Student Development Theory

At UMD, we are concerned about each student’s development. Education, personal values, style of learning, and interpersonal skills are all important aspects of a student’s college experience. Instead of focusing solely on teaching you a specific set of skills to get a job, we offer students an opportunity for to grow as a whole person. We recognize that learning and growth extend well beyond the walls of the traditional classroom.

Attending college involves more than just developing your intellect; it also includes physical, emotional, and interpersonal development. As a college student, you will be continually learning while shaping your identity and transforming into an independent young adult. This may seem overwhelming at first, but don’t worry! Remember that you are not alone; your peers will be experiencing many of the same situations that you do.

To help you better understand what lies ahead, you should try to learn more about student development theory. Student development theory describes seven areas which address the student in a holistic fashion. Please read on to learn about each of these following areas.

Developing Competence:

*College students’ college experiences aid in the development of intellectual, physical, and interpersonal competencies.*

Research shows that students develop three kinds of competence in college. These are intellectual competence, physical and manual skills, and interpersonal competence.

Probably the most obvious of the development areas, intellectual competence, is skill in using one’s mind. Chickering & Reisser, leading student development theorists, point out that it involves mastering content, gaining intellectual sophistication, and building a wide variety of skills to comprehend, analyze, and synthesize (1993). In essence, you will be able to make sense out of your observations and experiences. Since you are attending college, one would expect that you would develop the most in this area.

However, your intellectual development may be hindered if you aren't adequately prepared for college coursework. There are a number of resources available at UMD that can assist in this area of development. A good way to start is by trying to incorporate effective study skills into your routine. In addition, to stimulate your intellect, there are a number clubs and activities as well as opportunities to explore the research being performed by UMD faculty and staff available to interested students.

Physical and manual competence can involve athletic and artistic achievement, fitness, and self-discipline. Chickering & Reisser state that we tend to thrive on competition and creation since our performance and our projects are on display for others’ approval or criticism. Leisure
activities can become lifelong interests and can become an integral part of a student’s identity (1993).

During college you may notice some physical changes to your body. At this stage in your life, your body is finishing developing and readying for adulthood. Paying attention to these changes and taking care of your body is important. Sitting in a classroom, doing research in the library, and studying in your room can cause mental and emotional fatigue. You need to prepare your body for some long days of studying by making sure that you are also getting enough exercise. Finding physical activities to engage in is rather easy as UMD and the Duluth community have a number of opportunities available for students.

Chickering and Reisser point out that interpersonal competence entails the skills of listening, cooperating, communicating effectively, as well as the ability to align personal agendas with the goals of the groups, and to choose from a variety of strategies to help a relationship flourish or a group function (1993). Students' sense of competence is increased as they learn to trust their abilities, receive accurate feedback from others, and integrate their skills into a stable self-assurance.

**Managing Emotions:**

*College students have the potential to learn how to express emotions in positive, empowering ways through their collegiate experiences.*

Very few students escape emotions such as anger, fear, hurt, boredom, and tension. In fact, anxiety, anger, depression, desire, guilt and shame have the power to seriously impede the educational process when they become excessive or overwhelming (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Part of college is learning to manage these emotions well and understanding that in order to be managed well, students cannot simply ignore that these feelings exist. Instead, students should be able to recognize that they are there and deal with them appropriately. Development proceeds when students learn how to release anger before it turns to rage, deal with fear before it immobilizes, and heal emotional wounds before they interfere with other relationships and personal growth. As you learn more about how to balance self-control and self-expression, you will find yourself better able to possess a healthy emotional attitude.

There are also a number of positive emotions that students experience. They include relief, sympathy, yearning, wonder, and awe. These may not need to be managed, but rather brought into balance with other emotions students experience and learn to cope with. Chickering & Reisser report that you will need to learn how to balance self-assertive tendencies, which involve some form of aggressiveness or defensiveness, with participatory tendencies, which involves identifying or bonding with another individual or group (1993).
Emotional development is another area in which many first-year students experience growth. As a student, you are at a stage in your life where emotions play an integral part in your daily life. To assist with emotional development, we encourage students to visit Health Services.

**Moving through autonomy toward interdependence:**

*College students will learn how to handle responsibility, being self-sufficient, and set and achieve their goals.*

A key developmental step for students is learning to function self-sufficiently, to take responsibility for pursuing self-chosen goals, and to be less bound by the opinions of others.

Emotional independence means freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval. Chickering and Reisser report that it begins with separation from parents and proceeds through reliance on peers, non-parental adults, and occupational or institutional reference groups (1993). It culminates in the diminishing need for such supports and increased willingness to risk loss of friends or status in order to pursue strong interests or stand on convictions. While gaining this independence, students realize that acceptance from peers is no longer the single most satisfying component in their life. Now is the time to think for, and about, yourself.

Another key developmental piece is the ability to think critically and independently. This also involves learning to get from one place to another, and to find information resources required to fulfill personal needs and desires.

Chickering and Reisser point out that developing autonomy culminates in the recognition that one cannot operate in a vacuum and that greater autonomy enables healthier forms of interdependence (1993). The relationship with your parents changes; new relationships based on equality and reciprocity replace the older, less consciously chosen peer bonds. Interdependence involves respecting the autonomy of others and looking for constructive ways to engage with an ever-expanding circle of friends.

**Developing Mature Interpersonal Relationships:**

*College students learn to develop healthy relationships with their peers and can also learn what it takes to develop an intimate relationship.*

As you begin college, you will find that developing a social network will be one of your primary goals. The college environment is conducive to social development as several thousand students are contained within a common setting. Students who live on campus in the residence halls have the opportunity to interact with hundreds of students in their residence on a daily basis. Students will form relationships with students with their roommates, neighbors, and students they meet in class.
Chickering and Reisser report that developing mature relationships involves tolerance and appreciation of differences and the capacity for intimacy (1993). Tolerance can be seen in both an intercultural and an interpersonal context. Respecting differences in close friends can generalize to acquaintances. Awareness, openness, and curiosity help students refine first impressions and reduce bias and ethnocentrism.

In addition for greater tolerance, the capacity for intimacy also increases. Chickering and Reisser point out that developing mature relationships requires the ability to choose healthy relationships and make lasting commitments based on honesty. A healthy intimate relationship requires interdependence between two equal people, steering away from too much dependence and too much dominance. Development in this area provides more in-depth sharing, less clinging, and provides more long-lasting relationships which can endure a crisis (1993).

**Establishing Identity:**

*College students learn about their personal identity and have the opportunity to develop and establish the person they want to be.*

In their report Chickering and Reisser show that identity formation depends on the other areas of development mentioned on the student development page: competence, emotional maturity, autonomy, and positive relationships. The development of your identity involves being comfortable with your body, being comfortable with your gender and sexual orientation, having positive self-esteem, personal stability, and a sense of self (1993).

Chickering and Reisser state that some college student’s concern with appearance is obvious. Many students experiment with their wardrobe while trying to keep up with current fads. But by the time students are ready to graduate, many of the early creative variations are given up. Students realize that the package or the phoney personality doesn't make the person but that it is the individual inside that is important (1993).

Chickering and Reisser add that establishing identity also includes reflecting on one's family of origin and ethnic heritage, defining self as a part of a religious or cultural tradition while also seeing self within a social and historical context (1993).

Chickering and Reisser also point out that establishing identity involves finding roles and styles at work, at play, and at home that are genuine expressions of self and that sharpen self-definition (1993). Part of this process involves gaining a sense of how you are seen and evaluated by others. Identity establishment leads to clarity, stability, a feeling of capability, familiarity, and self-worth.
Developing Purpose:

*College students are given the skills and the opportunity to develop a purpose in life.*

Many college students have energy but no destination in mind. Chickering and Reisser point out that for the most part, college students believe that the point of college is to qualify them for a good job and to help ensure a comfortable lifestyle, not to help build skills applicable to "real world" experiences, broaden knowledge bases, or prepare students to be lifelong learners (1993).

Developing a personal purpose entails assessing interests and options, clarifying goals, making plans, and persistence. It requires developing plans for actions and setting priorities. Students need to integrate career plans, personal interests, and interpersonal and family commitments. If you need assistance with career development, explore the Career Services Handbook for helpful information. Even though graduation seems like a long way away, now is a good time to start addressing this important issue.

Most students tend to operate within a narrow framework. You need to look at your degree requirements as a way to gain knowledge and skills. While selecting liberal education and elective courses, find out how you can sharpen your leadership, critical thinking, interpersonal, and communication skills. Don't view your degree requirements as obstacles while obtaining your degree during four years of attendance. Make the most of your degree. Examine your personal goals and objectives as well as what your degree is intended to do for you. Select courses that will help you fulfill these goals and/or objectives. Don't select courses solely because they "fit" into your class schedule. Take responsibility for course selection and choose wisely as your decisions impact your academic experience.

Developing Integrity:

*By establishing their identity and clarifying their purpose, college students are able to further develop a sense of integrity.*

Chickering and Reisser point out that developing integrity is closely related to establishing identity and clarifying purposes. An individual’s core values and beliefs provide the foundation for interpreting experience, guiding behavior, and maintaining self-respect (1993). You bring to college a wide variety of values and beliefs. You probably acquired these assumptions from parents, church, school, media, peers, etc.

Developing integrity involves reviewing personal values and experimentation. It may involve an affirmation of values that have ongoing relevance and searching for ways to reconcile contrasting perspectives. Throughout this examination, students explore the links between values and behavior.
Developing integrity involves three sequential, but overlapping, stages: humanizing values, personalizing values, and developing congruence.

Humanizing values involves a shift from a belief in the absoluteness of rules to a more relative view where connections are made between rules and the purposes they are meant to serve. It is at this point that students learn to understand why some campus rules exist. Personalizing values involves students selecting guidelines to suit themselves and to suit the conditions of their lives. This is an important revelation as students then begin deciding how and what is considered appropriate behavior. Then, consequently, students develop congruence by achieving behavior consistent with their personalized values.


**W-Curve:**

*How college students adjust to their new environment.*

The W-Curve is a predictable pattern of stages occurs when a person experiences culture shock. This is based upon research done with students studying abroad. Zeller and Mosier (1993) found that the W-Curve could also be applied to first-year college students and the phases they go through in adapting to a new culture. It's normal to have the ups and downs of the W-Curve, and knowing about this may help make the transition easier. At the first signs of culture shock, some first year students may think this means they have made a mistake about going to college or that they have chosen the wrong school. If they see that this is just part of journey that everyone goes through, they may be better able to take it all in stride.
The Honeymoon:

The Honeymoon starts before students first arrive on campus. It usually begins once a student has chosen and been accepted to a college and builds as students attend orientation programs, get their Housing assignments, and begin planning for school to start. Although they may also experience some nervousness, the overall feeling is generally one of excitement and positive anticipation. According to Zeller and Mosier; “As students arrive on campus, there generally is a strong sense of welcoming from the campus community. Other new students quickly become friends, returning students become mentors, and staff and faculty are available to assist them through a variety of first-week programs. The initial sense of freedom new students feel often is exhilarating. For traditional-aged students, moving away from parental oversight and taking responsibility for one's own lifestyle creates a strong positive feeling.”

It's common for students to begin to have some feelings of homesickness mixed in with all of the fun and energy of a new beginning.

Culture Shock:

As the newness of the college culture begins to wear off, freshmen begin to deal with the reality of all the adjustments they are going through. In the Residence Halls, students are adapting to roommates, sharing a room, shared bathrooms, lots of neighbors, eating in a cafeteria, and the diversity that comes with meeting people from different backgrounds and cultures.

The process of making new friends is fun, but can also be draining. On the academic side of college life, Zeller and Mosier say that, "The unfamiliar territory of the college classroom also creates dissonance. Large lecture classes, unclear guidelines for note taking and studying, and unfamiliar and somewhat distant faculty work together to produce potential adjustment difficulties." They also write that, "Routine tasks that were taken for granted become problematic chores. Where to go shopping, get a haircut, or receive medical attention can create feelings of frustration."

Homesickness may increase and some students may try to deal with this by maintaining strong ties to their home community, often going home on weekends and staying in constant contact with friends from home, and possibly even continuing a romantic relationship. They may have a lot of pictures and other memorabilia in their rooms.

Developmental life cycle tasks are also continuing such as becoming self-sufficient, establishing identity, and accepting responsibility for their actions. "In summary, the college freshman has many personal issues to deal with in addition to focusing on the critical issue of academics; reworking relationships with parents, establishing interdependence with peers, dealing with separation and its resultant anxiety and dealing with conflicting values. Attempting to synthesize these personal challenges into some formal structure requires a great investment of
energy. It is important to understand that this is a period of great potentially positive change, but it is also a period of more intense personal conflict and anxiety" (Zeller and Mosier).

Initial Adjustments:

As initial adjustments are made, freshmen experience an upswing as they have successfully managed many of the issues that may have come their way. Simply overcoming the culture shock stage brings about a sense of well-being. They fall into a routine as they gain confidence in their ability to handle the academic and social environment of college. They feel they have regained some sense of control and normalcy in their lives. Conflicts and challenges may still continue to come and go, but students are now feeling more in the swing of things.

Mental Isolation:

According to Zeller and Mosier, "Although the physical environment has become more familiar, new students will relapse into a sense of isolation as they make comparisons between their new culture and their more familiar home culture." This may arise after students go home for an extended break between semesters. "Strong feelings of homesickness begin to surface, as first year students move through a second culture shock in adjusting the new environment."

This is a time of feeling caught between two worlds. The new college environment is still not as comfortable as home used to be, and home is now not as familiar as it once was. There is a sense of not totally belonging in either place. With all of the activity occurring when first coming to college, students may not realize how much they miss home until they have been away for quite a while. And even then, going home to visit can still leave them feeling homesick for a home environment that no longer seems to exist. It’s shocking to find that changes have happened at home, too, and not having been in on these changes on a day-to-day basis can be upsetting.

"The initial euphoria of the entrance into the university dissolves as the realities of campus life surface. Not all professors are friendly and helpful, not all living-group peers are potential friends, and everything is not as great as publicity brochures and admissions staff may have indicated. Questions of doubt regarding the decision to attend the institution may surface. Questions regarding major career and academic potential may surface as the realities of first year grades and test scores take over. As the tension and stress mount, first year students may retreat to a safer, more secure home culture environment. They may feel their beliefs and values systems being challenged, and they may not be able to adapt or integrate the new values of the university cultures. The historical base remaining from the home culture continues to be alluring, as does a desire to strengthen connections with high school friends. First year students must seek resolution to this second cultural shock, move from their feelings of isolation, and join their new university cultures. This requires integrating the values and beliefs of their home culture with their new university environment" (Zeller and Mosier).
Acceptance, Integration, and Connectedness

As students become more involved in campus opportunities, gain some history with new friends, and get to know faculty and staff members, they begin to feel a true connection to the campus community. They begin to have a more balanced and realistic view of the university, seeing and integrating the good experiences with the challenges. "They begin to think that, generally, it's a pretty good place to be. The university becomes the students' home. The original home culture becomes somewhat foreign. There is less dependence on parents and former peers" (Zeller and Mosier). It may be shocking for a parent to hear their college son or daughter refer to college as "home". A true sense of acceptance, integration, and connectedness occurs when a student has successfully adapted to their new world.