Section I: Developmental Issues

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The Myriad Faces of College Student Development

KATHERINE M. HERMANN, ESTHER NICOLE BENOIT,
AMY ZAVADIL, AND LESLIE KOOYMAN

The secret of eternal youth is arrested development.
—Alice Roosevelt Longworth

For counselors working in higher education and with increasingly diverse populations, it is essential to understand the worldview of the client. The years in which a student is traditionally engaged in higher education are a time of great personal development and reflect changes in many aspects of a student's functioning. The duration of this transitional period, now termed *emerging adulthood*, is increasing, and for a large number of individuals, this development is fostered during the college years (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001). As access to education has evolved, moving on to college is expected for more than half of all graduating American high school students (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012; National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2008). It is important to recognize, however, that students represent a diverse range of experiences, skills, and abilities, approaching this life transition from a variety of perspectives.

Tinto (2006), writing about college retention, asserted the importance of "the concept of integration and the patterns of interaction between the student and other members of the institution especially during the critical first year of college and the stages of transition that marked that year" (p. 3). During the 1960s and 1970s, theories of college student development emerged, and have continued to evolve and develop as demographics have changed (Gardner, 2009). Gardner (2009) summarized the series of student development theories that build upon the work of Erikson's

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life span development theory, focusing specifically on the college years. Many models exist, with a common expectation of the need to resolve an issue or develop a skill to progress in the developmental process (Gardner, 2009). Practitioners have also recognized the need for awareness of the ever-changing demographics, and corresponding needs, of college students (Astin, 1998; Bishop, Lacour, Nutt, Yamada, & Lee, 2004). As the population of individuals entering college increases in diversity and numbers, it is important to consider the range of developmental needs that may impact, as well as be a result of, the transition to college as part of this stage of the life span. For some, the transition to college may be a relatively quick settling in during the first semester of a student's first year, but this time of transition is more likely to span the first years of the college as students navigate their own complexity within a diverse community.

Developmentally, the college years are a time for developing oneself including self-sufficiency and personal responsibility (Arnett, 2003). College campuses strive to provide a supportive environment geared toward challenging students to grow and develop. Look to the mission statement of most colleges, and words like *growth, citizenship, development*, and *responsibility* are anticipated outcomes of the college or university experience. The evolving demographic of college students is well documented, specifically through 40 years of data collection with the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007), as well as discussion of the impact of changing demographics through the scholarly literature (Astin, 1998; Bishop et al., 2004). Thus, when conceptualizing college students, there are many developmental models through which we can view this population. College students are still very much adolescents and the developmental path of this group moves through many different landscapes, including cognitive, psychosocial, neurological, and emotional realms. The following models provide a lens through which we may be able to better understand students' adaptive or maladaptive methods of approaching the many challenges of the college years. Each of these descriptions can be isolated to explain specific actions and conflicts, or they can be reflected upon collectively to expound on college students' experiences and reactions to events. We will begin with one of the more recently developed perspectives on this group, through the lens of understanding the emerging adult.

EMERGING ADULTHOOD

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2000, 2012) presents one avenue for understanding the college years in current literature. He identified *emerging adulthood* as the transition period from adolescence to young adulthood and used the ages of 18 and 25 as boundary points. During this time most individuals have not yet experienced many of the developmental tasks indicative of a transition into adulthood such as marriage, parenting, or occupational stability, yet these topics are the focus areas for the transitions that will occur during this period.

Emerging adulthood is a time when goals that focus largely on exploration of identity and life course, including career, education, and relationships, unfold (Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). Arnett (2000) described this as a period of role hiatus in which burgeoning autonomy, coupled with a lack of persistent adult responsibilities, allows individuals to experiment and explore. This extended period of exploration and learning acts as a bridge between childhood dependence and adult roles and responsibilities (Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004).

Overall, well-being tends to be stable over time; however, emerging adulthood is one period of the life span when well-being can shift dramatically (Schulenberg, Bryant, & O'Malley, 2004). While the transition from college to work can be disorienting, the smoothness of this shift is not necessarily associated with overall satisfaction (Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, & Platt, 2010). This finding may suggest that the struggles experienced by college upperclassmen are a normative, and even an additive, component of emerging adulthood. It should be noted that although the concepts of emerging and young adulthood are supported in the research literature, these are culturally bound constructs and not immutable developmental truths.

AN ECOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTAL MODEL

An ecological developmental framework offers a perspective of this time of identity exploration, as well as physiological, physical, social, and emotional change. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) identify areas of student change, such as psychosocial and cognitive-structural, that occur within the transition to college. Particularly with traditional-aged first- and second-year college students, the individual college student transitions from his or her familiar adolescent environment to a college environment marked by both opportunity and expectation of individual responsibility. Students bring to this transitional experience a vast range of life experiences. Student persistence and retention, staying in school to achieve the desired goal (often a diploma), are complex issues. Engagement, students' connection within their educational community, particularly in the first years of college, supports retention and requires recognizing the diversity of students and their environments (Tinto, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner (1977) provides an ecological development framework for considering the development of the individual within the context of his or her environment. This includes considering not only the current environment, but also the many systems that can shape an individual. Bronfenbrenner defined microsystems as the person–environment relationship related to a setting, taking into account elements such as place, time, activity, and role of the individual (p. 514). Students who are classmates in their first year of college provide an example of a microsystem. Each student, though sharing this microsystem as a member of an incoming class at a specific institution, is influenced by the mesosystem, that is, interaction with other specific current influences such as family, peers, work, or other school experiences. This in turn is influenced by an exosystem, which is defined as broader societal institutions, such as government, school, media, or neighborhood influences, which impact the individual, but are not directly controlled by the individual. The exosystem includes college policies and practices that are defined by others, yet will influence students. Finally, the macrosystem in which these systems all are encompassed can be described as the cultural influences that underlie and inform each of the other environments. Taylor (2008) describes student's involvement in the micro-, meso-, and eco-systems as "important variables that play a part in the developmental process" (p. 220). In addition to individual characteristics and personal experiences, the salient environmental influences of an individual can vary at any given time. This framework can be visualized as a Venn diagram showing both overlap and unique influence among the various ecological factors (Bronfenbrenner, pp. 514–515).

Although we may first envision students as categories, that is, freshmen, sophomores, and so forth, it is essential to recognize the heterogeneity of each group's population. In preparation for work with college students, a broad ecological view of the variety of possible factors, experiences, and environments that can impact individual development is helpful to effectively support a client as well as encourage a campus community conducive to individual and community growth. Adjustment to college includes adjustment to academic, emotional, and social realms. Considering the individual student's characteristics and life experiences can inform responses to both identified and anticipated needs, as well as support development within each realm. We must remember that while the college experience brings together groups of students facing similar transitions and challenges, students will also face their own personal challenges that reflect their identities and personal path.

PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Erik Erikson, one of the pioneers of developmental stage models, designed a theory describing individuals' progression through eight developmental stages from birth into adulthood. In this model, Erikson offers insight into the typical interpersonal conflicts and important life events during each period. According to this framework, the sixth stage of development, Young Adulthood, marks a period when individuals, between the ages of 19 and 40, focus on forming close, loving relationships. During this stage, individuals battle isolation as they search for intimacy and meaningful connections with others. For many, this transition is reflected in the commitment to another individual and/or the desire to form a family of one's own.

Negotiating the interpersonal conflicts surrounding the resolution between intimacy and isolation can be a unique struggle during the later years of college. As students strive to become adults—establishing secure identities, becoming independent, and conforming to social standards (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009)—they must negotiate the coexistence of meaningful relationships with their postgraduation goals and current obligations. For many individuals, this growth process requires a balance of forming meaningful romantic relationships while cultivating the self-understanding necessary for individual identity formation. While this can be a valuable period for exploration and formation of building meaningful lifelong connections, conflict can arise when students are unable to concurrently balance their connection to their social network and their romantic partner or when they seek to find stability during this period of transition by coupling. Erikson's model provides valuable insight into a natural area of conflict that many college students experience—the link between identity and intimacy. This issue will be discussed in further detail in chapters addressing sexuality and romantic relationships.

PERRY'S INTELLECTUAL SCHEMA

Like Erikson, William Perry created a structure for understanding developmental growth. Perry's research, a reaction to his observation of "increase[ed] relativism in society and diversity on campus" following World War II (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p. 5), provides a developmental epistemology for investigating the lifetime evolution of individuals' knowledge (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). Through his longitudinal research on over 500 students at Harvard and Radcliffe, Perry created a nine-position, four-stage developmental sequence to describe undergraduate students' process of making meaning during their academic and personal college experience (Granello, 2002; Love & Guthrie, 1999; West, 2004).

Perry's model provides a "map" of adult intellectual and moral development/ethical changes. Students begin at the most basic stage of dualistic thinking; in this stage, individuals perceive a simple "right or wrong" answer to every question or challenge. Thus, students are eager to gain facts, which they believe will provide the knowledge necessary to succeed. The next stage is multiplicity in which there is the realization that there is no real single truth and that knowledge is much more subjective than once believed. As students begin to recognize that answers still need to be found, they begin to move into the third stage, relativism. In this stage, ambiguity in knowledge and answers is recognized as an unavoidable circumstance, and students may be discombobulated by the recognition that all answers must be evaluated and that all answers may have merit. This disequilibrium may move a student forcefully into the final stage, commitment. This may reflect a commitment to a vocational path or moral ideals and marks the ability of the student to hold conflicting viewpoints and accept ambiguity from a point of personal commitment (Granello, 2002; Love & Guthrie, 1999; McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). These hallmarks of higher development and stronger identity formation are more frequently characteristic of the behaviors observed within students during the end of their college experience. Advanced reasoning capabilities enable students to manage additional stressors and developmental challenges. As a result, students are not paralyzed by a search for a single truth and definitive result, but are comfortable navigating through unclear experiences.

Ideally, college students progress through the early dualistic developmental positions during their first year in college, and acquire relativistic reasoning capabilities before graduation. Nevertheless, research presents conflicting evidence about the average student position at the time of graduation (Love & Guthrie, 1999), with some evidence suggesting students can graduate from a university without reaching a relativistic level of reasoning. In addition, in times of high uncertainty and unbalanced levels of challenge and support, students may regress to earlier developmental positions in search of comfort and security. This notion of seeking security and operating within an established support system is closely related to the challenges described by Erikson during this period of life. If individuals are capable of negotiating the need for connection away from isolation, they may be better equipped with peer and/or romantic support that will encourage their success as they embark from an environment of familiarity into an uncertain milieu.

The demonstration of dualistic reasoning—whether the byproduct of external factors, life circumstances, situational regression, or other variables—may result in students who are less capable of operating within an environment of high uncertainty. For these students, the many transitions during the later college years may be particularly challenging.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT

The transition to college coincides with development in moral reasoning, as an individual's process of response to a moral dilemma evolves over time. Lawrence Kohlberg describes development across three levels of moral reasoning related to ethical behavior (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1991; Terenzini, 1987). The work of Kohlberg focused on an ethic of justice or fairness, whereas Carol Gilligan expanded on this notion with the perspective of an ethic of care or responsiveness to others (Gilligan, 1988). Gilligan's work introduced gender differences in how one approaches moral reasoning.

As students operate from different stages or levels of moral development, as well as an individual place on the spectrum of the ethic of justice or care, managing student conflict is increasingly complex. Students at different stages of moral development will react differently to similar social, academic, and cocurricular experiences; conversely, exposure to a variety of such experiences can serve to support moral development (Mayhew, Seifert, & Pascarella, 2010). As with other aspects of student growth, providing opportunity for student engagement, as well as sufficient challenge, can support moral development and enhance ethical decision making to benefit the individual and their current community.

EGO DEVELOPMENT

Jane Loevinger's (1966) theory of ego development offers yet another valuable developmental framework for understanding the experiences of this population. In the 1960s, Loevinger formulated the theory of ego development as "the way individuals make meaning of their personal life experience and the world at large" (Krumpe, 2002, p. 1). Since her original research, ego development has been described as "the organizing aspect of personality, or as the 'master trait' [since] it organizes and governs how a person perceives and thinks about a problem, and thus determines how a person behaves" (Clements & Swensen, 2000, p. 1; Sheaffer, Sias, Toriello, & Cubero, 2008; Swensen, Eskew, & Kohlhepp, 1981).

Loevinger organized the developmental process into nine stages, which begin during infancy and continue throughout the lifetime. Like many stage models, ego development unfolds as a linear process whereby each new stage builds upon mastery of the previous. These stages are not associated with age, and advancement to a subsequent stage is not predicted based on an established interval; rather, individuals advance at unique rates as they experience various milestones. Ego development is dependent upon an individual's potential and environment; nevertheless, one's preexisting, intrinsic, and intellectual capacity may restrict growth potential. As described with Perry's developmental schema, individuals can regress to previous stages of development during periods of increased stress.

Current literature links an array of positive characteristics to higher ego development levels, such as "increased nurturance, trust, interpersonal sensitivity, valuing of individuality, psychological mindedness, responsibility, and inner control" (Hauser, Gerber, & Allen, 1998, p. 209), characteristics that are ideally cultivated in students prior to leaving college. However, data on the developmental progression of college students have been rather inconclusive. While scholars often assume college students experience a consistent advancement during their academic careers as a result of increased stressors, some data indicate that college seniors experience a decline in their developmental level (Loevinger et al., 1985). Some speculate this decline may be the result of increased stressors prior to graduation when testing has been administered. Regardless, this organizing principle of personality provides a structure for understanding the growth demonstrated by many students as they accept a greater sense of personal responsibility and ability to self-reflect, and begin to exhibit greater tolerance and acceptance of others. Developmental growth along this continuum may be especially meaningful as college students prepare for employment, where personal responsibility and the ability to understand and tolerate divergent perspectives are of great benefit.

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

The ramifications of students' ongoing physical development are a final developmental transition with explanatory power. Because all individuals do not progress along a uniform timeline physically, college students, especially males, are likely to continue to experience physical changes. One area of consequence is the brain's developmental course. The prefrontal cortex, one of three areas of the frontal lobe, is the last area of the brain to finish developing, usually around the mid-20s. This area of the brain, described as having neuropsychological functions, is strongly related to behavior (Miller, 2007). When the prefrontal cortex is fully formed, individuals typically have acquired the advanced reasoning skills associated with adult maturity such as the recognition of consequences to actions, avoidance of socially unacceptable behaviors, foresight, reduced impulsivity, and increased organization (Giedd, 2008; Miller, 2007).

In many instances, this advanced stage of brain development closely coincides with the completion of an undergraduate program, so as students prepare for greater levels of responsibility, they simultaneously recognize the ramifications of their actions and the importance of their decisions. The combination of actual and recognized responsibility can be overwhelming for some students, yet the balance of ability and opportunity is one of the unique markers of this life stage.

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