

# An Introduction to Student Development Theory

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## Foreword

The collegiate environment, particularly on a residential campus, offers students exciting opportunities for intellectual and personal growth. Student development theory, founded on general theories of human development, attempts to describe the growth processes that are common in the student experience. Faculty and student service personnel have many occasions to observe and affect student developments. This primer has been prepared to provide information on student development theory, along with observations on practical applications of theory that apply to common interactions with students.

## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow's (1) theories on personality and motivation were originally developed beginning in 1935 and were revised throughout his career. His "theory on human motivation" is a holistic theory of human development based on the belief that behavior is motivated by the desire to satisfy needs. Need satisfaction progresses in a hierarchical manner, beginning with physiological needs such as hunger and thirst and culminating in self-actualization. Once lower-level needs are satisfied, individuals progress to higher levels of development. Maslow proposed five levels: physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization.

## Physiological Needs

Maslow proposed that the human body seeks to maintain a constant normal state of the blood stream called "homeostasis." Hunger, thirst, and maintaining an appropriate body temperature are the most important needs, since they are necessary for survival. If these needs are fulfilled, they cease to serve as determinants of behavior and the person can seek to fulfill higher levels of needs. Other

physiological needs such as sexual desire, fatigue, need for activity, or maternal behavior are important motivators, but are not necessary for survival or homeostasis. Obtaining adequate sleep, receiving basic nutrients, and remaining free of life threatening illness or injury are also critical to well being. With rare exception, college students are generally able to satisfy basic physiological needs.

## Safety Needs

The next level of needs is comprised of the need for safety and a feeling of stability or security, which come from living in a familiar environment, free from danger. Infants and young children who become upset after being startled or separated from parents are expressing safety needs. Maslow cites needs for a predictable world, a comfortable routine, vocational stability, financial savings, insurance, familiar objects, and, in some cases, religious beliefs as examples of safety needs. Chronic illness can be disruptive to an individual's sense of safety. Emergencies such as injury or disease, crime, natural disaster, societal disorganization, and war result in the need for safety becoming a primary motivator.

While college students generally are able to satisfy safety needs, there are identifiable times when the feeling of safety is threatened. The uncertainty of the first few days after arriving as a new student in a totally unfamiliar environment cause some students to withdraw from school. Lack of certainty in obtaining financial support to pay college expenses also threatens the student's sense of security. Family strife, particularly the separation or divorce of parents, is also very disruptive to students.

## Belongingness and Love Needs

Once physiological and safety needs are fairly well gratified, the need for love, affection, and

belongingness becomes a primary motivator. Individuals seek acceptance and friendship among peers; adults seek a mate. Thwarted needs for belonging and love are considered to be a primary source of maladjustment and psychopathology. Maslow stresses that love is not synonymous with sex, but that the need for love is one factor contributing to the desire for sex.

Again because they are in a new environment, new students typically spend a lot of time and energy seeking acceptance from peers and developing friends on the campus.

## Esteem Needs

Individuals have a need for self-esteem, a feeling of adequacy, achievement and competence based on independent actions. This is coupled by a need to obtain respect and esteem from others by receiving attention, recognition, appreciation, or status. Satisfaction of these needs leads to strength and self-confidence; lack of satisfaction leads to feelings of inferiority and weakness.

The college experience offers students opportunities in the classroom and in co-curricular activities to build competence and achievement. Many college students are very concerned with receiving recognition for their achievements. Lack of self-esteem is often found in students who have academic or interpersonal problems.

## Self-Actualization Needs

After lower-level needs have been satisfied, the individual will experience a desire for self-fulfillment. This is a need to fulfill one's potential – to use talent and creativity to become everything that one is capable of becoming. The outlet will vary from person to person, sometimes expressed in achievements in the home or work setting, sometimes in athletics, music or art.

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## Coons' Developmental Tasks of the College Student

In discussing the developmental tasks of the college student, Frederick Coons (2) refers to Havighurst's (3) definition of a developmental task as one which arises during a certain period in the life of an individual. This is usually spurred by a combination of factors such as physical maturation, cultural processes, and the goals and values of the emerging personality. He points out that the college environment, due to the geographical separation from parents, causes a reexamination of things previously taken for granted. This offers a unique opportunity for developmental growth. Using Erikson's (4) term of "developmental crisis" as a turning point when development must move one way or another, Coons states that crises are the rule rather than the exception for college students.

Resolution of the Child-Parent Relationship Changes in the student's relationship to parents occur when the student leaves home to begin college, and begin to stabilize toward the end of the second or third year. The student begins to recognize that parents are people. Difficulties in resolution most frequently occur with only children and youngest children. Students complaining about overprotective parents are usually struggling with this transition. The transition can be more difficult due to ambivalent feelings in wanting to develop autonomy, but not wanting to give up all dependency. The transition is also more difficult when financial dependence conflicts with needs for emotional independence.

## Solidifying of a Sexual Identity

The student begins to see many more and different models of "male" and "female" behavior and marriage and family relationships. The needs for intimacy and expressing sexuality are closely related. Some students experience confusion

about heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality. Adjustment problems often occur when students come from a family background in which the parents and their marriage relationship are not representative of societal stereotypes.

## Formation of a Personal Value System

The student's values at the time of entering college may have been imposed by parents, church, school, and community. The student encounters differences in values and begins to examine and question previous beliefs, thus entering a process of internalizing his or her own value system. This process is more difficult when the student's previous background has led to right versus wrong polarizations, without recognizing the relativity of values.

## Development of the Capacity for True Intimacy

Students arrive on campus with differing backgrounds in regard to the expressions of affection and sharing of personal concerns and anxieties with others. Developing close relationships with peers is an important task among college students. Intimacy and tenderness may be confused with sexual arousal or dependency relationships.

## Choosing a Life's Work

This task deals with identifying an academic field of interest, and is not necessarily synonymous with choosing a vocation. Coons suggests that vocations often do not become settled until several years after college. Opportunities to explore alternatives are advantageous to development. The pressure to choose a major and identify a potential career path are a source of stress for students, however, the probability of success in completing academic work is greatly enhanced when the student finds a sense of purpose. Coons notes that some students may be

better served by taking time off from college as an alternative than remaining in college without motivation and accumulating a record of mediocre grades.

## Chickering's Vectors of Development

In 1969, Arthur Chickering (5) presented a model of college student development and outlined sources of impact in the college environment. (6) The theory was revised in 1993 by Chickering and Linda Reisser. (7) Seven vectors were identified, all of which could be classified under the general heading of "identity formation." Chickering emphasized that students are developmentally diverse, in that some students arrive on campus in the very beginning phases of development, while others have already developed a strong self-image.

## Developing Competence

This vector includes three spheres: intellectual, physical and social (interpersonal) competence. Increased skill leads to a sense of confidence in one's ability to handle such tasks as acquiring knowledge, critical thinking, physical and manual skills, and developing communication skills for a variety of social situations. If competence is developed, individuals are more willing to take risks, which spurs growth in other areas. Developing intellectual competence is directly tied to academic programs. Physical and manual competence is developed through athletic and recreational activities and through hands-on contact with art materials or construction materials. Interpersonal competence is developed through communication with individuals or groups as found in class teamwork or co-curricular organizations.

## Managing Emotions

Development in this vector involves increasing awareness of one's feelings and how they are

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expressed. Common concerns are roommate conflicts, sexual impulses, academic anxiety and aggression. Resolution involves integration of being able to recognize and label feelings, trust one's feelings, and the ability to define what will be expressed to whom. Development includes dealing with anger, controlling impulses, and learning to balance negative emotions with counteracting feelings of courage and optimism.

## Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence

This vector involves development of emotional autonomy, goals development, and recognition of one's interdependence with others. Development of emotional autonomy involves a gradual decrease in the need for approval and reassurance of others, toward independence and self regulation. Students typically move away from dependence on parents to increased reliance on peers. Goals development involves the growth of self-direction, and includes the ability to identify resources, seek help from appropriate people, and use systematic problem-solving methods. Recognition of interdependence follows from independence as the student finds a middle ground between being one's own person and slavish conformity.

## Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships

This vector involves increased tolerance and acceptance of differences between individuals and an increase in the capacity for mature and intimate relationships. Both components involve the ability to accept individuals for whom they are, to respect differences, including intercultural differences, and appreciate commonalities. Tolerance aids students in gaining a clearer understanding of customs, values, stereotyping, and discrimination. Skills and attitudes to be developed include the ability to

listen, understand and empathize with others without the need to dominate or pass judgment. Relationships are characterized by openness, trust and reciprocity.

## Establishing Identity

This component is strongly interwoven with the other vectors and refers to the ability to articulate an accurate, realistic self-profile. Students discover or confirm their core characteristics, their preferred ways to dress and act, and their favorite interests. They make choices and commitments about with whom they want to identify, roles they play, and lifestyles they want. Identity formation based on sexual orientation, ethnic minority status or handicap often presents additional challenges to students.

## Developing Purpose

Development in this vector refers to the ability to articulate directions and goals, which define the individual's purpose. This includes assessment and clarification of interests, educational and career options, and lifestyle preferences.

## Developing Integrity

This task includes an awareness of the relationship between beliefs and behavior, and the relativity of values. The individual becomes more able to look objectively at complex situations, develop a personal code of values, and seek congruence between beliefs and behavior.

Sources of impact in the campus environment that can influence student development include classroom teaching and frequent student-faculty interaction. There are many opportunities for significant interaction in the residence hall setting, and through involvement in formal or informal student clubs, which amplify and reinforce the impact of other experiences. Growth-inducing experiences include situations in which:

1. the student is involved in making choices,
2. the student interacts with diverse individuals and ideas,
3. the student is directly involved in new and varied experiences,
4. the student is involved in solving problems without demand for conformity to an authority's opinion, and
5. the student is involved with receiving feedback and making an objective self assessment.

## Moral Development Theories

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Judgment: Lawrence Kohlberg (8) developed a theory describing the development of moral judgment based on concepts of objectivity, justice, and fairness. His research originally was focused on boys aged ten to sixteen, and was later refined and revised. His theory illustrates the development of moral judgment proceeding through three levels, each with two stages.

### Preconventional Level

At the preconventional level, a child responds to cultural rules and labels of good or bad, right or wrong, based upon the consequences of the behavior such as reward or punishment, and the power of the person who expresses the rules.

Stage 1: Punishment Obedience Orientation.

Avoidance of punishment and deference to power are valued and the physical consequences of action determine its goodness or badness.

Stage 2: Instrumental-Relativist Orientation.

Satisfaction of one's own needs and occasionally the needs of others determine actions. Elements of fairness, sharing and reciprocity are understood in the context of self-satisfaction rather than being based on concepts of loyalty or justice.

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## **Conventional Level**

At the conventional level, living up to the expectations of one's family, group or nation is a primary value. The individual identifies with the group, conforms to its expectations, and actively supports and maintains the group's expectations.

## **Stage 3: Interpersonal Concordance Orientation.**

Behavior is shaped by what receives approval from others, and there is much conformity to stereotypical images of what is the majority behavior. Good intentions also earn favor.

## **Stage 4: Law and Order Orientation.**

Good behavior is determined by an attitude of doing one's duty, showing respect for authority, and maintaining the social order for its own sake.

## **Post conventional, Autonomous, or Principled Level**

This level is characterized by the definition of moral values based on acceptance of the values and principles as having justifiable social validity rather than because the individual identifies with the group or accepts authority.

## **Stage 5: Social Contract, Legalistic Orientation, Generally with Utilitarian Overtones.**

Correct behavior is defined by views of individual rights and societal standards that have been critically examined and agreed upon by society. The individual is aware that there are differences in personal values and opinions, and that the circumstances of a given situation can affect behavioral outcomes. The individual recognizes that laws represent a societal consensus of agreed-upon rules, but that laws may be changed based on rational argumentation.

## **Stage 6:**

## **Universal-Ethical-Principle Orientation.**

Behavior is ruled by a decision of conscience in accord with self-chosen ethical principles. These principles are based on universal concepts of justice, reciprocity, equality and respect for the dignity of all human beings.

## **Gilligan's Theory of Moral Orientation**

Carole Gilligan (9) was a colleague of Lawrence Kohlberg who later criticized his research on the issue on gender bias, and developed a theory of moral orientation based on the concept of an ethic of care. Gilligan proposed that women's perception of self is embedded in relationships with others and that judgments and moral decisions are made in relation to the context of the situation. Actions taken to resolve dilemmas are based on the ethic of care and doing the least harm while preserving relationships.

Other researchers have verified the existence of gender differences in moral orientations and found that females were more likely to use a care orientation than a justice orientation. However, it has been noted that both genders may use both orientations at various times.

Moral dilemmas occur frequently in the college setting. Common issues include decisions on use of alcohol, sexual behavior, resolving conflicts with roommates or family members, financial transactions, and dealing with academic difficulties.