

Evaluating and Using Student Development Theories in Higher Education: A Case Study of an Undergraduate Student Identity at Duke University

Question #1

Developmental Analysis of Students

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The case of a Duck University senior student from William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor book *The Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* had reminded me of three theories of student development: 1) James Marcia's (1960, 1980) theory of identity statuses, 2) Arthur Chickering's (1966, 1993) theory of identity development, and 3) Baxter Magolda's (2001) theory of self-authorship.

In Marcia's theory of identity statuses, the Duke University student was at the stage of an identity *diffusion* in which he had arrived college with very little to no understanding of the self. The student found himself associated with the fraternity keg scene, otherwise known as "the party scene." During the time, perhaps during his freshman year, the student was likely at a non-committal stage in which his ideas, beliefs, and values were primarily based on the premise of "go with the flow." Typically, identity *diffusion* occurs when an individual has not made any commitments or exploration. This is particularly common for freshman year students, where many are often forced to perform specific roles and rituals such as, dressing up for parties, joining fraternity/sorority, or even simply going to the bar. The question of whether the student had entered the fraternity keg scene with a specific goal or purpose in mind remains unclear. However, it is obvious that the student had a strong intention to meet new friends, especially since he had changed his wardrobe and hairstyle to "fit in" or "to be cool" among the popular crowd. Despite the student's ambition to meet new friends and perhaps to have fun in college, the student discovered during the holiday vacation how much he values being surrounded by people who are capable of holding serious intellectual conversations.

To enumerate, the student would recognize how much he enjoys holding and discussing controversial topics with his family over dinner compared to his prior experience talking with students at the fraternity keg scene. The student's ability to effectively recognize and explore his

preference is a clear example of him moving away from Marcia's identity of *diffusion* to Marcia's identity of *moratorium*. Generally, identity *moratorium* occurs when an individual is in the midst of exploration. The student desire to change his social identity from once being indecisive and ambivalence to being authoritative and creative is an example of him moving into the stage of exploration. Rather than simply "going with the flow," the student recognizes the importance of making decisions that reflect closely his own beliefs, ideas, and values. Eventually, the student decision to move off-campus to find highly intellectual friends in college is an example of how students can quickly move from one identity status to another identity status during their years in college. Marcia saw identity as two psychosocial tasks: 1) "crisis" or turning point to go either forward or backward in one's development and 2) "commitment" or making choices about occupation, religious or spiritual direction, and political and sexual values (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, 175). In other words, Marcia's theory of identity development illustrate how students identity statuses changes in college, often leading to differentiation, individualization, stability, continuity, and comfort.

Compared to Marcia's theory of identity development, Chickering's theory of identity development also fits well with the student decision to grow in college. To clarify, one of the seven vectors that resembles closely with the Duke University student was his ability to *move through autonomy toward interdependence*. Typically, autonomy implies mastery of oneself and one's power. When the student was unable to find what he wanted to gain from the fraternity keg scene, he knew that he must change his overall plan to find people who embrace intellectual stance toward life. The student decision to move off campus was a clear indication of him developing his own career goals, personal interests, and interpersonal commitments. He knew that he had to take new responsibilities for his own goals and to be less attached by other

opinions. His decision to change plans is an example of him *moving through autonomy toward interdependence*. Chickering and Reisser (1993) highlight three components students can move toward interdependence: 1) emotional independence, 2) instrumental independence, and 3) interdependence. Though the student had wrestled with numerous questions of independence and interdependence, he was able to discover overtime how to make effective decisions that best reflects upon his own identity. Normally, students moving toward interdependence learn lessons about reciprocity, compromise, sacrifice, consensus, and commitment to the larger community (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, 140).

In addition to Marcia and Chickering, Baxter Magolda's theory of self-authorship also fits well toward the student academic journey at Duke. At first, the student joined the fraternity keg scene to have friends accept him for who he was as an individual. This concept closely ties to Magolda's first phase *following formulas*, where the student would perform his own roles based on what his peers had expected him to be rather than who he wanted to be. Generally, external influences include societal expectations, significant others, mentors, and adults with whom they interact (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2011, 185). The student decision to simply follow his friends in order to win the approval of others is an example of him being at the first phase of *following formulas*. However, at the end of the semester, the student realized that something was missing in his life. The student decision to move off-campus is an example him creating a new plan that better suits his personal needs. This change reflects closely to Magolda's second phase *crossroads*, in which the student would establish a new plan that would make him feel more satisfied at Duke University. His ability to not allow his friends dictate or control his own destiny is a clear example of *crossroads*.

All in all, the three theorists had reminded me of William Perry's (1968) theory of intellectual and ethical development, otherwise commonly viewed as the 'meaning-making process.' Perry's nine "forms" or "positions" he once proposed in the 1960s has helped both scholars and students interpret the world in "unqualified polar terms of absolute right-wrong, good-bad" (p. 3). The student decision to enter the fraternity keg scene is a clear example of Perry's position one or position two of *dualism*. The student entered the world of college with limited intellectual understanding of what is considered to be good and what is considered to be bad in college. The student probably thought that going to a college fraternity keg scene would provide him unique opportunities to meet new friends and to perhaps hold intellectual conversations with his peers. Though it is unclear whether or not the student had enjoyed his experience at the fraternity keg scene, the Duke University student eventually recognized during his freshman year how much he prefers holding intellectual dialogues rather than holding basic and boring conversation with partygoer people. The student decision to move off-campus and away from the party scene is a reflection of him entering from position 4 *multiplicity* to position 5 of *relativism*. The student learned from his prior experience that what's considered to be good or fun for most students (e.g., going to party, dressing up to impress students, etc.) may not necessarily be good for his own personal development. His decision to simply not follow the crowd and to eventually make decisions that reflects his own social identity is example of him transitioning to the fifth stage of *relativism*.

In summary, all three developmental theorists (i.e., Chickering, Marcia, Magolda, and Perry) illustrate the complex challenges college students now face in the 21st century. Most students enter colleges and universities with multiple identities, perceptions, and values. Some students enter higher education with a strong sense of self while others, on the other hand, may

experience a state of confusion and insecurity about who they are and their relationships with others. Normally, it takes an act of will to move beyond past patterns and seek purposes that takes students into the unknown. Developing purpose requires the student to be intentional, to assess interests and options, to clarify goals, to make plans, and to persist despite obstacles (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, 209). Although most students now enter college with the primary goal “to have fun,” many students would eventually recognize at the completion of a university degree how their four critical years have vastly influenced their pursuit to become more independent, to deal with the complexities of life, and to determine complex answers to questions of “*Who am I?*” and “*What is the purpose of life?*”

As higher education administrators, I believe that we must help our undergraduate students understand their cognitive meaning making and social construction in life. Students are constantly changing daily to fit certain types of roles, norms, and environments. Because students often do not take time to reflect upon their own attitudes or emotions in college, higher education professionals must seek ways to challenge and support individuals in both cognitive and non-cognitive domains during normative and non-normative events. Practitioners must provide growth-enhancing conditions that empower students to develop a sense of self that is trusting and autonomous to which they can enter the “emerging adulthood” life. Understanding the self is a long-term process that requires concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Furthermore, establishing identity requires reflection upon one’s family of origin and ethnic heritage as well as putting the self within a social and historical context. In other words, developing a solid understanding of the self involves some knowledge that their behavior, thoughts, and feelings can be affected by forces we are not normally aware of (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, 206). This requires the transformation of

self. If student affairs practitioners seek to transform students during their four critical years in college, then they must help the academy recognize the value of the whole person concept in a more holistic and less linear matter. The authors of *Student Development in College* once stated in the first sentence, “Our student populations and the developmental issues they confront are more diverse and complex than ever in the history of higher education.” It is this statement in which I believe have led me to pursue a life-long career in the field of higher education administration/student affairs.