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Courageous Conversations: Advising the Foreclosed Student

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Authored by: Olga T. Salinas and Kyle W. Ross

Institutions with restricted enrollment programs share the common predicament of working with students who have steadfastly dedicated themselves to the goal of admission to one program and no other. For these students, those who are identified as foreclosed through their attachment to one major without consideration of other options, the admission/denial situation becomes an endless cycle of frustration and possible attrition. GPA requirements, global competition for placement, frequent admission criteria changes, and a confusing array of requirements across institutions all contribute to the stress felt by these students, parents, support team members, and most certainly, advisors. This article offers an approach for advisors to engage students in a broader and improved awareness of options available when students face denial from their intended major.

The Challenges Faced by Students, Advisors, and Departments

Foreclosed students are identified as such because they have bound themselves to a single choice with very limited research into their interests, strengths and abilities or of program and career options (Marcia, 1966, 1980). They have dedicated themselves to a single path at an immature degree of awareness, creating a type of pseudo-identity with their choice, and committed to the first major/career perceived as viable. A denial of this goal creates a crisis that requires a solution. A transition from the original choice is mandatory, but, without identified alternatives, these students remain "foreclosed."

While departments housing these capped enrollment programs benefit from being able to select students, they and their college(s) are faced with two immediate challenges: (1) students enrolled in their college who are in a state of educational limbo and (2) the potential costs of attrition. Both situations have potentially serious ramifications for students and institutions.

The loss to institutions due to student attrition is a major concern. A revenue loss, due to all students who left four-year institutions, of \$13,267,214 at publicly assisted colleges and universities and a revenue loss of \$8,331,593 at private institutions were calculated and described in a recent report from the Educational Policy Institute (Raisman, 2013). At the institutional level, roughly \$47,000 is expended in recruiting and retaining students who complete at least three years of school (Delta Cost Project, 2012). In addition, the majority of these non-completers are leaving in good academic standing, at a significant fiscal and emotional cost to themselves.

The advisor is placed in the unique and challenging position of being the face of the problem and the face of the possible solution. They serve on the frontline for their college and are the human embodiment of the rejection notice. They bear the brunt of the student experience. They also bear a significant responsibility from the institution to function as the humanitarian problem-solver and as the retention measure for the student who has been or will be rejected.

Advisors have a unique advantage of being in a position of great trust and having considerable knowledge from which to serve the student and institution. The moment of loss is the exact moment when a positive difference can be made by advisors. Refer at that moment of dilemma and panic, and we lose all trust and opportunity to assist. Any other institutional representatives are then also placed in a difficult situation when trying to help. However, serve and lead well, and advisors increase all opportunities for the student and institution.

Courageous Conversations

Discussions with students in these situations requires not only academic program knowledge, but also the ability to guide foreclosed students through frustration, pain, loss and fear of the future, to new and well-matched possibilities; hence, the concept of a “Courageous Conversation.” For students, these are difficult conversations because the stakes are very high. Dreams, internal and external pressures, and emotions are strong and can easily interfere with understanding and creativity.

The stakes are high for advisors, too, thus making them equally invested in the “Courageous Conversation.” In addition to their dual role as solution creators for both students and institutions, advisors genuinely care about students who are experiencing tremendous and real disappointment. Advisors fully understand what retention means to long-term quality of life for the students they serve. They also comprehend the practical importance of protecting the institution’s investment of time and resources for each student. In the advisor’s world, the stakes do not get much higher than that.

Setting the Tone

To begin a Courageous Conversation, advisors must create an environment that establishes agreement on a mutual purpose and supports mutual respect. Through genuine and demonstrated interest in the foreclosed student’s experience, goals, and concerns, a strong foundation is laid and sets the tone for open and productive dialogue.

Mutual respect maintains the environment that allows the conversation to continue. It will often fall to the advisor to support this environment and identify when mutual respect is at risk. Stepping out gracefully to re-enter the conversation with a restatement of the mutual purpose, and finding the inner meaning of what the student is saying, so that they feel understood, are approaches that can be employed to this end.

Getting Students Through It: REACH as a Model

The REACH Model stems from Marcia’s (1966, 1980) work in identity status theory that describes a healthy identity as being a result of both adequate exploration in breadth and depth of the self and all options available for an identity, and confident commitment to a viable choice. For students’ academic and career identities, this means full exploration of majors and careers open to them and a well-informed commitment to a program and career path. The REACH model also incorporates Gottfredson’s (1981) theory of circumscription and compromise, which addresses the effects of career elimination choices at early ages. The REACH approach is a way to help students revisit and rework choices that are suitable for their current situation, personality, strengths, and interests.

1. **Recognize and Reflect:** Identify the stories that students tell themselves and the ones they tell others, as a way to show or cast light on their current situation.
 - a. The student’s story helps pinpoint underlying reasons for a specific path and provides leverage for considering other options. A student interested in becoming a doctor has some inner and perceived vital reasons to pursue this career.
 - b. Within the stories, find that which is most relevant and practical at that moment and reflect back the best light possible through empathy, knowledge, professionalism, and positive examples.
2. **Eliminate false constructs:** In the absence of facts, myths are created, perpetuated, and exaggerated. While hearing the stories, advisors become sifters that remove the false rumors, inaccuracies, and all that is destructive, while acknowledging the feelings, the facts, the relevant, and all that is helpful.
 - a. Where are the gaps in the stories? What are verbal and non-verbal expressed limitations and pain (“I can’t do this.” “I’m a failure.” “My family will be so disappointed in me.” “Everyone else got in but me.”)?
 - b. Help students identify destructive myths and false constructs through active listening and reliable information. Provide the data needed to increase awareness (salaries, job placement, rates, career resources, O*Net, etc.).
3. **Ability to Adapt:** A gentle method to illuminate their personal adaptability and success is to ask questions that can serve as a springboard for change.
 - a. Set the stage for a renewed motivation and movement through key questions: Where have hurdles come up in their lives before? How did they manage those hurdles? How does that speak to their innate ability to survive and succeed? Through this self-reported history, not only are the hardships identified, but the student’s adaptability and successes are illuminated as well.
 - b. Focus on the student’s personal strengths and support team. To whom do they look to for

guidance? What would that person say about their strengths? Remind them that true friends remain their friends.

- c. Identify which courageous conversations they will need to have later. If some family members are disappointed, is it a sympathetic response or a toxic environment? Role-play is a great way for students to practice having that courageous conversation. Allowing them to practice with an advisor gives them the confidence needed to proceed on their own. Serving as a limited resource for parents might be appropriate as well.
4. **Creativity and Commitment:** Moving towards a new vision and goal requires renewed perspective on the original factors for their foreclosed educational/career choice.
 - a. Identify the levels (or lack of) of exploration in breadth and depth of self and new major/career options. Reinforce the need and benefits of continued research in personal strengths and align those with career possibilities. Help them avoid a "truncated search," a limited search where the student does not explore alternative paths in depth and finds the first thing that is close to the original goal but still not appropriate (Gottfredson, 2004; Ross, 2013).
 - b. Suggest the possibility of the appreciated career aspects (as they know them) and personal strengths that could be well matched in additional—perhaps even related—options.
5. **Holistic Help:** Providing the space to create positive outcomes now can be expanded beyond the advisor and the advising visit. Because advising at its best is a synergistic experience and profession, it is stronger and better through a merging of theories and collaborative effort across disciplines. Advisors should use resources to build a network that supports students outside of the advising appointment.
 - a. Summarize the path agreed on: goals for the next phase, the advisor's role, and the student's role.
 - b. Provide immediate in-office resources.
 - c. Link the student to institutional resources (offices, mentors, etc.).
 - d. Schedule a follow-up conversation.

Conclusion

Advisors are in the unique place of serving as a sieve for the negative emotions. A sieve works as a utensil/tool that separates coarse from the fine. In the same way, advisors can help sift through that which is debilitating from that which can serve students well and facilitate student development.

Advisors help students reconnect with their personal strengths, and to discover alternatives that are not seen as a second tier stigma, but as equal to if not better alternatives to their original choice. Advisors provide a way for students to not just accept reasons given to them for another choice through a traumatic event like the denial of an application, but grow through reasons identified and created by them to move toward a new and better career opportunity.

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