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Theories and Models of Student Development

Dallas Long

Long's chapter provides an overview of the theoretical models of student development that are most often used by student affairs professionals in their work. These theories guide student affairs professionals in developing programs and services, setting strategic goals, and interacting with students. Understanding these theories provides librarians with insight into the aims and values of the student affairs profession, a shared vocabulary for discussing student support efforts with colleagues, and frameworks for creating programs that encourage holistic student development.

Why do some students succeed in college while others do not? Why do some students identify very strongly with their cultural or racial background, while other students of the same background do not? Why do first-year students respond very differently to a conflict with a roommate than fourth-year students? As Ivey suggested about student growth and development during the college years, “there is too much going on that meets the eye ... and development is too complex for us to be aware of it all.”¹

Student affairs, as a profession, is highly practical but also well grounded in theory. As in librarianship, theories serve as a foundation for the knowledge, expertise, and practice of student affairs. Theories and models advance most—if not all—of the daily work of student affairs professionals, from academic advising, to career exploration, to leadership development, to student discipline. This chapter provides an introduction to the family of theories and models that student affairs professionals most commonly use to create meaningful educational experiences and programs.

Many of the theories and models which inform the work of student affairs professionals derive from the disciplines of education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, ethnic studies, law, business administration, and communication. However, student affairs ultimately exists as a profession to support student learning and student success. Therefore, student development theories, which describe how students grow and change throughout their college experience, are the cornerstones for the theoretical framework of student affairs.

FAMILIES OF THEORIES

Student development theories fall into four broad families of theories. *Psychosocial theories* focus on the self-reflective and interpersonal dimensions of students' lives. These theories describe how students' perspectives of their own identity and of society evolve through the conflicts and crises they experience. *Cognitive-structural theories* explain how students think, reason, organize, and make meaning of their experiences. These theories are often sequential in nature, with cognitive development unfolding by stages as students build upon past experiences. *Person-environment interactive theories* focus on how the student's behavior and growth are directly affected by the educational environment. This family of theories is used extensively in academic advising and career services. *Humanistic-existential theories* describe how students make decisions that affect themselves and others. Counselors and other student affairs professionals engaged in helping skills heavily use this family of theories.

The most influential student development theories are briefly and very simplistically described in this chapter. They provide significant context for student affairs research and practice and underpin many of the educational experiences and programs that student affairs professionals create.

PSYCHOSOCIAL THEORIES OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

Psychosocial theories of student development explain how people grow and develop over their life span. This family of theories examines development as sequential in nature, generally accomplished through tasks, stages, or challenges that must be mastered or overcome before advancement to the subsequent phase of development. These tasks are frequently age-related, and most theorists working in the area of student development have focused on the developmental stages most closely related to the traditional age of col-

lege students—ages eighteen to twenty-two years. Conflict, independence, interdependence, and autonomy are the underlying values of many psychosocial theories. Student affairs professionals engage psychosocial theories frequently in situations that require students to resolve conflict with others or to develop independence and autonomy; these theories are also used to frame discussions of identity, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

Identity Development

Chickering's "seven vectors" theory of identity development is arguably one of the most widely known and widely applied theories of student development. He referred to identity as students' concepts of themselves as autonomous, independent people with carefully articulated opinions, beliefs, talents, skills, and ethics. He suggested that the development of students' identities is the foremost issue during students' college years and that students move through seven distinct vectors.² Each vector can be considered a developmental stage or phase of the students' lives.

Developing competence is the first vector of identity development. During this vector, students acquire a wide range of new cognitive, psychosocial, and technical skills as they encounter new academic challenges, living environments, diversity, and technology. Students develop new competencies and, subsequently, confidence as they master new skills. In the vector of *managing emotions*, students develop the ability to recognize the appropriateness of certain emotions and reactions in different contexts. They are able to control and express their emotions accordingly.

In the third vector, *moving through autonomy*, students achieve autonomy by learning to solve problems on their own. They recognize that their goals must be accomplished largely through their own actions and decisions rather than through reliance on parents, peers, and others. During the fourth vector, *developing mature interpersonal relationships*, students develop an appreciation for others based on the qualities they possess. This leads students to develop both a tolerance of differences and the capacity for intimacy.

In the vector of *establishing identity*, students construct a secure and comfortable sense of identity in regards to physical appearance, gender, race, and sexual orientation. They are aware that their identity is composed of multiple dimensions and how their identity is integrated with the broader society, culture, and history. In *developing purpose*, students develop a set of clear career goals, personal aspirations, and commitments to family, friends, and self. In

the final vector, *developing integrity*, students progress from “black and white” thinking on complex moral and ethical issues to acknowledging the perspectives of others as valid. Students’ behavior aligns with the values and goals they have established previously.

According to Chickering, students progress through the first four vectors during their first and second years of college and through the last three vectors during their third and fourth years of college.³ Students move through the vectors at different rates and may move back and forth between vectors as they re-examine issues and experiences. Other researchers and theorists have examined the applicability of Chickering’s theory of identity development to specific groups, such as women, African Americans, nontraditional-aged students, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. Other theories of identity have subsequently been formulated in regards to each special population of students.

Phinney’s Theory of Racial and Ethnic Identity Development

There are many models and theories of racial and ethnic identity development. Cross developed one of the first theories of racial identity development, focusing on African American students. Garrett and Walking Stick Garrett examined racial identity development in regards to Native American students. Torres examined Hispanic students; Sue and Ibrahim respectively proposed theories for Asian American and Indian American students. Spickard addressed multiracial identities, and Helms proposed a theory of white identity development. All the racial and ethnic identity models focus on the psychosocial process of discovering and defining a sense of self through the lens of culture.⁴

Phinney developed a theory describing an identity process applicable to all minority racial or ethnic groups.⁵ Her model features three stages: diffusion-foreclosure, moratorium, and identity achievement. She proposes that students who belong to minority racial or ethnic groups experience fundamental conflicts that occur as a result of their membership in a minority group. Students experience threats to their identities as they experience stereotyping and prejudicial treatment. Students must critically examine their racial or ethnic identity to successfully resolve the threats.

Students at the *diffusion-foreclosure* stage have not examined their ethnic identity. They may lack interest in what their membership in a minority racial

or ethnic group means to them; such students are diffused. Students at this stage experience a fundamental conflict with their identity as they experience stereotyping and prejudicial treatment. Students may accept the majority culture's negative views of their race or ethnicity; such students risk a fore-closed identity, which might lead to internalized racism and self-loathing. If students reject the majority culture's negative views of their racial or ethnic group, they begin to question what it means to be a member of their racial or ethnic group.

Phinney's second stage of ethnic identity development is a search for ethnic identity, which she calls *moratorium*. During moratorium, students will explore their ethnic background and seek to understand what being a member of the minority race or ethnic personally means to the student. The exploration may be spurred by harsh personal encounters, such as racism, or a gradual awareness that not all racial and ethnic backgrounds are treated equitably.

Phinney's third stage of ethnic identity development is *identity achievement*. As the students accept their membership in a minority racial or ethnic group, they become comfortable with their identity. They demonstrate a knowledge of their racial or ethnic group's customs, history, and contributions to society. They are proud of their racial or ethnic identity. Students at the third stage also attain an openness to other cultures and tolerance for differences.

Theories of racial and ethnic identity development are employed by student affairs professionals in a variety of settings. Student affairs professionals use such theories to frame discussions and dialog about diversity and social justice. Counselors help minority students connect with mentors who share their racial or ethnic identities. Student affairs professionals working in minority student services create educational experiences that teach students about their respective cultures, and many student affairs organizations create cultural houses and other programs that offer welcoming, safe environments for minority students who might otherwise feel isolated or unsupported.⁶

Super's Theory of Career Development

There are a number of theories of career exploration and development, but Super's theory of career development is the most widely adopted by career counselors today.⁷ Super proposed that career preferences and competencies change with time and experience. He developed the concept of vocational

maturity, in which people pass through five developmental stages during their lifetime.

In the growth stage, people build a general understanding of the world of work and the need to work. In the exploratory stage, people try out a variety of occupational choices through classes, work experiences, and hobbies. This stage corresponds most closely to the experience of college students as they collect information about careers, build an understanding of the skill sets and qualifications for specific careers, and develop career interests. In the establishment stage, people acquire the entry-level skills for their chosen occupation and focus on expanding their knowledge and expertise. The maintenance and decline stages are focused on career advancement and ultimately retirement.

Super identified six factors associated with the exploratory stage that help students select appropriate career choices and advance to the establishment stage. He argued that decision-making skills; long-term planning skills; knowledge and use of information resources; general information about the culture, rules, and etiquette of the work world; and detailed information about occupations were essential for students in the exploratory stage to master.⁸ Consequently, many student affairs professionals engaged in career services and counseling are focused on helping students build interview skills and knowledge of workplace etiquette and on arranging internships and other professional experiences that introduce students to the daily environments of their career choices.

Although Super framed his theory as a life-span model, with each stage corresponding to a chronological period in life, he acknowledged that people cycle through multiple careers as workers adapt to workplace trends and lifestyle choices. Consequently, people of varying ages might occupy similar stages in their career development—or move through all the stages more than once through their working lives.⁹

COGNITIVE-STRUCTURAL THEORIES OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

The cognitive-structural family of theories explain how students interpret and make meaning out of their experiences. Teaching, learning, reflection, change, and empathy are values that underlie many cognitive-structural theories. Student affairs professionals engage cognitive-structural theories frequently in situations that require students to reflect, learn, and adapt their perspectives and behaviors to their environment.

Perry's Theory of Cognitive Development

Perry's theory of cognitive development describes how students perceive and organize knowledge. Perry's theory identified nine sequential positions which are grouped into four major periods of students' cognitive development.¹⁰ While in the *dualistic* period, students exhibit rigid, inflexible attitudes towards knowing. Students resist learning new information or interpretations that challenge their established beliefs. Students accept most information as indisputable facts with little or no inclination for critical inquiry. Teachers, parents, and the media are the absolute experts and not questioned. The dualistic period is most commonly associated with primary school-age children.

In the *multiplicity* period, students recognize that knowledge has shades of gray and that the information imparted by teachers and parents is imperfect. Nonetheless, students perceive knowledge as still absolute—but ultimately unknowable because not all facts are known about certain issues or questions. Kurfiss described the viewpoints typical of such students: "Values? Ideology? Why have any? Just go with the flow. All we have is opinion, and one opinion is just as good as another."¹¹ This period of cognitive development is most commonly associated with secondary school-age children, but sometimes with students in the early years of college.

In the *relativistic* period, students recognize the strategies of information seeking and analysis: designing experiments, comparing interpretations, and analyzing evidence. In the *commitment to relativism* period, the students commit to a value system or ideology through which they construct their worldview or paradigm for perceiving knowledge. This period of cognitive development is most often associated with students in the later years of college.

Student affairs professionals apply Perry's theory of cognitive development for facilitating student learning outside of the classroom through programs, service learning, and other opportunities designed to challenge their beliefs. Subsequent researchers have adapted Perry's work to improve strategies for college teaching, first-year experience programs, and student discipline.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

Kohlberg's theory of moral development explains how students' ability to reason affects their behavior and conduct. He describes six stages of moral development through which students develop a sense of personal responsi-

bility for their own actions and ultimately for the actions of a morally just society.¹² Each stage requires a moral conflict before progression to the subsequent stage can occur. The six stages are categorized into three distinct levels: pre-conventional morality, conventional morality and post-conventional morality.

Pre-conventional morality consists of the first and second stages of moral development and is characterized primarily by a wish to avoid punishment or injury and a limited interest in others only when one's own interest is fulfilled. Children exhibit pre-conventional reasoning most commonly. Kohlberg believed that adolescents and adults demonstrated pre-conventional reasoning, too, but rarely.¹³

Conventional morality is composed of the third and fourth stages of moral development. During the third stage, people shift from egocentricity to a desire to conform to a specific social role, such as a "good little boy." People's motivations are significant, and they view rules as existing primarily to support social roles. During the fourth stage, people recognize the need for law and order to maintain a healthy, functioning society. The concepts of right and wrong are dualistic and idealized, and shades of gray are often unrecognized. Many older adolescents and traditional-age college students operate at a conventional level of moral reasoning, according to Kohlberg.¹⁴

Post-conventional reasoning is composed of the fifth and sixth stages and is characterized by the recognition that situations are often ambiguous and law and order are not unflinchingly just. People develop a sense of ethics and consider moral dilemmas in light of those ethics. People develop integrity through their consistent application of those ethics.

Kohlberg argued that people must experience moral dilemmas and reflect upon their own responses in order to progress through his proposed stages of moral development. Kohlberg stated, "We get into discussions and debates with others, and we find our views questioned and challenged and we are therefore motivated to come up with new, more comprehensive positions. New stages reflect these broader viewpoints."¹⁵ Kohlberg's theory of moral development has profoundly affected the way student affairs professionals approach student discipline and conduct. Like that of Chickering and Perry, Kohlberg's work has inspired new theories by subsequent researchers. Theories in development of college students' ethics, faith, and spirituality have arisen from Kohlberg's work.

Parks's Theory of Faith Development

Parks's theory of faith development is arguably the most dominant theory of spiritual or faith development in student affairs. Parks describes faith development as "the process of discovering and creating connections between among experiences and events."¹⁶ She explains that faith is the process of spiritual development that is concerned with meaning making, and spirituality is the activity of faith. Spirituality is the recognition and acceptance that unknowable higher powers exist and influence the direction of one's experiences.¹⁷

Parks's theory adapts Perry's theory of cognitive development and proposes that faith development emerges in sequential stages, moving from a dualistic perspective where students accept the belief system of their communities without question to an integrated belief system that acknowledges multiple explanations. Parks focuses her theory on young adulthood as a critical point of life where faith develops. Young adulthood is marked by *probing commitment*, in which students recognize that it is necessary to choose their own path in the world. Students may commit tentatively to multiple ways of knowing or making sense out of their experiences through the lenses of different belief systems.

Parks claims that forms of community are vital to fostering students' faith development. Students' belief systems are "fragile and vulnerable" during their stage of probing commitment but are "healthy and full of promise" when supported by forms of community.¹⁸ Parks argues that the form of community needed by students during this time is a mentoring community. She defines a mentoring community as "a compatible social group of belonging in which young adults feel recognized for who they really are, and as who they are becoming. It offers ... good company for both the emerging strength and the distinctive vulnerability of the young adult."¹⁹ She argues, too, that the culture of the community must be flexible and nonjudgmental in its shared values—the stronger the culture, the less the student is able to tentatively probe a commitment.

Student affairs professionals work to integrate the recognition of spiritual development into student affairs programs and activities. Campus ministries are frequently viewed as the avenue where spiritual development is best supported and explored, especially at state-supported colleges and universities. However, the close connection between students' spiritual development and their cognitive and psychosocial development leads many student

affairs professionals to create educational experiences and environments that promote students' self-reflection on their value systems. Love explains, "Students' involvement in social, volunteer, leadership and community service activity may be a manifestation of their spiritual development and quest for meaning."²⁰

HUMANISTIC-EXISTENTIAL THEORIES OF STUDENT DEVELOPMENT

The humanistic-existential family of theories is focused more on the students' relationship to others and to society. These theories emphasize more the conditions for healthy growth and development and less the development itself. Balance, harmony, and purpose are significant values that underlie humanistic-existential theories. Student affairs professionals engage humanistic-existential theories frequently in situations that require helping, counseling, or advising students.

Hettler's Model of Wellness

Student affairs professionals recognize that dimensions of student development do not exist independently of each other. Identity development is intrinsically linked with psychosocial and intellectual development—it is difficult for a student to reflect on his or her cultural identity without also reflecting on the social dynamics of race relations or the social constructs of race and ethnicity. Hettler proposed that students cannot develop psychosocially and intellectually without wellness. Hettler defined wellness as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being. He developed a holistic model of wellness that integrates six dimensions of a student's life: physical, intellectual, social/emotional, spiritual, environmental, and occupational. Each dimension requires a deliberate personal commitment and time to reach an optimum level necessary for balance. A student must achieve between each of the six dimensions to fully experience learning and development that is positive, healthy, and complex.²¹

In the *physical* dimension, students must be well nourished and well rested and maintain a regular regimen of physically activity. The *intellectual* dimension involves students' continuous active learning and the effort to acquire new knowledge and skills. In the *social* dimension, healthy friendships, relationships, and social interactions help students make meaningful connections and find a sense of belonging. Exploring students' values sys-

tems and philosophies is the focus of the *spiritual* dimension. The *environmental* dimension explores the students' connections and interdependence with their physical and natural surroundings. The *occupational* dimension involves finding a fulfilling career or vocation as well as developing lifelong learning as an occupational value.

Student affairs professionals recognize that students will struggle in their academic work, personal and social lives, and career development without a critical understanding of the dimensions of wellness. Consequently, they promote wellness deliberately in a variety of ways in campus activities, which range from residence hall programs that stimulate physical activity, to service-learning programs that focus on sustainable living, to recreational programs that teach students to reduce and manage stress.

PERSON-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTIVE THEORIES

Although the theories described previously are widely accepted in student affairs, no theory adequately describes the complexity of the college experience. Many student affairs scholars remark that theories of student development are more truly theories of personal development. Given the right learning conditions—be it in college, the military, or the working world—most young people will experience conflicts that challenge their perspectives and subsequently spur their progress through the developmental stages of Chickering's, Perry's, and Kohlberg's theories.

What unique role does the experience of being a college student college play in development? College impact models examine the process of student development. They are focused on context—how does the environment of the college or university affect the student's development? How do the background and individual characteristics of the student foster or impede development?

Astin's Theory of Student Involvement

Astin proposed that students are more academically and socially proficient the more they are involved in the academic and social aspects of college life. He defined involved students as those who participate actively in student organizations, spend considerable time on campus, interact often with faculty outside of the classroom, and devote considerable time to studying.²² He focused on the motivation and behavior of students and recognized the integral role of students' time and the quality of available programs and resources.

He stressed that involvement has a quantitative feature, the amount of time devoted by students, and a qualitative feature, the seriousness with which students approach their involvement. If students invest significant amounts of time and approach academic work and campus life with seriousness, their overall learning will increase because they are emotionally and physically invested in the outcomes.

Astin believed that students are more likely to be involved if they have access to high-quality programs and services that stimulate and challenge their learning. If extracurricular activities and classroom assignments are not directly relatable to students' goals and lives, and if faculty, student affairs professionals, and resources are not accessible to students at their convenience, students will not be directly involved in campus life. Astin encourages faculty and student affairs professionals to make academic work and other activities relatable to students' lives, connect directly to an outcome that students value, and be flexible to accommodate the external demands on students' time, such as jobs, family, and friends.²³

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Tinto developed a theory to explain student retention. He argued that students depart higher education without earning a degree because of the nature and quality of their interactions with the college or university. He claimed that students enter higher education with unique and individual characteristics ranging from socioeconomic circumstances, family support, clarity of purpose for higher education, and cultural and social values.²⁴ Colleges and universities, too, are composed of unique individual characteristics. The characteristics of students and the colleges or universities they attend may not match and therefore may bring the students into conflict with the college or university. Students may depart, or drop out, if the sources of conflicts are not resolved.

Tinto proposed that the sources of student departure are primarily in three specific areas—academic problems, failure to integrate socially and intellectually with the culture of the college or university, or a low level of commitment to the college or university.²⁵ He argued that colleges and universities must integrate students deliberately in all three areas to decrease the chances of departure. Colleges and universities should create intentional opportunities for extracurricular activities, informal student interactions, and faculty/student interactions.

Tinto cautioned that students and colleges and universities define failure differently.²⁶ Often colleges and universities interpret the students' lack of attaining a degree at that particular college or university to be a failure. Students leave colleges or university for a variety of reasons, however, such as career advancement, family obligations, or health reasons. Students may transfer to other colleges or universities or return to higher education to attain degrees at a later time. Thus the student may not interpret departure as a failure at all.

Student affairs professionals help students make the academic and social transitions at their colleges and universities through early contact with students and community building. They monitor students' academic performance and make referrals to counselors, academic advisors, and tutors. Student affairs professionals help create supportive social and educational environments in which students are valued and full members of their communities.

Pascarella's Model for Assessing Student Change

Pascarella proposed a model for the assessment of student development, or change, in which he considered the direct and indirect effects of a college or university's structural characteristics as well as its campus culture. He suggested that students' growth and development are affected by five sets of variables: students' precollege traits, the college or university's structural or organizational characteristics, the campus culture or environment, socializing agents on the campus, and the quality of effort put forth by the students.²⁷

Students' pre-college traits include students' socioeconomic backgrounds, preparation for college-level work, and demographic traits. A student body composed predominantly of wealthy students who attended college preparatory schools will present significantly different opportunities and challenges to colleges and universities than students coming from predominantly working-class backgrounds and less academically proficient secondary schools. The size, selectivity, geographic location, secular or faith affiliation, and residential character of colleges and universities define their structural or organizational characteristics. Together the variables shape the third variable: the campus culture or environment.

Pascarella defines the fourth variable as the frequency, content, and quality of the students' interactions with the socializing agents on the campus, namely the faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals.²⁸ The

fifth variable, the quality of effort expended by students, will be directly affected by the fourth variable, as well as by their own individual characteristics and the cultural norms and expectations of the college or university. Students who are less involved because of work or family obligations, have little access to faculty and student affairs professionals, and attend a college or university whose culture tolerates mediocre academic performance will not develop as vigorously as they would under different circumstances.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Theories of student development are helpful for student affairs professionals in several different ways. Theories explain and describe student behavior and create meaning for students' unique perspectives and experiences. Student affairs professionals intentionally design educational experiences and programs using theories of student development. For instance, first-year students are concerned with skills acquisition and developing competency, as suggested by Perry. Therefore, writing workshops, study skills programs, and other programs that emphasize developing competencies in academic skills are more likely to be successful when marketed heavily to first-year students. As Evans wrote, "Theory suggests questions to ask, avenues to explore, and hypotheses to test. It provides shortcuts to exploring students' concerns and analyzing how they are addressing them."³⁰

Notes

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 12. Lawrence Kohlberg, *Moral Development and Behavior: Theory, Research and Social Issues* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976), 34.
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 14. *Ibid.*, 38.
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 17. Patrick G. Love, "Spirituality and Student Development: Theoretical Connections." *New Directions for Student Services*, no. 95 (2001): 11.
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 26. *Ibid.*, 48.
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