

# A Brief Introduction to Student Development Theory

---

## What is Student Development Theory?

Student development is the way that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrollment in an institution of higher education.

There are three types of development:

- *Change* is an altered state, which may be positive or negative and progressive or regressive.
- *Growth* is an expansion, but may be positive or negative to overall functioning.
- *Development* is positive growth.

Theory is used to describe, explain, predict, and/or control student development. In other words, student development theory can help you to better understand, support, and serve students. However, use caution when referring to student development theories. Students are individuals and theory is simply a guide; it is not applicable to all students in every situation. You should be aware of the use of labels and avoid using theory to manipulate students.

## Types of Student Development Theory

- *Psychosocial* – deals with interpersonal and identity development of students: including how students define themselves, their relationships with others, and what they want to do with their lives.
- *Cognitive-Structural* – illuminates changes in the way people think and make decisions. Examines both intellectual and moral development.
- *Typology* – examines individual differences in how people view and relate to the world. Typologies are not developmental; they are used simply to observe innate individual differences (e.g., Myers-Briggs, Holland,).

## Relevant Theories

### Arthur Chickering and Linda Reisser: Theory of Identity Development (1993-Psychosocial)

Chickering/Reisser can be helpful in understanding the progression that students have in their identity development. Students will move through the seven vectors at different rates and in various orders. Vectors interact with and build upon one another.

1. *Vector 1 - Developing Competence*: Intellectual, physical and interpersonal
2. *Vector 2 - Managing Emotions*: Ability to recognize and accept emotions and express and control them
3. *Vector 3 - Moving Through Autonomy Toward Interdependence*: Emotional independence, self-direction, problem solving, and awareness of interconnectedness with others
4. *Vector 4 - Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships*: Increased tolerance and appreciation of differences, and capacity for healthy, lasting, intimate relationships with partners and close friends

5. *Vector 5 - Establishing Identity*: Comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, self-acceptance and self-esteem
6. *Vector 6 - Developing Purpose*: Developing clear vocational goals, personal interests and activities, strong interpersonal commitments, and intentionality.
7. *Vector 7 - Developing Integrity*: Humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence

**William Perry: Scheme of Intellectual and Ethical Development (1968 – Cognitive-Structural)**

Students progress through Perry's scheme hierarchically, although some students may stray from straight-line development. Each stage represents a different way of thinking.

Perry's scheme provides insight to the behavior that you may observe from first-year students. They may share dichotomous thoughts in class discussions and become frustrated by your challenge to help them see the "grey" in situations. Students can be supported as they move from a place of dualistic thinking to more relative thinking by assignments that promote critical thinking and analytical consideration of information.

Four Stages:

1. *Dualism*: Students view the world dichotomously (right vs. wrong, black vs. white), and assume authorities have all the answers. Students typically have trouble with reflection, comparison, and analysis because they see learning as a simple information exchange and nothing more.
2. *Multiplicity*: "Everyone has the right to their own opinion." Students believe their peers are more legitimate sources of knowledge and multiple alternatives are now acceptable. Logic, data and evidence are viewed as less important, versus the amount of work done or time spent is seen as key.
3. *Relativism*: Students recognize the need to support opinions, while all opinions are no longer equally valid. Context is taken into account and analysis and synthesis now occur. The capacity for empathy is now present.
4. *Commitment to Relativism*: Students learn to tolerate ambiguity and to make choices in a contextual world. They develop a personal set of values and are able to make choices and commitments in the absence of complete information. Continual knowledge and learning becomes important.

**Alexander Astin: Involvement Theory (1984)**

Role of student involvement in development – States that for growth and learning to occur, students must be engaged in their environment. The amount of student learning and personal development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement. The more students put in to an activity, the more they get out of it.

**Vincent Tinto: Retention Theory (1987)**

Several key factors are responsible for student attrition – a feeling of isolation, difficulty adjusting to a new environment, and an inability to integrate new information and knowledge

with previous information and knowledge. As students transition into college during their freshman year, social and academic integration into the fabric of the university is critical.

Both Astin and Tinto theorized that students' social integration with the university is a critical component of their development and, ultimately, their decision to persist to graduation. The first-year seminar is a prime environment for students to consider social integration and campus engagement. Introducing students to campus resources, encouraging involvement in clubs and organizations, promoting learning through service opportunities, etc. can prompt students to become engaged in their experience, thus enhancing their learning and development.

**Challenge and Support**

The notion of challenge and support as functions of growth and development has been written about quite frequently. People grow best where they continuously experience an appropriate balance of *support* and *challenge* (Sanford, 1967). Environments that are weighted too heavily in the direction of challenge without adequate support are toxic; they promote defensiveness and anxiety. Those weighted too heavily toward support without adequate challenge are ultimately boring; they promote lifelessness. Both kinds of imbalance lead to withdrawal. In contrast, the balance of support and challenge leads to vital engagement.

<b>CHALLENGE</b>		
Low	High	
Disengage	Retreat	<b>S U P P O R T</b> L H
Stagnate	Maximum Growth	

*Other areas of interest for theorists include Racial and Ethnic Identity Development, Identity Development of Women, Sexual Identity Development, Moral Development, Vocational Theory, and Experiential Learning. Refer to references and additional readings for more information.*

## Ways to Promote Student Development

---

1. Let students know that they have the freedom to disclose their innermost thoughts and feelings without fear of attack or rejection from the instructor. Create a classroom environment where they are also encouraged to share this information with the class.
2. Recognize that students must begin at their own level and move at their own pace and master each succeeding level of learning before moving through the developmental process.
3. Create opportunities to identify emerging developmental needs and give students an equal voice in deciding what learning to pursue and how to proceed.
4. Create ways for students to be able to observe and interact with others who effectively model the characteristics, values, and processes that best represent the outcomes to which the environment is committed.
5. Make sure that students are receiving accurate and usable feedback and reinforcement in response to their behavior.
6. Create opportunities for students to practice and test out new ideas and actions.
7. Encourage students to learn increasingly complex behaviors and apply them, as appropriate, to situations of daily life.

### Tips for Implementing a Supportive Atmosphere for Students to Grow and Develop

1. Take a genuine interest in the individual student's personal situation so that an atmosphere of support and care can be established, which promotes awareness and exploration.
2. Provide avenues (people, places, activities) in which a student can explore the options and opportunities beyond the present situation. Suggestions and non-threatening forms of challenge can be impetus for the student to move to a higher level.
3. When impasses and problems arise, demonstrate problem-solving strategies to move the student towards solutions. These may be activities you apply yourself or by referral.
4. Help students assess where they are through the use of reflection and feedback.
5. Be proactive by providing programs and activities that anticipate the needs of students based upon what is known concerning developmental level.

#### References:

- Evans, N.J., Forney, D.S., & Guido-DiBrito, F. (1998). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco.
- Ender, S.C. & Newton, F.B. (2000). *Students helping students: A guide for peer educators on college campuses*. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco.
- Yovich-Whattam, M. (n.d.) Introduction. *Creating your course: Freshman year experience resource manual*. University Division, Purdue University, Calumet.

## Differences Between High School and College

High School	College
<i>Teacher/Student Contact</i> – Contact closer and more frequent (5 days a week)	<i>Teacher/Student Contact</i> – Faculty are available during office hours (only a few hours a week) and by appointment to address students' concerns.
<i>Competition/Grades</i> – Academic competition is not as strong; good grades can often be obtained with minimum effort.	<i>Competition/Grades</i> – Academic competition is much stronger; minimum effort may produce poor grades.
<i>Status</i> – Students establish a personal status in academic and social activities based on family and community factors.	<i>Status</i> – Students can build their status as they wish; high school status can be repeated or changed.
<i>Counseling/Dependence</i> – Students can rely on parents, teachers, and counselors to help make decisions and give advice. Students must abide by parents' boundaries and restrictions.	<i>Counseling/Dependence</i> – Students rely on themselves; they see the results of making their own decisions. It is their responsibility to seek advice as needed. Students set their own restrictions.
<i>Motivation</i> – Students get stimulation to achieve or participate from parents, teachers, and counselors.	<i>Motivation</i> – Students apply their own motivation to their work and activities as they wish.
<i>Freedom</i> – Students' freedom is limited. Parents will often help students out of a crisis should one arise.	<i>Freedom</i> – Students have much more freedom. Students must accept responsibility for their own actions.
<i>Distractions</i> – There are distractions from school, but these are partially controlled by school and home.	<i>Distractions</i> – The opportunity for more distractions exists. Time management to students will become more important.
<i>Value Judgments</i> – Students often make value judgments based on parental values; thus, many of their value judgments are made for them.	<i>Value Judgments</i> – Students have the opportunity to see the world through their own eyes and develop their own opinions and values.

Reprinted with permission from:

Mullendore, R.H., & Hatch, C. (2000). *Helping your first-year college student succeed: A guide for parents*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. All rights reserved.

# First-Year Adjustment Issues

---

Certain times during the academic year tend to be universally challenging to students. Those who understand the ups and downs of the first college year are better able to help students negotiate the challenges of transitioning to college. Below are some typical adjustment issues faced throughout the first year.

## August/September

- Excitement
- Testing new-found freedom
- Frequent calls and visits home
- Homesickness and loneliness
- Anxiety about roommates, professors, classes
- First exams

## October

- Roommate problems begin to arise
- Students begin to question: "Do I fit in here?"
- First test grades returned
- Midterm exams
- Love relationships from home remain strong, or fall apart (this is usually the time high school sweet hearts break up)
- Consequences of decision-making are experienced

## November

- Midterm grades returned
- Roommate challenges become more clear
- Many exams and papers due before Thanksgiving
- Excitement and/or anxiety regarding going home for Thanksgiving
- First series of campus-wide illness (cold, flu, strep, etc.)

## December

- Anxiety over preparing for finals
- Excitement and/or anxiety regarding going home for the holidays
- Sadness about leaving new friendships and/or love relationships

## January

- "Fresh Start" mentality sets in with new term
- Satisfaction and/or disappointment with fall term grades
- Homesickness
- Loneliness for love relationship back home
- Relief being away from home and back at school

### February

- Feelings of claustrophobia and depression set in with winter
- Potential increase in alcohol and other substance abuse
- Challenges with love relationship back home
- Valentine's Day brings out loneliness and isolation

### March

- Anxiety regarding finding roommate(s) for next year
- Excitement and/or disappointment regarding Spring Break plans
- Midterm exam stress
- Concern over summer employment
- Concern over winter weight gain

### April

- Excitement with arrival of spring
- Concern over declaring major
- End of semester pressure

### May

- Final exam anxiety
- Apprehension about returning home for summer
- Sadness over leaving new friendships and/or love relationships at school
- Realization of how college influences life decisions

In addition to these more predictable stressors, students may experience the following concerns throughout the academic year:

- Missing family birthday and holiday celebrations
- Missing participation in family traditions
- Some involvement with family is maintained, but students expect their desire for complete freedom to be respected.

Reprinted with permission. Mullendore, R.H., & Hatch, C. (2000). *Helping your first-year college student succeed: A guide for parents*. Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition. All rights reserved.

## Ten Transitional Stages of First-Year Students

---

The following phases are typical of new students' adjustment to college. Stages may not occur in the sequence described, and students may not experience all of the phases. However, this information can serve as a useful guideline to understand the challenges students might face during the first year.

1. *Post-high school satisfaction/Pre-college elation*

As students experience much excitement over the prospect of attending college, expectations tend to be unrealistic and are based on brief glimpses of college life from campus visits, movies, or television.

2. *Early separation anxiety*

As they begin to pack and prepare for college, students realize that they are actually leaving behind the support systems of family and friends.

3. *Acute separation anxiety*

As students leave home, they experience emotional moments with loved ones. They realize that they do not know the unwritten rules of this new campus culture. At this stage, it is especially critical to meet experienced older students, such as resident advisors and peer leaders, who can assist with the adjustment process.

4. *The honeymoon*

This is a time of euphoria as students anticipate intellectual excitement and a satisfying social life. Students feel ready to experience all that campus life has to offer.

5. *The end of the honeymoon*

After the frantic rush of orientation and welcome week activities subsides, students realize that college life consists of hard work, frustration and disappointment. Normal events such as long lines and class schedule changes may be unsettling to the new student. Initial grades may be lower than expected, which can come as a shock to the students who "coasted" through high school. Students may work much harder than ever before, only to receive lower grades. At this point, students often experience feelings of homesickness. Faculty and staff can help ease anxiety by helping students realize that this is normal and that they are not alone.



6. *The grass is always greener*

Midway through the first year, students often think they can solve their problems by transferring to another institution. At this point, students should be encouraged to give the college they are attending at least a full year's try. Students should be reminded that they might have had a worse experience at another school and situations that seem impossible in the first semester often disappear later in the year.

7. *You can't go home again*

A first visit home is often traumatic due to a sense that things have changed. Siblings are curious about college life and reunited high school friends tend to exaggerate college success. At this time students may realize that they have changed and may long to return to campus.

8. *Learning to cope*

After about six weeks, students have learned their way around campus and are expanding their circle of friends. Their self-confidence increases, they participate in more activities, and they enjoy campus life.

9. *Fear of failure*

Students often panic around the time of midterm or final examinations as they fully appreciate the amount of work involved. Students should be reminded that thorough course preparation is the best way to ensure a good grade. Warning signs that indicate trouble include panic attacks, procrastination, sleeping over twelve hours a day and avoidance of academic responsibilities.

10. *Putting it all together*

By the middle of the second semester, students notice that classes, residence life and social activities have come together into a well-integrated lifestyle. Students are more confident, better able to make decisions, and are aware of opportunities for both personal and intellectual growth.

Adapted from:

Zuker, F. (n.d.) Transitional trauma: Predictable signs in the transition from high school to college.

## Special Issues Pertaining to the First-Year Classroom

---

**Relevance** – Try to help students think creatively to understand the relevance which exists at the interfaces – the margins of knowledge and personal experience. Most students take to the information presented if they can relate it back to personal experiences. Try to help students think creatively in order to understand the relevance and make the connection between classroom knowledge and personal experience.

**Dualism/Passivity** – Most first-year students are both “dualistic” thinkers while also being anxious about their college transition. This combination creates intolerance of ambiguity and a striving for “the one right” answer. Many first-year students prefer passivity to activity.

**Critical thinking** – Related to the above statement, many students are unaccustomed to being encouraged to think critically about academic material.

**How to study** – Many students devote large numbers of clock hours to study, but with few observable results. Others study infrequently, if at all.

**Learning styles** – Diverse learning styles characterize the first-year classroom. Active learning strategies should be used to engage first-year learners.

**The special needs of women and students of color** – Research indicates that these groups are often “field-dependent” learners, responding best to learning that is relevant, relational and contextual.

**Academic dishonesty** – Whether through misunderstanding or intent, many first-year students cheat and accept cheating as part of the academic status quo. This may be a special issue with students from other cultures.

**Classroom behavior** – Classroom behavior problems (such as laptop usage, cell phone disruption and e-mail etiquette) are on the upswing and many college faculty are uncertain about how to handle these situations.

**Feedback** – Early and frequent feedback is essential for first-year students to give them a realistic picture of their academic performance.

**The need for ENTERTAINMENT** – Some research has shown that student evaluations of instruction are influenced by the perceived “enthusiasm” of instructor. Students need to know that their professors are passionate about what they are teaching.

Reprinted with permission from:

Barefoot, B. (1998, month). *Special Issues Pertaining to the First-Year Classroom*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference on The First-Year Experience, Columbia SC.