

Student Development Theories

a brief overview

The following are the “greatest hits” of student development theories (and only ‘greatest hits volume 1’ at that!). These theories generally form the foundation of how student affairs professionals approach individual and group development, particularly in the first year. Some theories play particularly well to certain areas, such as residence life and conduct situations, but most student affairs professionals develop their personal approach from a synthesis of the developmental theories.

(**Please note:** There is a whole range of gender development theories, racial/ethnic identity theories, GBLT developmental theories, etc. that also play a part.)

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

(<http://quangkhoi.net/learningcenter/2009/05/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs/>)

Maslow’s theory suggests that motivation is driven by the satisfaction of various needs. The hierarchy consists of five categories of “needs”: **Physiological**; **Safety/Security**; **Love/Belongingness**; **Self Esteem**; and finally **Self Actualization**. During the first six weeks, a great deal of focus is spent on the first 3 categories...particularly the connection the student has with peers and mentors. The theory suggests that higher level needs cannot be focused on until lower level needs are met (for example, a student won’t care about building self esteem unless/until they feel a sense of belongingness within the community). Maslow believes that Self Actualization can never be fully attained, because it is a continual challenge.

Chickering’s 7 Vectors of Student Development

(<http://www.utdallas.edu/dept/ugraddean/theory.html>)

Based off the work of Erik Erikson, Chickering theory addresses the process of identity development of the “typical” 18-25 year old college student (like many of the early student development theorists, the focus was on white, middle-to-upper class males, although male gender was not thought of as a construct but an assumption).

Chickering’s 7 vectors are generally divided into 3 groups. The first group, consisting of **Developing Competence**, **Managing Emotions**, and **Developing Autonomy**, are pursued simultaneously during the first and second years of college. The fourth vector, **Establishing Identity**, occurs during the sophomore and junior years. The theory generally states that a student moves through the final three vectors (**Freeing Interpersonal Relationships**, **Developing Purpose**, and **Developing Integrity**) during the junior and senior years.

Sanford’s Theory of Challenge and Support

(<http://blog.richmond.edu/rcdean/for-parents/theory-101-aka-why-we-do-what-we-do/challenge-and-support-sanford>)

Sanford theorized that college students go through significant personal growth and development, much of which is influenced by the college environment itself (that includes what goes on in the classroom as well as what goes on outside of the classroom). He believed that for growth and personal development to occur, a student needs to have a challenge/support balance.

The basic idea of this theory is that for growth to occur, a person needs a balanced amount of challenge and support as appropriate for the task. Too much support, and the student will never really learn what they need to grow and develop...too much challenge, and the student will become frustrated and possibly quit trying.

Perry's Cognitive Theory

(<http://www.utdallas.edu/dept/ugraddean/theory.html>)

Perry's theory suggests that college students move from a "simplistic, categorical view of the world" through a period of "relative" values, and finally to a commitment of one's own values. Perry's theory is composed of nine positions divided into three levels. In the first level – **Dualism** – a student believes that all information is either right or wrong, any uncertainty is the result of the authority, or because the "right" answers haven't been discovered yet.

In the second level – **Relativism** – the student moves from believing that knowledge is uncertain (no one has "the answer"), to believing that all knowledge is contextual, to starting to develop commitments to personal values. As a student progresses into the third level – **Commitment** – they develop a pluralistic sense of their identity and values through the development of personal themes.

Baxter-Magolda's Theory of Self-Authorship

(<http://tarheeldiversity.blogspot.com/2006/09/who-heel-am-i-self-authorship.html>)

Baxter-Magolda's (2001) theory suggests that intellectual development is made up of four distinct phases. The first phase involves *following formulas* - where what you believe, how you define yourself, and what is important in the relationships you have - is determined by an "authority" (e.g. parent). The second phase is called the *crossroads*, and as the title suggests, this is the point where the person might start to wonder if the things they "believe" are the things they *really* believe. The third phase is where a person *becomes the author of one's life*, when s/he starts to choose beliefs, values, and identity that feel "real" to them. In relationships, we look to negotiate ways that both individual's needs can be met. Finally, a person develops an *internal foundation*, where s/he feels comfortable and grounded in their identity.

Bridges' Transition Theory

(<http://blog.richmond.edu/rcdean/for-parents/theory-101-aka-why-we-do-what-we-do/transition-bridges>)

Bridges' model focuses on the adjustment that people make when they are going through a transition. Bridges states that "transition starts with an ending and ends with a beginning." The first stage is the **ending or letting go**. Before heading off to college, a student has to "end" his/her time of being a high school student, living at home, etc. S/he has to let go of their old identity before fully embracing the new one as a college student. The second stage is the **neutral zone**. The student is still feeling somewhat connected to the "old" normal, but they're also starting to connect to the "new" normal. It is a gray area, because the student's identity is in flux. The final stage is the **new beginning**. This is the "new" normal. The student will embrace their new identity as a Richmond student, and will talk with you about the things s/he's doing with a level of excitement that will confirm that s/he has made the transition.