everyone expected me to be. At church, I
played the piano, served as an acolyte, and was the president of the youth group. My senior year in high school, I was president of the honor society, editor of the school newspaper, a cheerleader, and vice president of the student council, in addition to being voted Miss Magnolia County High School. Looking back now, instead of seeing an impressive list of achievements, I see a pitiful little girl who was trying to live up to an impossible image influenced by the expectation of others. (pp. 17-18)

This subservience may be especially true in cultures with strong traditions of parental direction of children’s’ decisions; for example, according to Cakir and Aydin (2005), Turkish children with authoritarian parents are likely to be foreclosed. If foreclosures remain in the social situations in which they received their identities from their parents or other authority figures, they often function very successfully. However, when they are removed from these situations, they soon appear to be at a loss about making decisions and processing the world independently (Orlofsky et al., 1973). As has often been reported in the literature on authoritarian personality, foreclosures tend to be more rigid and display less tolerance for ambiguity than identity achievers (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; Raphael, 1978).

This constellation of being relatively closed to new ideas and new directions, lacking confidence about being able to control their lives, and being subservient to the direction set by trusted authorities suggests that foreclosures seem to follow the motto “Don’t confuse me with options, my mind is made up!” However, the conventionalism of foreclosure students also means that they are often perceived as good, well-behaved students who rarely cause trouble, and their conscientiousness often translates into academic success—especially as that is defined at the secondary education level (Petitpas, 1978). As a result, their persistence and ability to organize their actions and follow their plans often lead these students to relative success despite their premature commitments. However, in many ways, the style of thought and action that foreclosures adopt is antithetical to intellectual growth and higher learning as well as the demands of classroom assignments and professional socialization. So, while foreclosures may achieve success in controlled and familiar circumstances, when in unchartered territory or faced with unfamiliar means of success, they are at risk for failure. Schwartz (2001) has remarked,

Foreclosed individuals tend to become increasingly attached to their current circumstances and to the individuals who have helped to put these circumstances into place, and they tend to resist change at almost any cost. This reliance on current circumstances creates something of a security blanket. Marcia (1994, 1995) pointed out that, when this security blanket is removed, foreclosed individuals often go into crisis, not knowing what to do without being able to rely on the norms, rules, and situations to which they have become accustomed. (pp. 12-13)

These characteristics of foreclosure limit the ability of college students in taking individual courses and pursuing their chosen curricula.

The Academic Performance of Foreclosure Students

If they are allowed to focus on the certainty of their convictions and their commitments, foreclosures may present themselves to advisors as successful students who have their act together. While less empirical research features the relationship between identity status and academic performance than one might expect (Lounsbury et al., 2005), the available evidence suggests that foreclosures show lower levels of academic success and persistence than students with an identity achievement status (Waterman, Geary, & Waterman, 1974; Waterman & Waterman, 1972). Foreclosure students can experience academic difficulty, including probation and failure, when their background and skills are a poor fit for the career directions they have chosen prematurely.

In general, the literature on the relationship between identity status and academic performance demonstrates that college students with an identity achievement status tend to outperform students in each of the other three identity statuses on virtually every dimension of academic achievement that has been studied (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005; Cross & Allen, 1970; Faye & Sharpe, 2008; Lounsbury et al., 2005: Xu, 2009). For example, Lange and Byrd (2002) followed students and their performances in an undergraduate psychology class and found that students in the identity achievement status category showed a better understanding of their academic capabilities, used more effective study habits, and expressed more accurate perceptions of their course grades than students in the other identity status categories.

Differences between identity achievement stu-
students and others have been reported on several measures of academic performance including grade point average (GPA), satisfaction with college, study habits, withdrawal and retention rates, and the selection of challenging academic majors (Berzonsky, 1985; Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005; Good & Adams, 2008; Lange & Byrd, 2002; Waterman & Waterman, 1970; Xu, 2009). The personality traits of foreclosed students often limit academic performance because they dispose them to a self-limiting style of decision making, problem solving, and information processing that Michael Berzonsky has called a normative identity style (Berzonsky, 1985, 1989; Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005).

Building on Marcia’s scheme of identity statuses, Berzonsky proposed a threefold scheme of identity-processing styles or orientations that help to explain how identity affects student adaptations to college life (Berzonsky & Kuk, 2005; Boyd, Hunt, Kandell, & Lucas, 2003). The most effective, called an information-oriented style, refers to an approach where students seek out and remain open to new information and ideas—even those that are inconsistent with their current beliefs and plans—and are willing to test, and revise if necessary, their current identity and commitments. This profile fits the pattern of the big five traits (conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience) associated with identity exploration. According to Berzonsky, this cognitive style is characteristic of Marcia’s identity achievement students and is also necessary for Marcia’s moratorium students to eventually achieve a satisfactory personal identity.

The least effective style, called a diffuse/avoidant style, refers to an approach where students try to avoid confronting information and ideas that potentially conflict with their current self-conceptions, avoid self-reflection or critical thinking, and try to cope with life by using defensive cognition and following the apparent demands of peers and immediate situations. Berzonsky linked this style to Marcia’s diffused status.

Berzonsky also referred to the normative-oriented style, which offers an intermediate level of effectiveness because it represents a mixture of more and less adaptive features. On the one hand, to maintain the norms that anchor their normative orientation, students using a normative-oriented style develop a relatively automated, mindless, and dogmatic defensiveness that leads them to avoid contact with new information or ideas that may challenge convictions; they adopt a straight and narrow approach to all of their commitments, whether they be religious, political, moral, or vocational. On the other hand, normative-oriented students show signs of stability because they are agreeable, conscientious, confident in their beliefs, and are consciously and tenaciously committed to these convictions. Berzonsky argued that this normative-oriented style characterized the thinking of Marcia’s foreclosed identity status.

Academic advisors should be interested in learning to identify and to work with foreclosure students because the evidence shows that some foreclosure students may experience academic difficulties associated with this identity status. (Boyd et al., 2003; Lounsbury et al., 2005; Waterman & Waterman, 1972). For example, Berzonsky (1985) documented that foreclosures in their first year of college demonstrate a record of underachievement as measured by GPAs earned in the first 2 semesters compared with those predictions based on their SAT scores. Foreclosures also open themselves up to an accumulated self-defeating record of academic failure when their skills and aptitudes do not match those required to be successful in the college course work necessary for their committed career path. Foreclosures tend to deny the signals of such a mismatch when they appear. Marcia (1966) reported that foreclosures maintained lofty goals associated with high levels of aspiration despite experiences of failure. In an experimental setting, students were asked to state their expectations of performance on items of the Concept Attainment Task (Bruner, Goodnow, & Austin, 1956) before actually attempting each task. Foreclosures showed higher measured differences between their expected performance and their actual achievement than participants in any other identity status categories, and they maintained their high expectations despite repeated experiences of failure to attain those expectations. This finding fits with the broad patterns of avoidant coping strategies often reported when foreclosures are presented with evidence of poor performance or failure (Boyd et al., 2003). If confronted with questions about their future performance based on poor performance in the past, foreclosures often defend their persistence with wishful thinking, distancing, or tension-reducing behaviors (Boyd et al., 2003).

A real-world example of avoidance pattern was reported by Waterman and Waterman (1972) who used Marcia’s psychometric methods to measure the identity status of engineering students at Renselaer Polytechnic Institute and then followed their academic progress over 6 semesters. These authors found that student persistence was affected by both identity status and academic performance.
While some foreclosures maintained their grades and persisted throughout the course of the study, the foreclosures who withdrew from the school neither transferred into other curricula nor were able to maintain the required 2.00 GPA and were forced to withdraw.

Only a few studies feature measures of the academic performances of students in different identity statuses, but the available evidence suggests that foreclosed status students’ grades tend to be significantly lower than those of identity achievement students but not significantly different from either moratorium or diffusion students (Cross & Allen, 1970).

Cross and Allen (1970, p. 288) concluded, “College students who have achieved a strong identity perform better in college. They are more likely to be task-oriented and their work is more meaningful to them.” While systematic studies of identity status and persistence have not been reported, some studies allow for tentative inferences to be drawn. On the basis of available evidence, one can conclude that persistence seems to be higher for students in the two identity statuses that involve commitment (identity achievement and foreclosure) than the two statuses that do not (moratorium and diffusion); foreclosures do not withdraw at the same rates as moratorium or diffusion students in these studies (Waterman et al., 1974), and Graunke, Woosley, and Helms (2006) reported that students’ commitment to a particular major is negatively associated with the probability of completing the requirements for a baccalaureate degree.

Students in identity foreclosure are not assured of failure in college course work or in life. They tend to display conscientiousness, and they may persist and be successful in their academic work through sheer effort and determination (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Foreclosures are committed to their first choice and will work hard to make it work! One of our colleagues provided us with a personal recollection capturing this point: “Throughout all of the college years there was still the family influence. Dad’s side, not too keen on college in the first place, would have accepted a change in major even less. For my part, I think I wanted to prove them wrong, so I was determined to ‘finish what I started’” (personal communication, July 29, 2010). Many foreclosures succeed because they have important sources of support in their lives. In a corollary of family dynamics of the foreclosure, the influence of family that leads adolescents to make commitments without thorough exploration but the family is also often a source of support for that adolescent. Parents and significant others can express pride in their young people for the life courses they have chosen and be a network of social support (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994).

Successful foreclosures are often high-ability (or gifted) and possess multipotentiality such that they can succeed in many curricula, even if their final choice is less than the optimum one. The term multipotentiality refers to the ability to perform a broad range of activities and skills with high levels of accomplishment and enjoyment; it is often considered characteristic of high ability students (Achter, Lubinski, & Benbow, 1996; Carduner, Padak, & Reynolds, 2011; Cross, 1997; Greene, 2006; Jordan & Blevins, 2009; Robinson, 1997; Rysiew, Shore, & Carson, 1994; Rysiew et al., 1999; Sajjadi, Rejskind, & Shore, 2001). Ironically, this reported multipotentiality in intellectually talented students can both cause identity foreclosure or help the foreclosed students achieve success. The relationship between multipotentiality and identity formation is complex.

Multipotentiality in gifted students is often associated with overchoice syndrome, meaning that gifted students show the abilities, interests, and motivation to open up opportunities to excel in so many possible academic majors and career choices that the students become anxious about making the “wrong” choice and perseverate in the decision-making process (Achter et al., 1996; Greene, 2006; Rysiew et al., 1999; Sajjadi et al., 2001). If these students enjoy a supportive environment with good advising, their initial search period can be a psychosocial moratorium leading to good choices and identity achievement. However, overchoice can overwhelm them such that they fall into Berzonsky’s diffuse/avoidant style of identity formation typical of Marcia’s diffusion status. These students correspond to Gordon’s seriously undecided and chronically indecisive subtypes of student (Gordon, 1998), and their concerns have been recognized by academic advisors as special challenges. For example, Childress (1998) noted that academically gifted students may drop out of college because they do not have the limits for themselves that average students have: “When one is good at everything, definite limits are missing…” (p. 42). However, many gifted students find relief from the anxieties of overchoice by becoming foreclosures, and they tend to do so by seeking to find and follow the counsel of significant others, including parents and teachers (Greene, 2006; Rysiew et al., 1999; Sajjadi et al., 2001).

Although these talented students may be main-
taining good to excellent academic records, their foreclosure status may manifest itself in their self-descriptions. Foreclosures may say that they are making “safe” choices, by selecting courses and majors in which they are sure that they can maintain a record of good grades; they may say that they are making a “practical” choice of major and career (Robinson, 1997), choosing a career to “make good money,” or going into the same fields that their as their friends (Astin, Green, & Korn, 1987; Kerr, 1991; Rysiew et al., 1999). Foreclosures may also betray themselves by exhibiting a reluctance to make appropriate academic progress toward degree completion or show other signs of becoming a “perpetual student,” thereby staying in the school environment where they can expect to continue to appear to be successful (Rysiew et al., 1999).

The Advisor’s Role in Working with Foreclosure Students

As Koring and Reid (2009, p. 104) caution: “All students in the exploring phase must be assessed as individuals, which is a process that cannot be completed in one 30-minute appointment with an advisor.” A fortiori, the same caution is even more appropriate when working with foreclosure students. Despite that disclaimer, we make some suggestions concerning advisors’ approaches to identifying and beginning to work with foreclosure students. Developmental academic advising is characterized by set goals for students that correspond to the psychological characteristics of identity-achieved individuals who have reached that status through a thoughtful exploration process (Creamer & Creamer, 1994). Because identity achievement status has been clearly linked to good academic performance, advisors should encourage each advisee to explore his or her interests, beliefs, and values as well as talents and abilities, even if that exploration precipitates an identity crisis in some students.

To prepare to work with foreclosure students, advisors might follow the five-stage model for structuring advising sessions proposed by Gordon (1992) (see also Steele, 2003), but also prepare a series of follow-up questions (called probes). Following O’Banion’s (1972/1994) five steps in initiating a developmental academic-advising relationship with a student, the identification of foreclosures should be attempted during the first two steps of exploring a student’s life and vocational goals. Because the signature of identity foreclosure is commitment without crisis, advisors should be prepared to examine the depth of students’ commitments by probing for students’ conscious memories of crisis and of deliberate exploration of possible alternatives.

Following the lead suggested by Marcia, we recommend probing students who express a seemingly sure and committed selection of a major by asking, “Can you imagine any circumstance where you would change your mind if another, better career choice came along?” If, for example, a new advisee presents her or himself as a declared engineering major, the advisor can begin to probe for signs of foreclosure by asking questions such as “How did you decide that you wanted to be an engineer?” Answers such as “I have always wanted to be an engineer” should be probed further: “What other careers have you considered?” “What did you do to discover what being an engineer is like?” “How do you know that you will like engineering?” Using these in-depth follow-up questions, advisors listen for any evidence that the student consciously remembers a period of identity crisis and an accompanying search that may have influenced his or her stated choice of career and major. The evidence suggests that a mature career decision follows a period of conscious search and reflection that is readily recalled, but foreclosure is expressed as an early commitment to a major and career choice that was never questioned because the choice seemed self-evident to the student. If the student’s response to probing questions suggests a lack of option exploration, the advisee’s choices are not necessarily wrong, but signal that selections were reached before the student sufficiently searched among reasonable alternatives. The result of settling on an anxiety-reducing course characterizes foreclosure. Academic advisors may still be able to exert a positive influence on successful foreclosure students by encouraging them to perform some activities meant to confirm the appropriateness of their premature choices.

Conversations ensuing from these probing questions may uncover signs that betray a foreclosed identity status in other ways. Foreclosures may complain about the activities or requirements integral to an academic major that are expected to be sources of intrinsic satisfaction in well-placed students. For example, instrumental music majors who hate to practice their instruments or accounting majors who detest performing mathematical computations may very well be foreclosures. Ironically, foreclosures may be admitted as undeclared students if they have been denied admission to the major of their choice, or they may appear to be
undecided major changers if they are denied admission to their first choice and have matriculated as majors in a second-choice field. They may fit the profile called up-tighters (Buyarski, 2009) because they are either unable or unwilling to explore alternatives after being denied their first choice or because they may speak unrealistically about enrolling in courses appropriate to their denied choice. In each of these cases, advisors who broach the subject of career exploration with foreclosures can expect to encounter resistance.

When advisees manifest anxiety during discussion of options, they may be revealing the reinforcement history of their foreclosure. In addition to providing a supportive environment for these students within the developmental advising context, academic advisors might help their advisees seek further support from counseling professionals on their campuses.

Academic advisors may also encounter specific forms of identity foreclosure depending on the categories of students with whom they work. For example, identity foreclosure has been a conscious concern for academic advisors and career counselors who work with collegiate student-athletes (Jordan & Blevins, 2009; Lounsbury et al., 2005; Meeker, Stankovich, & Kays, 2000; Murphy, Petitous, & Brewer, 1996; Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). Sometimes, student-athletes with elite skills and high profile accomplishments foreclose on identity and career exploration because they believe they will turn professional or participate in life-changing events such as the Olympics (Adler & Adler, 1989; Sparkes, 1998). More often, the time and energy demands of participating in intercollegiate athletics encourage the student-athlete to make hasty and poorly considered choices of major (Miller & Kerr, 2003; Murphy et al., 1996). Empirical studies of student-athletes with foreclosed identities suggest that these students share many of the same personality traits and attitudes as other foreclosed students, including low levels of openness to experience, external locus of control, and dependence on authority figures for decision making (Murphy et al., 1996). However, student-athletes often face problems unique to their situation, such as a sense of grief or loss at the prospect of retiring from their sport or fear of confronting a future without competitive sports (Shurts & Shoffner, 2004). All academic advisors should appreciate that, while a common problem within the student body, foreclosure probably presents in distinct ways depending on the socialization process experienced among the students, and students in similar circumstances, such as student-athletes, may express it differently than students in other situations.

We close with consideration of one last issue: Should advisors precipitate an identity crisis with foreclosure students? Foreclosed students who leave an advising session after being asked to question the certainty of their career directions may feel less comfortable than when they arrived. However, because identity achievers outperform foreclosures academically, we believe each student should consider her or his choices and be open to the possibilities of personal growth that the college experience makes possible. We have focused on major choice and career advising in this article, but foreclosures may grow in other areas of life such as ethnic, gender, religious, and political identities. Therefore, we think advisors should make foreclosed students aware of missed opportunities to explore future directions, and should encourage them to consider future selves so the results of new exploration proves rewarding.

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