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## ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted to investigate the relationship between Erikson's concept of ego identity and student's attitudes toward college. The results of Study 1 indicated that students who were in the process of going through an identity crisis over occupational choice had the least favorable evaluations of their education, while students who had never experienced a crisis but were, nevertheless, committed to a vocational goal, held the most favorable attitudes. Study 2 demonstrated that students who when through crisis over choice of major field while in college, showed more negative attitudes than did students not experiencing a crisis during their college years. These findings suggest that the association of crisis with college is an important factor in student dissatisfaction. (Author)

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Abstract

Waterman, Alan S. (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) and Waterman, Caroline K. (State University of New York at Albany). The relationship between ego identity status and satisfaction with college. — Two studies were conducted to investigate the relationship between Erikson's concept of ego identity and student's attitudes toward college. The results of Study 1 indicated that students who were in the process of going through an identity crisis over occupational choice had the least favorable evaluations of their education while students who had never experienced a crisis but were, nevertheless, committed to a vocational goal held the most favorable attitudes. Study 2 demonstrated that students who went through crisis over choice of major field while in college showed more negative attitudes than did students not experiencing a crisis during their college years. These findings suggest that the association of crisis with college is an important factor in student dissatisfaction.

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EGO IDENTITY STATUS AND  
SATISFACTION WITH COLLEGE<sup>1</sup>

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The difficulties colleges and universities have in meeting the needs of their students is reflected both in the rate of student attrition and in the frequency with which students criticize their schools. A review of the research on college dropouts by Summerskill (1962) reveals that 40% of entering students never receive a degree. Of those students dropping-out of college, less than half do so for reasons of academic failure or ill-health. For those students remaining in college until graduation there is evidence of a significant degree of dissatisfaction. Trent and Medsker (1967) found that while college seniors generally felt their college experiences were satisfying, almost one-third voiced serious criticism concerning the quality of their college faculty and the administration's treatment of the students.

The level of a student's satisfaction with his school can be thought of as a function of two classes of variables: a) variables of the college and b) variables of the student.

The present studies deal with the latter type of variable. Specifically, they are concerned with the variable of ego identity status.

The theoretical groundwork for the concept of ego identity has been developed by Erikson (1959, 1968). He has formulated a theory of personality development in which each stage of a person's life is seen as involving some important crisis resulting from a socially posed problem. The different components of personality are determined by the manner in which each of these crises are resolved. The crisis which is important during adolescence involves the establishing of a stable sense of identity. The adolescent in our society is faced with a decision about what type of person he will become. This includes both making a decision about an occupation and arriving at a stable set of beliefs, for example, about religion and politics. Erikson spoke of a successful resolution of the crisis as the achieving of an ego identity. A failure to successfully resolve the crisis was seen as resulting in identity diffusion.

Marcia (1966) elaborated further on Erikson's ideas regarding identity. He proposed a four category classification of this construct: a) Identity Achievement, b) Moratorium, c) Foreclosure, and d) Identity Diffusion. According to Marcia, these various ego identity statuses can be categorized on the basis of two components: crisis

and commitment. Crisis refers to a period of struggle or active questioning in arriving at a set of beliefs and an occupational choice. Commitment refers to a firm, unwavering choice regarding beliefs and occupational choice.

An Identity Achiever is someone who has gone through a period of crisis and has developed a stable commitment to an occupation and a belief system. The term Moratorium is used to refer to a person who is currently in a state of crisis and is actively seeking among alternatives in an attempt to arrive at a choice. A person is classified as a Foreclosure if he has never experienced a crisis but nevertheless is committed regarding occupation and beliefs. The occupation and beliefs chosen are generally ones which reflect the wishes of his parents or other authority figures. The category of Identity Diffusion includes individuals who are not committed to anything and who are not actively trying to make a commitment. These people may never have been in crisis, or they may have had a period of questioning but were not able to resolve it and subsequently emerged without making a choice.

This concept of ego identity, particularly those aspects concerning occupational choice, would appear to have important implications for the student's evaluation of his college experiences. Douvan and Withey (1955) found a

tendency among high school boys to describe their college plans in terms of specific occupational fields. Beardslee and O'Dowd (1962), in making a similar observation, noted that few freshmen have a realistic conception of what the work in their chosen fields involves. As a consequence of this, many students, after arriving at college, are forced to re-evaluate their vocational plans; i.e., they enter a period of crisis. That this process of questioning can be stressful to the student is indicated by the finding that Moratoriums show higher levels of anxiety than other statuses (Marcia, 1967). It would appear plausible to expect that students who go through this stressful occupational crisis while at college would tend to have relatively negative attitudes toward their school since it has been associated with this crisis. On the other hand, students who are committed to an occupation when they arrive on campus and who do not subsequently experience an occupational crisis will not associate the stress of crisis with college and may perceive the school as helping them fulfill their vocational plans. They should therefore be relatively satisfied with their college experience. Thus, it can be hypothesized that Foreclosures on occupational choice will tend to have the most favorable attitudes toward college while Moratoriums will tend to have the least favorable attitudes.

### Study 1

A study testing this hypothesis was conducted at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). Since RPI is a technologically oriented university, the question of vocational choice is particularly important for the student in his decision to come to the school. A large majority of the freshmen anticipate careers in engineering or physical science. The attrition rate is somewhat lower than the national level, averaging approximately 30%. However, for each entering class there occurs a substantial transfer of students from the Engineering and Science programs to programs in Management and the Humanities and Social Sciences. These shifts generally occur during the student's first three years on campus. These changes in programs reflect the frequency of occupational crises at RPI.

### Method

Subjects: The sample consisted of 15 Freshman and 17 Juniors, all of whom were taking the Engineering program at RPI.

Procedure: All subjects were given a semi-structured interview to assess their ego-identity status. The form of the interview was the same as that described by Marcia (1966). The topics covered included the student's choice of school, his choice of occupational field, and his attitudes in the areas of religion and politics. The questions were designed

to elicit material concerning whether the student went through a period of crisis in arriving at his choice of occupation and belief systems and whether he was committed to them. For the purpose of the present study, only the material on occupation is relevant for testing the hypothesis.

For each subject, the identity status material was classified by two judges. When disagreement as to the occupational identity status occurred, the interview was submitted to a third judge for decision.

Following the identity status interview, each student was questioned regarding his attitudes toward RPI. This material was also rated by two judges and was scored on a series of four five-point scales. The scales were: a) satisfaction with their education, b) satisfaction with the faculty, c) satisfaction with the administration and d) satisfaction with the students. A high score indicated a favorable attitude while a low score indicated a negative evaluation. When disagreements in ratings occurred, the two scores for that scale were averaged.

#### Results

Since there was no significant differences between Freshman and Juniors in the frequency of the various occupational identity statuses or in their evaluation of college, data from both classes were combined for all subsequent analyses.



The mean ratings for the student's satisfaction with college are found in Table 1. Analysis of variance reveals

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Insert Table 1 about here  
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a significant difference between students with different occupational identity statuses regarding their evaluations of their education ( $F = 5.24$ ,  $df = 3/28$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Consistent with the hypothesis, Foreclosures on occupation showed the most satisfaction while Moratoriums indicated the least satisfaction with their education. The results for satisfaction with the administration were in the same direction and approached significance ( $F = 2.35$ ,  $df = 3/28$ ,  $p < .10$ ). No differences were observed from either satisfaction with the faculty or with the students at the school. Thus, the identity status of an individual regarding his occupational choice is an important factor in his evaluation of some, but not all, of his college experiences.

#### Study 2

In order to provide further evidence that the association of an identity crisis with college is an important factor in the student's evaluation of the school, previously obtained data from RPI seniors on the College Student Questionnaire-2 (CSQ-2) was reanalyzed. The CSQ-2 contains questions concerning the student's educational and vocational plans, his activities at college, his satisfaction with various

aspects of the school and his attitudes in a variety of areas. (For a more complete discussion of this questionnaire, see Peterson, 1965). While the questionnaire did not provide enough information to assess the degree of crisis over occupation directly, it did provide sufficient material about the student's choice of major field to assess both whether he went through a crisis in selecting his major field and, if he did, when it occurred.

There are two indicators of crisis during the college years which can be abstracted from the CSQ-2. The first concerns how and when the student selected his major field. Data from the questionnaire revealed that approximately 85% of the seniors in the sample were considering two or more alternatives when they chose their major field, i.e., they experienced a crisis. About half of these students reported that they made their selection in high school (High School Deciders) while the remainder reported that the choice was made in college (College Deciders). If it is the association between college experiences and the occurrence of crisis that leads to negative attitudes toward college, then it should be expected that College Deciders would show less favorable evaluations of their school than would High School Deciders. The second, and related, indicator of a crisis involving choice of major field was taken from the question on the CSQ-2 concerning whether or not the student changed his major field after entering college. Just over

40% of the students in the sample reported that they changed majors one or more times since entering college. Since change of major field is often indicative of crisis, it is hypothesized that students who changed fields will express less satisfaction with college than those who remained with the same major field throughout their college careers.

It must be emphasized that these indicators of crisis, the time of choosing between alternative majors and the changing of the major field, are not independent. A student who switched his major while in college is likely to have selected between alternatives fields at that time. Therefore, these two measures may best be considered as alternative means of assessing the same underlying concept of crisis.

#### Method

Subjects: The subjects in this study were 282 RPI seniors from the Class of 1967.

Procedure: Each student completed the CSQ-2 during class time. The dependent measures were the four ten-items scales of the CSQ-2 relating to satisfaction with college. These scales are: a) satisfaction with the major field, b) satisfaction with the faculty c) satisfaction with the administration, and d) satisfaction with the students.

#### Results

The mean scores on each of the four satisfaction scales for High School and College Deciders are presented in Table 2. It can be seen that on all measures, College Deciders

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Insert Table 2 about here  
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show less satisfaction than High School Deciders. This effect was significant for satisfaction with the major field ( $t = 3.84$ ,  $df = 235$ ,  $p < .001$ ), satisfaction with the administration ( $t = 2.31$ ,  $df = 242$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and satisfaction with the students ( $t = 2.54$ ,  $df = 239$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The difference between groups regarding attitudes toward the faculty did not attain significance.

Table 3 contains the mean satisfaction scores for

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Insert Table 3 about here  
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students who switched majors while in college and students who remained in the same field throughout their college careers. Here too, all the satisfaction scores are in the predicted direction. The t-test comparisons reveal that the differences are significant for satisfaction with the major ( $t = 4.63$ ,  $df = 270$ ,  $p < .001$ ), satisfaction with the faculty ( $t = 2.23$ ,  $df = 260$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and satisfaction with the administration ( $t = 2.88$ ,  $df = 279$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The difference for satisfaction with the students was not significant.

Thus, for both indicators of crisis, those students who experience a crisis while at college consistently ex-

hibited more negative attitudes than did students who did not undergo a crisis during the college years.

#### Discussion

The findings from both studies demonstrate that the variable of ego identity status plays an important role in the student's reaction to college. Students who go through a period of Moratorium concerning their choice of occupation or major field while at college have less favorable attitudes towards their school than students who did not go through an identity crisis during their college years. The results suggest that it is the association of the stress of crisis with college experiences, and not the fact of having had an identity crisis, that is the crucial factor in the relationship between ego identity and satisfaction with college. Support for this conclusion can be drawn from the data on students who had an identity crisis and resolved it before entering college. Since, for the High School Deciders, the stress of crisis would not be associated with college, it was anticipated that they would have relatively favorable attitudes, and the findings bear this out.

It must be recognized that the experience of an identity crisis while at college is not thought to be indicative of psychological maladjustment. To the contrary, within the theoretical framework of Erikson and Marcia, the seeking of an identity from among available alternatives is an important precondition for further psychological growth.

Therefore, this research does not imply that colleges should strive to reduce the probability of crisis. Rather, efforts should be directed toward providing an atmosphere which facilitate the student's successful resolution of his identity crisis.

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## Footnotes

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Table 1

Mean ratings for satisfaction with college for students  
with the various occupational identity statuses

Status	Satisfaction with				Students
	Education	Faculty	Administration		
Identity achievers (N=6)	4.17	3.42	3.08		2.67
Moratoriums (N=11)	3.05	2.82	3.05		2.91
Foreclosures (N=9)	4.44	3.61	3.67		3.28
Identity diffusions (N=6)	3.33	2.92	3.25		3.00

Table 2

Mean scores for satisfaction with college for students deciding between alternative major fields while in high school and while in college

	Satisfaction with			
	Major	Faculty	Administration	Students
College Deciders	26.46	25.37	25.57	25.08
High School Deciders	28.62	26.20	27.07	26.40

Table 3

Mean scores for satisfaction with college for students who changed their major field while at college and those that did not change

	Satisfaction with			
	Major	Faculty	Administration	Students
Changed	26.23	25.14	25.51	25.58
Did not change	28.61	26.37	27.22	25.90